

HOW PRAYER WORKS

by Ray C. Stedman

As we come to the end of an old year and the beginning of a new, most of us are engaged in an evaluation of what has happened through the past year. And we struggle with a sense of need for motivation. We are aware of certain failures which have occurred in the past year, even though we began the year with the best of intentions. Somehow things have not gone quite as we expected. We haven't been able to do just what we determined to do. So, as we face the new year, we are asking ourselves, "How can I do better? How can I motivate myself really to do what I know I ought to do?"

Last week I received a note asking a question which puts this rather graphically:

"What can be done about the problem of self-discipline? For the twenty years of my life before becoming a Christian, I found myself unable to achieve this. And after two plus years as a Christian, it still eludes me, though there seems to be some reason for expecting it on the basis of Galatians 5:23."

The verse the writer refers to is about the fruit of the Spirit. It says that not only will there be love and joy and peace, but also gentleness and goodness and self-control -- self-discipline. And so this writer is asking, "How can I have this? There is in Christianity the hope of discipline, self-discipline, but how can I lay hold of it?"

This is where many of us struggle -- the struggle of "ought" against "is." "I am this; I ought to be that. How can I do it?" I am sure all of us have felt this way at times.

The world's answer at this time of the year, of course, is New Year's resolutions: "I will determine to do this. I will grit my teeth and say, 'Yes, I am going to do it.' I will set myself to it. I'll prop myself up with reminders here and there, and tell my friends so they can help me. This way I will get it done." But every December brings ample testimony that this doesn't work, because it is what we tried last year at this time -- and it didn't work!

Well, this is the very problem the apostle is facing in the closing verses of Chapter 3 in his letter to the Ephesians. He is concerned about these Ephesians. You get the setting of this passage in Verse 13, where Paul says,

So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, {Eph 3:13 RSV}

The Christians in and about Ephesus were in danger of losing heart.

Did you ever lose heart?

When an athlete is in an endurance contest of some kind, he presses on and on, though his legs begin to turn to rubber and his breath comes heavily and he experiences real physical pain. He keeps going nevertheless. And when he finishes, we say, "What a great heart he's got. He's got the morale, the stamina, to stay with it."

But when you lose heart -- you lose stamina, you lose morale. You come to the place where you say, "What's the use? Why keep going? I can't make it." And you give up. That is what Paul sensed was about to happen there in Ephesus. They were about to give in, lose heart. So he says, "I am concerned. Don't lose heart. The situation isn't the way you think it is." And, as we have seen, he teaches them some wonderful truth to show them why they ought not to lose heart.

But then he closes with this great prayer:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven

and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. {Eph 3:14-19 RSV}

The apostle has dealt with the problem of motivation once before, in Chapter 1. He closes that chapter with a prayer, too. In Verse 15 he says, "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," {Eph 1:15-16 RSV}. Then he goes on to pray that the eyes of their hearts may be enlightened, that the truth may grip their emotions and thus enlighten their minds, so that they will begin to see truth not merely as intellectual dogma but as living reality, a revelation of the way things are, and that they thus will be motivated to begin to move in the direction God wants.

The prayer in Chapter 3 picks up right from that very point and goes on from there. For the apostle makes clear that they need not only to have light and knowledge to begin, but they need power to continue. They not only need motivation, but they need resolution to keep going, to stay with it, to stick on to the end.

Isn't that what we need? We are facing a new year. Most of us know that we can make it through the first two weeks pretty well. All our bad habits will drop away, and we can be kind to our neighbors, our mother and father, our children -- and even the dog -- for two weeks. But then it begins to ebb and wane. By the end of January we are pretty well back into the same old ruts we were in before.

What we need is not only motivation, not only light to begin, but power to continue. That is the difference between this prayer in Chapter 3 and the one in Chapter 1. That was a prayer for understanding -- understanding that grips even the emotions. But this is a prayer for power -- power which keeps you going and helps you to recover from losing heart.

