

HOPE, RICHES, AND POWER

by Ray C. Stedman

I wonder how many of you are remembering my exhortation at the beginning of this series that you read through the book of Ephesians once a week until we have finished these studies. I'm sure that some of you have been faithful in doing this. Now, the rest of you repent, and begin again, will you? You will find that your life will never be the same again if you keep reading through this text thoughtfully and understandingly every week.

We have now arrived at the last part of the first chapter of this letter. We have been watching the Apostle Paul in his great concern for these Christians in Ephesus and the surrounding cities in the province of Asia. And we have learned from him that growth in Christians requires two fundamental conditions. It requires, first, the careful instruction of the mind in the great facts of reality. This is what Paul has been doing in the opening verses of this chapter -- setting forth the broad sweep of God's truth, the undergirding reality of the Christian life, the great facts upon which our faith can rest. He is careful to see that this is done thoroughly.

But, as we saw last time together, that is not enough. Beside the careful instruction of the mind there must be the prayerful enlightenment of the heart. So Paul is not content to leave these people merely taught; he also prays that the eyes of their hearts be enlightened, that the truth which they have heard and understood with their minds will come alive and capture their hearts, that they will experience a kind of "divine heartburn" -- like that of those two disciples whom Jesus met on the road to Emmaus and who said, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" {Luke 24:32 RSV}.

I wonder if much of our teaching isn't lost because we are not faithful in praying for each other that our minds be instructed and our hearts enlightened. It is so necessary that this truth not be held with the intellect only -- a mere academic understanding of doctrine -- but that it be gripping, vital, and compelling, and that we will see its full impact. This, of course, is the way God has designed us to operate: The teaching is to instruct the mind, the prayer is to awaken and enlighten the heart, and, thus, the will is enabled to act. And if people can't act as Christians it is very likely that one of these elements is missing.

Here we are dealing with the great problem of motivation. The apostle understood these Christians. He was a veteran warrior of the cross. He had been a Christian for many years by the time he wrote this letter and he had undoubtedly gone through all the varying experiences that a Christian can be subjected to. He knew the lukewarmness which can set in, the lethargic, apathetic attitudes which can sometimes arise after a warm and hopeful beginning. And, here, he saw these Christians as dispirited, listless, turned off, and he understood their need.

Perhaps many of you are struggling with this very problem. No Christian escapes this entirely in his lifetime. There are times when we simply get cold and our spirits grow apathetic. The apostle understood that. He knew that these people had lost sight of certain truth. They still held it with their minds -- they would have been able to pass an examination on the doctrine involved -- but they had lost sight of it in their hearts. It was no longer living, flaming, warm, compelling, motivating.

So the apostle turns to prayer, and his prayer reflects his understanding of their needs. He specifies three things:

He is praying that the eyes of their hearts will be enlightened,

... that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, {Eph 1:18b-19a RSV}

Hope, riches, and power. You notice that he doesn't pray in general, as most of us tend to do. He doesn't simply say, "Lord, bless the Ephesians this morning." Most of us drop general, blanket prayer upon everybody and expect that to take care of the situation. But Paul knows these people better than that. He knows that they have lost their vision. That is part of their problem. They have sunk into an attitude of indifferent routine. It seems to them as though nothing is happening in their lives and they are going nowhere. They have lost their sense of hope. They know it as a doctrine, but they have lost the experience of it. So Paul prays that God will enlighten their hearts so that they may know the hope of God's calling, the hope to which he has called them.

You and I know the need for hope. This word, of course, is one part of the great triad found very frequently in the Scriptures: faith, hope and love -- the essentials to living a full-orbed Christian experience. You find these linked together often in the pages of the New Testament. Hope always concerns the future. These people obviously had lost their sense that anything happening now affected the future. And this happens to many of us. We are all waiting for the coming of the Lord, but it doesn't really turn us on very much. We know it as doctrine, but it isn't very exciting. These people had come to that place.

