

TURNED ON BY PRAYER

by Ray C. Stedman

With Verse 15 of Ephesians 1 we leave the great doctrinal passage in which the Apostle Paul has been teaching the great facts underlying the Christian faith, and we turn now to his prayer. This study will be a helpful revelation of the place of prayer in the Christian experience, especially in believers who are maturing, and in relationship to the study of Scripture. This brings prayer and the Scriptures together. The apostle, having finished the great passage in which he has set forth what the three-fold God is doing for us, now adds these words addressed to the Ephesian Christians:

For this reason, because I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, ... {Eph 1:15-18a RSV}

We will stop there and finish the rest of the passage next Sunday.

I want to call your attention to the reason why the apostle prayed for these Christians. He starts with those very words: "For this reason," and then he goes on to list the evidence which makes him confident that they are Christians. The phrase, "For this reason," looks back upon the great passage that we have just covered, from Verse 3 through Verse 14, in which the apostle has been outlining for us the great, fundamental facts about our faith:

- Our call by the Father,
- His destining us to be his sons,
- The redemption and forgiveness available to us in the Son,
- The opening of our eyes to the whole plan of God,
- Our sealing by the Spirit,
- Our enlightening by the Spirit in our lives and hearts, and
- His guarantee that we shall inherit all that God has provided for us.

It is for this reason, Paul says, that he prays for the saints at Ephesus and others who read this letter. It is because they need to understand these truths.

He is convinced that they are Christians because of two things which have come to his attention -- their faith, and their love. That is most instructive. The apostle evidently has heard in Rome of the faith of these Christians, many of whom were in cities around Ephesus and whom he had never met. He has heard of the fact that they have confessed Christ and turned from their pagan idols. They have acknowledged that Jesus Christ is Lord, and have taken open positions as Christians. But the thing which convinced him that their faith was true was the evidence of their love -- faith that works by love. It was the fact that love was beginning to be shown among them, love for all the saints, which made him aware of the fact that the faith they exercised was genuine.

That is very helpful to know, because, if your faith has not resulted in your becoming a more loving person, in your growing in this direction, then it is not genuine faith. It is merely an intellectual acceptance, which means nothing. Remember how James stresses this very fact. He says that faith is revealed by the concern that it awakens for the hungry, the homeless, the needy, and the heartbroken, and our willingness to reach out to heal the hurts of those in society around us. He said, in effect, "Show me your love, and I'll see your faith; but don't talk to me about faith unless love is present," {cf, Jas 2:18}. And Paul agrees. He has heard of their love, and so he is aware that their faith is genuine.

And notice that it is love toward all the saints, not just toward some of them. Some saints are easy to love. Some are beautiful people, joyful and happy, and everybody likes to be around them. But Paul is struck by the fact that these Christians love all the saints, and, therefore, their love is not based upon people's personalities, their friendliness, nor upon their wealth; rather, it is based upon the fact that they are saints, they belong to the Lord Jesus, they are in the family of God. This is what every family must learn. If you want harmony in your home, you must learn to love your brothers and sisters. They may not be always the most pleasant people, but they are your brother, your sister. This is what the apostle is struck by among the Christians in Ephesus.

Today, too, one of the most remarkable signs that a person has genuine faith is that he loves anyone who loves the Lord Jesus. It doesn't make any difference what the person might be like. I have just returned from a large middle-American city where I was involved in several churches, and I was struck by the fact that oftentimes it is so difficult to get Christians to begin really to love one another. They resist opening up to each other and bearing one another's burdens. They have been taught and trained, somehow, to live in isolation from each other, and not to want to get involved with anyone else. (That is the way the world lives today.) But this is always a mark of the fact that their faith has diminished. Because if your faith in Jesus Christ is genuine it always results in love.

Those two qualities, then, have convinced the Apostle Paul that these Christians are real. Therefore they need to know and grasp the great truths he has outlined for them, and it is for this reason that he prays. Now, I want you to notice that. This indicates that the command of truth, the knowledge of doctrine, is never enough to enable one to grow up as a Christian. You can learn all that there is in the Bible, and be able to write a very profound and scholarly theological treatise on it, but if it hasn't reached the heart it is absolutely worthless. Truth known never changes anybody; it is truth done, truth which has flowed through the emotions and gripped them and thus motivated the will.

Thus this passage beautifully takes into consideration the way God has made us. He has made us so that truth hits the mind first of all. And that is where it should strike. We ought to be exposed to the facts, as Paul has exposed us here. But that is never enough. There are some people today who think that if you merely study your Bible and take the right courses and learn all these great facts, learn the doctrine, the truth of the Scriptures, that is all you need. But the apostle makes very clear here, that is never enough. Just that much will never change anybody. But that truth must somehow move from the head down to the heart. It must grip "the eyes of the heart," to use the beautiful figure that Paul employs, and there must be a moving of the emotions so that the whole man gets involved, and, thus, the will is properly motivated. He is talking about motivation. And this wise apostle knew that nobody ever gets motivated by truth alone. Truth can be dull and academic and deadly. Your heart also must be stirred. So he prays for that.