So if that is your problem, or has been, or will be, then I hope you will give careful attention to this prayer, because the Apostle Paul begins at that point -- with someone who is about to lose heart, or has lost heart, someone who says that they have reached the depths of depression and despair, and that they think they are unable to come back to the Lord. What do you do for them? Maybe you are there yourself. Maybe you are thinking of someone right now who is there, and you don't know where to start. Then pay careful heed as the apostle takes us step by step up a grand staircase of endeavor here, step laid upon step, rising constantly, and leading us on to the fullest possible experience of Christian vitality. We will look at it in the simple divisions that Paul himself provides -- first his prayer itself, and then the great paean of praise which comes at the end.

The first step:

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, {Eph 3:15-16 RSV}

In other words, he begins with prayer. This is important to emphasize. We need to understand more about the ministry of prayer.

I am convinced that, although there has been much prayer for one another during the last two or three years here at PBC, we still need a great deal more understanding of what prayer really does and how it works.

The apostle evidently clearly understood this, because he is never very far from prayer for those to whom he writes and for whom he is concerned. He understood that this was an essential ingredient to the solution of their problems. And not only for them, but for him, as an apostle. He needed them to pray for him, and he asked for it again and again.

I am very concerned that as we study this passage together, we catch the vast significance of this. The place to begin when somebody's faith is failing, when they are turning cold and lethargic and dead in their spiritual

experience, is to pray for them.

Notice particularly the One to whom Paul prays. He says, "I bow my knees before the Father." It wasn't customary for the Jews to bow their knees in prayer. We think of kneeling as the common posture of prayer, although perhaps not as much these days as a few decades ago. But the Jews usually prayed standing with arms outstretched to God. It was only when something was of deep, intense concern that they bowed the knees or prostrated themselves before God. This is the position the apostle takes here.

Of course, it really isn't important what your position is. I vaguely remember a humorous poem about a group of Christians who were arguing about this. One insisted that the only way to pray was on your knees. Another insisted that it had to be standing with bowed head. A third asserted that the only way to pray was to be seated in a chair looking up to God. One who till then had been silent told of an incident in which he accidentally fell head first into a well. While he was hanging there upside down, he prayed a prayer which he said was the most effective he had ever prayed! So it isn't posture that is important.

Nevertheless, the apostle stresses the earnestness of his prayer: "I bow my knees in earnest concern for you who are about to lose heart." He prays to the Father: "before the Father." And then he adds, "... from whom every [literally] fatherhood in heaven and on earth is named." It's not family. It is fatherhood. In other words, God is a Father. He is the very epitome of fatherhood, and every fatherhood in heaven and on earth which deserves the name of father draws its characteristics from the fatherhood of God. He is the archetypal father -- the Father from whom all fatherhood takes its essence and its character.

Now, this doesn't mean paternity. Sometimes we read in the newspaper of a paternity suit wherein a woman sues a certain man, claiming that he is the father of her child. It may be true that he has participated in the conception of the child, and is in that sense the father. But that is a far cry from the words "Father" and "fatherhood" as Paul uses them here. Sometimes "Father" is used in the sense that God is the father of all human beings, and in that sense perhaps it is correct.

But here it is in the sense of fatherhood, which evokes concepts of concern and provision and loving guidance and faithful training, of shared pleasures, of occasional firm handling, of increasing communion. That is fatherhood. And the apostle wants you to remember that when you are despairing about your spiritual life or about someone else's, when you are feeling cold and lethargic, and you are about to lose heart, and you feel like giving up and saying it is time to quit, then that is the time to turn to a Father. God is our Father, and he is the very quintessence of fatherhood. And he approaches this problem of the paralysis of our will out of the resources he has as a father, which Paul describes as "the riches of his glory":

... that according to the riches of his glory ... {Eph 3:16a RSV}

God's glory is God's being, God's person. He himself is his own riches of glory. And when God wants to display his glory he shows you himself. He reveals what he is like. This is why the apostle stresses this at this time. For you are not going to some cold, distant being -- sitting up on some remote Mount Olympus somewhere, flapping his eyelids in contemptuous indifference to your needs -- to ask for help. You are coming to a tender, concerned, loving Father, who is deeply involved with you, who wants you to grow, who is concerned about your welfare, and who will not leave you in some state of arrested development. That is what Paul sets before us as the background of this prayer.