The hope of a believer is described for us very plainly in Romans 8, Verses 18-25, which we should read so that we will understand what hope he wanted to find awakened within their hearts:

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. {Rom 8:18 RSV}

That is the hope -- a glory which is coming, a glory toward which we are moving day by day. That glory is waiting for us, Paul says. It is a glory which touches the whole world:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. {Rom 8:19-21 RSV}

That phrase, "the bondage to decay," is a very accurate description of what scientists call the Second Law of Thermodynamics, the law of entropy, the law which states that everything in the universe is running down, that it was wound up once but that now everything is declining, deteriorating. Paul includes not only the natural world, with its constant decay, but the human body as well. He says,

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly [and sometimes outwardly] as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. {Rom 8:22-25 RSV}

That was the hope which these believers entertained in their minds. They knew it academically. They knew that there was coming a day when their bodies would be redeemed, that God was working out that transformation, and that a whole new day was ahead. The central factor of this hope is the certainty of a new humanity. And you will notice that this hope is not just a faint possibility. It isn't an uncertain dream lying in the distant future. It is an absolutely guaranteed certainty, toward which we are now moving, that we will one day live in a whole new creation and will be men and women endowed with a spirit which can mount up with wings as the eagle, a soul that can run and not be weary, a body which can walk and not faint, equal to the demands of the spirit.

We know how true it is, in the words of our Lord, that the spirit is often willing, but the flesh is weak. About the best we can manage to say is that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is ready for the weekend! We need rest; we look forward to relaxation. But there is coming a day, says God, when we shall be in a new body, and it will be equal to all the demands of the spirit, so that we never get weary or tired. We're looking forward to that day.

"Well," you say, "that's fine. I understand that. But how does that help me now? Now, I'm bored, I'm caught

up in a meaningless routine. Day by day goes by, and life is not very exciting. How does that distant hope help me now?" The answer is that the Scriptures do not teach that all of this hope is going to be attained in one blinding flash at the end. I think that many Christians today misunderstand it in this way.

Perhaps these Ephesians did too, and this was their difficulty. What the Scriptures actually teach about this hope had never dawned upon them. And that is that this is not going to happen all at one moment in the resurrection which occurs at the end of life, or at the end of the age, but it is something which is happening right now. It is true that the body is ultimately redeemed at that future time, but the new creation is taking place right now.

Read the way Paul describes it in these most helpful words in Second Corinthians 4:

So we do not lose heart [we don't get discouraged]. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us [right now!] an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ...
{2 Cor 4:16-17 RSV}

That is what is happening now! I never read the phrase "this slight momentary affliction" without thinking of what Paul says a little farther on in that same letter when he describes his own experience: He had been beaten with rods three times and had received thirty-nine lashes five times, he had been shipwrecked three times and a night and a day had been adrift at sea, he had even been stoned once (not on LSD or something like that -- rocks had been thrown at him) and left for dead, he was in danger constantly on the sea and on the land, in danger from false brethren, spent many a sleepless night and many a day without food or drink. All this he catches up in one phrase: "this slight momentary affliction." And he says that this is working for us, it is preparing us. It is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

That is what Paul is praying that these Christians will capture -- the sense that God is at work in their daily circumstance, and that this is happening now, that, in the midst of the old creation, the new one is gradually taking shape. You can't see it, although perhaps as you look back you can see some of the results of it in your spirit and in your soul. But these very trials and pressures and problems and afflictions are preparing us for that future time.

That means that the flat tire you had on your car yesterday and which upset you so -- just as you were in a hurry to go someplace you came out and found it there -- is working for you. It is preparing you for this day. It is teaching you something about how to be patient, how to handle your pressures. It is giving you a chance to exercise some of the power of Christ which is available to you. That spot of shoe polish you got on your best dress, the weariness you feel at the end of the day, the arthritic pains in your shoulder, the spat you had with your best friend -- all this, you see, is working together for your good. That is the point. That is what Paul wants these Ephesians to see. They are not lost in a meaningless routine of events, drifting through with some degree of numbness day after day. No, it is all working together. It is preparing them for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

Learn to look at life that way!

That is the hope of our calling.

There is no circumstance we go through which cannot, in the hands of God, be turned to our advantage. Granted, we often allow ourselves an immediate failure at that point, but that failure is not the end of the story. We can go back and say, "Lord, I see now that I didn't need to give way to the flesh, to its despair or its reaction of anger or impatience. Thank you for showing me that. When the situation arises again I'll be readier to rest upon your sustaining grace. I'll be more experienced in how to turn the problem over immediately to your strengthening hand upon which I can lean." When you begin to see that, then every moment, every event, is tinged with the flame of glory, with the touch of heaven upon it.