It is instructive to see that prayer is what will do that. I must confess that I have been greatly moved by this passage because it has made me aware that we must add, deliberately and intelligently, this dimension to our teaching. Teaching truth is never enough. We can teach another person -- a student in the Sunday school or our own children at home -- and they are able to parrot the truth back to us, and oftentimes we are satisfied by that. We say that they know this truth. But the apostle was not satisfied. He knew that you don't know truth in that way. You never know it until it has gripped you, and you have been changed by it. So that is what he prays for. God has designed life that way.

Next, notice the one to whom he prays. He uses two unusual names for God: "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory." Why does he call him that? Of course God is "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ" when Jesus was here as a man. Yet there is no recognition, here, of the fact that the Son is equal with the Father. Paul is not praying directly to Christ; he is praying to the God of the Lord Jesus. That is amazing when you think about it. Why does he do so? Well, the reason is that the evidence we have that God will answer this kind of prayer is that he is the One to whom the Lord Jesus prayed. He is the One upon whom Jesus depended for the enlightenment of his own disciples. For he, too, could not merely teach them and thus deliver them from evil. He had to pray for them in order that the truth might grip their hearts and they might be changed by the truth that they knew. That is why you often find our Lord praying for his disciples, why he spent whole nights on a mountainside, at times, praying truth into his disciples' hearts.

Do you remember when Peter came to him with his confidence, his strutting boldness, and told him, "Lord,

don't worry about me, I'll never leave you. These other rascals will defect and run away, but you can count on me, Lord. I'll stick with you." Do you remember the Lord's answer to that? "Peter, Satan has desired to have you, that he might sift you like wheat [that he might run you through a sifter so all the phoniness will be made visible]," {cf, Luke 22:31}. And Jesus implied by that, "I'm going to give you to him, I'll let him have you." Yet he went on to say, "But I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail." It was that prayer which held Peter together when, three times in one night, he denied his Lord. Finally, gripped by the awfulness of what he had done, he went out and wept bitterly in the streets of Jerusalem. But something held him steady -- it was the prayer of the Lord Jesus, the light which came from that prayer, which gripped his heart and held him on course. And so the very God to whom Jesus himself prayed, and upon whom he depended to keep his disciples in the truth that they were learning, is the same God to whom we are to pray, that the Father of glory may open our hearts and lives.

I love that phrase: "the Father of glory." There is a lot of hope in that! Do you know what that means? It could mean, of course, "the glorious Father, the Father who is himself glorious." And God is glorious. But I think that here it means instead "the One who originates glory, the One who begets glory, the Father who produces it."

I attended a wedding reception some time ago, and what a glorious occasion it was! Everyone was joyful and happy, rejoicing with the young couple. And it was in a beautiful setting. There was a scrumptious spread of food, and the decorations made it a lovely place. I circulated around, and off in the corner I found a man standing by himself. I talked with him and discovered that he was the father of the bride. He had been paying all the bills, and, as father of the bride, he was the father of glory. He had produced all the glory of this occasion.

And this is the idea conveyed by that title "the Father of glory." When you pray to God about understanding truth you are asking him to make this truth glorious, to make it come alive, to make it vivid, living, vital. That is what he promises and is able to do. He is the Father of glory. That is why Paul uses that title here. The God to whom Jesus prayed is also the Father of glory, is able to produce glory.

Paul turns now and prays for these Christians. Notice what he prays for: "... [that he] may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, ..." Why does he say that? Aren't these Christians? Haven't they already been indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Yes. Paul has already acknowledged that. He has said that they were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. So he is not praying that they will be given the Holy Spirit. He is praying for a special ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet speaks of the seven spirits of God -- the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of counsel, the spirit of knowledge, etc. He doesn't mean that there are seven Holy Spirits; he means that there is one Holy Spirit who has a seven-fold ministry of illuminating and enlightening the heart. That is what Paul is praying for here.

Notice that he doesn't take it for granted that this is going to happen. This is not an automatic feature of the Christian life. If you want the Scriptures, the Word of God, the truth, to come alive to you, you must ask for illumination. That is what this passage teaches us. And if you want it to come alive to someone else you must ask that they be given the spirit of wisdom and of revelation. Remember that James says, "You have not, because you ask not," {cf, Jas 4:2}. Everything that God has is for us, but it won't be given automatically.