Paul knew also of their sense of impoverishment. He knew that these Christians tended to grow dull and flabby in their experience. They had begun with a vast comprehension of the greatness of God and the glory of

life, and they had been set free from the habits which had held them in bondage and had limited their experience. But now, without realizing it, they were gradually drifting into a narrowness of experience. They were becoming limited and provincial. A sort of living rigor mortis was setting in. They were becoming established. (That means inflexible and rigid!) This condition afflicts many Christians.

I was in Portland, Oregon, yesterday. Some friends were telling me about a large evangelical church there, orthodox to the core, the people exposed to a great deal of Bible teaching. But the outstanding characteristic of that church is an increasing inflexibility and narrowness. Those who attend there are finding the walls of their lives moving in. They are limited in what they can or cannot do. There is a tendency to retire and to back away from life and not to get involved in the real issues. And they are gradually falling into a rut which is extremely unappealing and unattractive to others around, but they seem to be only dimly aware of it. This can happen to any of us.

But Paul is aware of this condition among these Ephesian Christians, and so he prays that they may know "what are the riches of his [God's] glorious inheritance in the saints." Notice how he puts that. He is not asking that they understand that God is their inheritance. It is true that God is our resource. He is our strength; we draw upon him. We belong to him, and he to us. And that is the great resource of the Christian life. But what Paul is emphasizing here is that we belong to God. We are his property. He has an inheritance in us. It is his delight to use us. And if we make ourselves available to be used, then enrichment and fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams await us. But if we are afraid to let God use us, we will narrow down into this living rut of experience, and we will find that the Christian life is gradually turning drab and dreary and dull and gray.

So what is needed is an understanding of the adventure which awaits anyone who makes himself available to God. This is Paul's appeal in Romans 12: "I beseech you, brethren, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice unto God," {cf, Rom 12:1}. Give him your life -- day by day, not just in one crisis moment of dedication but in every situation. Say "Lord, do you want to use me in this situation? Okay, here I am. I'm available. I see this need right in front of me. Help me, Lord, not to pass by on the other side. Give me the grace to be available now. Lord, have you given me gifts? Is there equipment in my spirit that you want to use? Well, here it is, Lord; I'm available for you to use to meet this need." And then move out, venture out, plunge in, risk a little bit! As you do, you will discover that this brings enrichment of life, that your life gradually becomes delightful in its adventure, broad in its understanding, rich in its varied experience.

Yesterday I attended a conference at a beautiful estate on the Columbia River. It was a glorious autumn day. After the morning meetings I wanted a little chance to be alone so I took a walk. I was walking along a rather well-defined, wide path, when I saw a little trail wandering off to the side. I wondered where it went. It looked as if it headed down toward the river. I thought perhaps it might open up a vista of the Columbia River Gorge. It was a steep path, and I knew that when I came back up the going might be a little tough, but I decided to try it. I hadn't gone two hundred yards before I broke into a clearing where I had a tremendous, glorious view of the whole river, the gorge, the autumn colors, the cliffs, the mountains beyond. It was well worth taking that path!

I was thinking of this verse as I walked back up that path, thinking of how Paul prays that we might understand the riches of God's glorious inheritance in the saints -- the thrill of being used of God. It struck me that I had just experienced a living parable of that. I had to take the chance that the path went somewhere. It didn't appear to be much of a path, it could have dwindled into nothing -- so I had to risk something. But it was well worth the risk, because it enriched my life with the beauty of that scene.

And God is speaking in that way to you. Many of you are just waiting for God to tell you to do something. But the New Testament never instructs you to do that. Its message is: "God is with you; therefore reach out, risk something, venture, move out, plunge in, try something new that you've never done before and trust God to see you through it. The result will be fantastic enrichment of life. I wish we could take the time to have dozens of you in this congregation come up to the platform and share with us, as I know would be quite possible, how true this is, how you have found that as you ventured out for God it has opened up your life and enriched it beyond your wildest dreams.