Any wise father knows that you can't give to your children in that way. If you were to anticipate all your children's wishes and were always to have whatever they need ready for them even before they become aware that they needed it, they would soon take it all for granted. They would fail to develop a thankful spirit. They would fail to develop any sense of need in their lives. No wise parent does that. You learn to wait until your children sense some need, until they come and ask you for help, or until they realize that they are up against it and that there is no other way it can be provided. Then is the time to step in.

And God does that. He is teaching and training us, and he never allows the Scriptures to come alive for us without our sensing a need for this.

That is why for so many, probably for all of us, there comes a time when the Bible becomes dull. You read it and it doesn't say anything -- there is no illumination; or you are listening to a message and it falls flat -- other

people seem to be blessed, but you get nothing out of it. What is the reason? Well, it is part of the great conflict which Paul speaks of in the last chapter of this letter -- the blinding, hardening, darkening work of the powers of darkness which keeps us from grasping the truth. To counteract that, there must be the ministry of prayer, of asking God for a spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that the truth may come alive with vitality.

That is what Paul is asking for here.

I wonder sometimes if much of our teaching doesn't fall flat and much of the training of our children isn't a failure because we have never prayed this for them. Notice how the apostle does, how he is so concerned that these mighty truths should be more than mere sentences on the page, that they will really grip the lives and hearts of these Christians. And notice also that it is wisdom and revelation "in the knowledge of him" for which Paul prays. That is where truth finally leads. It leads to the understanding of the Person of God.

Do you pray like that when you read your Bible? Do you open the pages and say, "Lord, show me yourself?"

- This is not merely a book to read in order to learn what is going to happen as prophecy is fulfilled.
- It isn't merely a book from which to get some ethical guidelines on how to behave in the relationships of life.
- Primarily and paramountly this book is designed to lead you to stand in the presence of the living God, to feel him, to know him, to sense his love, his wisdom, his strength, his might, his incredible grasp of circumstances, his control of human events, and to enable you to understand your relationship to him, to have him stand in your presence living, breathing, compassionate. That is what the book is for. That is the wonder of it. No other book has that quality, but this one has. Christ can step out of the pages and be a living presence in your life and heart, if you pray and ask him to give you that spirit of wisdom and of revelation. But it will not come in any other way.

So, if your Bible study time is dull and dreary, take that as a hint and begin to pray that it might come alive, that you may know him. Remember what Jesus said in his great prayer recorded in the seventeenth chapter of John. He prayed, "Father, I thank you for our relationship, and I pray that men may know thee, the only true God, for this is eternal life," {cf, John 17:3}. And if you want life -- life with that quality of abundance which characterizes God -- then that is the way to have it. It comes with knowing God, knowing who he is and what he is like.

I remember reading some time ago in the *China Inland Mission Journal*, an account of two churches among a group of churches in a certain province in the inner part of China. These two churches flourished tremendously, while the others were just dawdling along at a slow pace. The mission director of that area became very interested in why these two churches were doing so much better than the others. He investigated and found that a couple of years earlier, at a conference in England, information had been given out regarding all these churches, and certain individuals had been requested to pray for the churches. One man took these two churches upon his heart and remained steadfast. Every week he had been praying faithfully for the Christians in these churches, that the truths they heard would be understood. The result was that these churches were like flowers with abundant sunshine and rain. They grew bountifully, while in the other churches the same truth was being taught, but no one seemed to grasp it and lay hold of it. This was tremendous testimony to the fact that prayer has this power to open eyes.

Now look at the last thing the apostle says in this introduction to prayer -- the instrument by which this occurs: "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know ..." Then he lists the things they are to know (we'll look at them in detail next Sunday):

- The hope of our calling, i.e., our future expectation;
- The riches of Christ's inheritance in the saints, i.e., his present inheritance, and
- The exceeding greatness of God's power, i.e., the present experience of the believer.

Paul's prayer is that we may know these things, but they will come to us as the eyes of our hearts are

enlightened.

That's a strange expression, isn't it: "the eyes of the heart." We know how eyes are expressive. You can sometimes look at a face that seems dull and impassive, a "poker" face, but if you look at the eyes you can see something happening within. Oftentimes I have visited people in the hospital whose faces and whole bodies are wasted away, but their eyes are speaking volumes. Eyes are extremely expressive. And they are the instrument by which we perceive, by which we see things. The mind also has eyes. If you listen to truth in any area, or if you study a subject by means of a book, your mind is perceiving. The eyes of your mind are grasping ideas. But the apostle tells us here that not only does the mind have eyes, but the heart as well. The heart needs to see things, needs to grasp truth and understand it. And the heart is always used in Scripture as the seat of our emotions.