There in Portland I ran into some folks who knew Dick and Pam Ewing. Many of you remember them from

when they were at PBC while Dick was an intern. When they first came to us, Dick and Pam were such a quiet, retiring couple that you hardly ever even noticed they were around. We have to confess, as a staff, that some of us wondered if Dick would succeed as an intern because he was so quiet. But these folks gave me a report on what is going on in Portland. Dick and his wife moved up there near the campus of Lewis and Clark College, with no regular financial support at all -- no group backing them. They went alone onto this campus. No other Christian organization is working there -- just this couple. They met some students and invited them over to their home. They began to teach one or two of them the Scriptures and shared with them the truth that they had learned. They began to open up their lives to these students and helped them to see the richness of God. These first few brought others, and now there is a group of forty or fifty college students meeting with them every day. Dick is still a quiet person. He is very shy and retiring, and he doesn't teach with a lot of power and persuasiveness. But the richness of his own life is an evident testimony to the truth of what he is saying, and he is becoming a tremendous force for God on that campus. And his own life, as he shares in his letters to us, is so enriched, so much greater than he ever dreamed it could be.

I was just reading the letter sent out monthly from Taiwan by Lillian Dickson. What an amazing story her life is! She responds to every need that comes her way -- nobody mentions a need but that she doesn't do something about it. The result is that she has friends all over the world, and she has a ministry which is so rich and filled with exciting incidents that there is never a dull day, never a boring moment. Now, that awaits anyone -- if you will let God have his inheritance in your life, if you will present your body to him and say, "Lord, here I am, available to you."

There is one final element in Paul's request here: "that you may know ... what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe, ..." The apostle knows that these Ephesian Christians, like Christians everywhere, are oftentimes immobilized by the grip of fear. He knows their insecurity. He knows that they are afraid of their neighbors, afraid of failure, afraid of persecution and ridicule. There is a deep sense of inadequacy and of impotence in their lives. They don't think they can do anything. They know how entrenched the forces of evil around them are and it seems hopeless to try to challenge any of the social situations of the day. They know what tremendous, relentless pressures the world can bring to bear upon those who seek to relieve some of these situations, and they are afraid.

The answer to fear is power. The minute you feel a sense of adequate power, you lose fear, because power overcomes fear. Love overcomes fear. These forces are mighty, powerful forces. And so Paul prays that Christians will get their eyes open, in a practical way, to the power available to them -- "that you may know what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us [not up in heaven somewhere -- in us] who believe."

I am often distressed by the fact that so many Christians seem to give up. They feel that their struggles are just too much, that they just can't make it. It is because they have lost sight of the One who is giving them power.

Paul develops this at some length here because it is so important to us. He wants us to see that this power was first demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus:

... according to the working of his great might which he accomplished in Christ when he raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, {Eph 1:19b-20 RSV}

It is resurrection power. That means that it is different; it is not like any other power. It isn't the power of a strong personality, nor of an educated mind. It isn't the power of a good family background, nor of money, nor numbers, nor leadership ability. It is the power that raised Christ from the dead, that is able to bring life out of death. What does that mean in practical terms? Well, it means, as I have often said, that it works best in a cemetery. If you are living in a cemetery, if everything is dead and dull and lifeless around you, try resurrection power. That is what it is for. It means that this power takes no notice at all of obstacles, just as Jesus rose from the dead, paying no attention to the stone, to the decrees of Caesar, to the fulminations of the Jewish priests, nor to the guard in front of the tomb. Resurrection power doesn't pay any attention to obstacles. It just surges on ahead, leaves the problems up to God, and goes on. It means that resurrection power requires no outside support. It doesn't rely upon someone else, nor upon something else. It doesn't need a vote of confidence. It doesn't require any kind of undergirding expressions of support from anybody. It

can operate alone, completely alone, if necessary. And it means that it makes no noise or display. It doesn't try to arrest attention by some publicity stunt. It just works quietly and, without any noise, effects its transformation, brings life out of death.

And further, you will notice that the apostle declares that it is supreme in the universe:

... far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; {Eph 1:21 RSV}

It is far above, greater than any other force, stronger than anything which can be launched against you. So believe these words! This is what the apostle is praying for -- that you will really grasp this thought, understand that this is exactly what God means.

Some years ago a young man came to me with anguish in his eyes, obviously in agony. He told me of how he had been struggling to overcome a terrible passion, terrible feelings of lust which affected him all the time. These would sometimes grow so strong that he would fall back into habits which he knew were wrong and were horribly destructive of him and his loved ones, but he would give way nevertheless and he just couldn't resist. We sat down and talked about power, about the power of a resurrected Lord, and what he has made available to us. I remember turning to this passage and reading him these words. At the time it didn't seem to affect him much, but I said to him, "You know, God's power is made perfect in weakness. Your problem is that you are trying to feel strong. You want to feel powerful. But God says, 'No, resurrection power is the kind that works best when you feel weak.' So if you feel weak, thank God. And the next time you find yourself threatened with being mastered by these surging lusts, run to Christ in helplessness. Commit yourself to him again. Say 'Lord, I can't handle this myself. I can't control myself. If you don't help me, I'm sunk!' And simply cast yourself upon him." He said, "All right, I'll try."