In other words, God is facing what the present generation has so beautifully rediscovered for us: We consist of more than mere minds operating; we need to have our emotions stirred and caught up and captivated by truth. Truth must come first to the mind, then to the heart. But the will is never properly motivated until the heart has been moved as well. The whole man must respond to the truth of God. When that happens, then a deep-seated certainty results. You will know something when both the mind and the heart have been touched.

You remember the episode which Luke records for us in his twenty-fourth chapter -- that walk to Emmaus when the risen Lord appears to those two disciples. They are so defeated, so downcast by the horrible thing which has happened in Jerusalem. The Lord joins them, but they don't know who he is. He walks along with them as a stranger. And unfolds to them all the passages in the Old Testament Scriptures concerning the promised Messiah, including his sufferings and his resurrection. Do you remember what they said afterward as they were discussing this? They said to one another, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked with us along the way, while he opened to us the scriptures?" {cf, Luke 24:32}.

That "burning of heart" represents the eyes of the heart being opened. It is the enlightenment, the inflaming, of the heart, so that it comes alive, vital, and is deeply stirred and moved. It is this burning of heart that the apostle desires for these Christians. When the heart begins to burn with truth, when truth from the Word of God becomes so vivid and real to you that your heart is captured by it and you begin to burn, when it takes root in you and you simply must respond to it, that is when you know with certainty that God is real, that the hope of your calling is genuine, that the power of his presence is available, and that the riches of his ministry through you is manifest to others as well.

I could illustrate this in many ways. I remember an incident some time ago here at PBC. A young man became a Christian, came into the church, and married a girl who had grown up in this church. At first his Christian life was glorious to behold. He was warm, open, responsive, and eagerly read the Scriptures. But after a while it all began to ebb away, as often happens. Many Christians go through this experience. He turned cold, lost his interest in the Scriptures, and quit coming to church. He was no longer interested in fellowship with other believers and he avoided them. To use the term of a generation ago, he "back-slid."

Naturally his wife became very concerned. So she and a friend decided that they would pray together for her husband every day. She decided in her heart that she would not nag him nor plague him nor push him. She wouldn't urge him to come to church, and thus gain some kind of outward conformity by pressure, because she didn't want him to come if his heart wasn't in it. She resolved simply to pray. And she and her friend met daily. For a month or more nothing happened. He went on in pretty much the same way. But they took the advice of the Lord Jesus: "Men ought always to pray and not to faint, not to give up," {cf, Luke 18:1}. So they kept on praying.

Gradually her husband's attitude began to change a bit. One day she came home and found him reading the Bible. But she didn't say anything to him, and he didn't say anything to her. But it was a note of encouragement. Then, one Sunday, he announced that he was going to church with her. Again she rejoiced inwardly, but didn't make a big deal of it. After a while, he finally said to her, "You know, dear, I've really been way out of it! Somehow or other I lost all my interest in the Lord. But God has moved in, and met me, and brought me back." And he came alive again. What a wonderful testimony to the power of prayer to open eyes!

It isn't enough simply to teach truth. It isn't enough to spread doctrine. It isn't enough to have a Bible class in which you are getting the students to learn certain facts from the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul, and the other great leaders of the early church, understood man much better than that. You never get the whole man until the heart is moved, until the eyes of the heart are enlightened, until truth is moved from the head down to the heart, and thus it has gripped the emotions. Then the will is properly motivated. Then the person begins to grow tremendously.

So what an encouragement this is to a ministry of prayer!

Pray for one another:

- Pray for the class that you teach.
- Pray for your children -- that the truth they are learning, both at home and at Sunday school, will become vivid to them. How many times have we allowed them merely to learn factual matters, and have never prayed about it, and then wondered why the truth doesn't seem to affect them very much.
- Pray for your father and mother -- that the truth they are learning may change their hearts so that they will be easier to get along with.
- Pray for your husband, pray for your wife -- that this enlightenment of the heart may come.

See how Paul understands this and how he stresses it with us. He says, "For this reason ..." there is no use teaching you this truth unless I also pray for you, unless prayer changes your life so that you are 'turned on,' so that your hearts come alive with the truth of God." And if we do the same we will understand that God has designed truth to make its appeal to the whole of our humanity, the whole being, the whole man, and we will become whole in Christ.

So let us pray together now.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we thank you so much for this revelation of the way we are made. Thank you for the wisdom of the Apostle Paul, who knew that you can't simply pour out so many facts, write them down in a letter, and expect to have people grasp them and live by them. There must be the bending of the knee, the opening of the heart, the imploring of the Spirit, the bathing of the truth, the Word, in prayer, so that it becomes vital, living, attractive, compelling. Lord, help us to pray for each other. We need this truth greatly today, and we pray that you will drive it home to us with clarity and with power, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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