A couple of weeks later, I saw him again. His face was wreathed with smiles when he came to me. He said, "You know, it works, it really works! I was reading again through that passage which you read to me, and I was struck by two words. It says that Christ is seated at God's right hand in the heavenly places [i.e., in the seat of power in the universe], far above, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. And those two words, 'far above', really opened my eyes. Why, of course," he said, "if God is at work in me, and if he has that kind of power, then nobody else's power even approaches his. No demonic force, no lustful urge, can be greater than the power of Jesus Christ. When I saw that fact, I was able simply to rest in the Lord, and it has been working. God has set me free!"

You notice that Paul stresses the fact that the name of Jesus is greater than any name that is named. When you name a name you are representing the resource upon which you intend to act. A policeman acts in the name of the law. The President of the United States acts in the name of the people. A salesman acts in the name of the company. And there are men and women today trying to act in the name of Satan. But here is a name which is above every name. Of any name that can be named the name of Jesus is greater, not only in time but in eternity as well, not only in this age but in the age to come. Never will there be a greater name than the name of Jesus. What encouragement that gives!

The last thing that Paul tells us of this power is that it is all made visible in the church:

... and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness [the manifestation, the visible expression] of him who fills all in all. {Eph 1:22-23 RSV}

The only place this kind of power is ever going to be manifest is in you and me, in the midst of our pressures and problems -- power to be patient (that takes power, doesn't it?), power to love, when someone is irritating the socks off of you, but you must love him nevertheless (that takes power!), power to be joyful in the midst of distressing circumstances, power to be thankful, etc. That is what Paul talking about -- power to live as God intended men to live.

This conference in Oregon yesterday consisted of a lot of new Christians, many of them teenagers, and some

older couples who had been Christians for several years. There were some non-Christians present, agnostics. A young Jewish athlete was there. There was a crowd of about a hundred twenty-five people. I was teaching the New Covenant, the new arrangement for life made in Jesus Christ, and was stressing the fact that this is God's provision to set us free from our inner hangups, to relieve us from guilt and fear and hostility and anxiety, to relieve all our inner tensions so that we are at peace within and can operate out of a sense of oneness and wholeness in God's presence. I explained how this is so obviously available in Jesus Christ, and how it works, and I confirmed it with certain experiences.

At the end of one of the messages a man came up to me and rather abruptly said, "You know, we're going to have to find some way to shut you up!" I wondered what he was getting at. He said, "If you keep on talking this way, men like me are going to be out of work." I asked, "What do you do?" He said, "I'm a psychiatrist! But seriously, I want you to know that what you are saying, I have recently discovered, is the secret that can make psychiatry work." We went on to converse, and I found that, not too long ago, he had become a Christian. And now he was enjoying the discovery of a secret he had puzzled over and wondered at before -- why some of the psychiatric techniques he had been taught would work and others wouldn't. Now he understood that a new power is available, and that, in that power, these psychiatric approaches can be made to work consistently, and so he had begun to correct his psychiatry by the Scriptures.

So this is what God is telling us. He has come to give us hope, and riches, and power -- power to be what he wants us to be, power to be what we, too, want to be.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we ask that this mighty prayer of this great apostle will become true of us -- that the eyes of our hearts will be enlightened, that these words will not be merely empty words, not mere phrases that we repeat because they are in the New Testament, but that they will come alive in our experience and we too will discover how encouraging it is that our failures are working for us "a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," that even in the times when we are distressed and we don't handle the situation rightly, if we will turn back to you then that situation will work out to our advantage. Lord, we thank you for this encouragement that if we will venture even a little bit, our lives are going to be enriched thereby. And we are grateful that above all, and undergirding everything else, is this amazing power that is within us, that is quietly able to bring life out of death, hope out of hopelessness, joy out of sorrow, and beauty out of ashes. Lord, we ask that we will understand this and live by it and act on it, so that the world around will begin to see it in us. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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