Now he begins to trace step by step the course of recovery from spiritual depression:

**he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man,
{Eph 3:16b RSV}**

That is the first step: "strengthened with might by his Spirit [literally] 'into' the inner man". This is not a reminder that the Spirit dwells in the inner man, although that is true. Rather, the idea here is that the Spirit might infuse his own strength into your inner man. Well, what is your inner man? You and I are of course familiar with this distinction between the outer man and the inner man. We take care of the outer man carefully. We dress it, we clothe it, we feed it, we comb it, we pat it, we primp it, we wash it, we dry it, we smear it

with cream. We are always concerned with the outer man -- the body and its needs. But we are also aware that there is an inner man.

Many commentators, I find, take this to mean the soul, the inner soul, with its faculties of reason and emotion and will, our thought life, and so on. But I don't think this is what Paul means here, because in Second Corinthians 4 he gives us a clue to what he does mean when he says "the inner man." There he says that "the outer man is perishing, but the inner man is being renewed day by day," {cf, 2 Cor 4:16 KJV}. That is, for Christians there is something about us which is getting old, decaying, deteriorating, but there is also something about us which is getting better, getting fresher and more vital, increasing, and becoming richer and deeper and stronger every day we live. And that is what he calls "the inner man."

Now, you know as well as I, that your soul grows old as well as your body. Your mind can become enfeebled by age, and your emotions can grow unstable and easily affected the older you become. We are all familiar with this. And even the will can become enfeebled, so that you don't have the same resolution and drive and determination you once had. So it is clear that the soul is part of our life linked with the outer man which is perishing day by day. We are getting older, growing senile.

I had lunch some time ago with a man my age. At the end of the meal I paid the bill. I gave the waiter the money and he took the bill away and brought the change back. To my astonishment, my friend helped himself to the change and put it in his pocket. Absent minded! I realized that I was having lunch with a senile old man!

I won't tell you about all the times I do things like that.

But, you see, that is not the inner man. The inner man here is the spirit, the human spirit. And it is here that God begins the work of recovery -- not in the soul, in the spirit. Not in the realm of our feelings, in other words, but in what psychologists would call the realm of the subconscious, the deep-seated part of our life, the fundamental element of our nature. You know that when you are really discouraged, really broken-hearted, and have given up, the way your condition is often described is as "dispirited." That is an accurate term. You have become "dis-spirited." Your fundamental nature is dissatisfied, discontent. It is not merely a question of temporary boredom. That would be in the realm of the soul. But this is something which touches the spirit, right at the very deepest level of human life, and you find yourself filled with ennui, with despair and indifference, and it persists for hours and days on end.

This is where the recovery must begin. And what the apostle tells us about here is the capability of the Creator himself, our loving Father, to give us a fresh infusion of strength by his Spirit into our spirit the inner man. We are strengthened with might by his Spirit into the inner man. In First Corinthians 12, speaking of believers, Paul says, "... by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body [We have been made members of the body of Christ.], and ... made to drink of one Spirit," {1 Cor 12:13 RSV}. That is what our human spirits are for -- they are to drink of the Spirit of God, so that the Spirit of God is able to refresh us and revitalize us. Just as taking a drink refreshes your body, so drinking of the Spirit refreshes your spirit, at the deepest level of your life.

Now, that is not the realm of feeling. I want this to be clear, because we get so hung up, in this process of spiritual recovery, by always wanting an instantly good feeling. We seek some instant sense of relief. Well, relief will come, but it doesn't start there. It starts down at the level of the spirit, and may be nothing more than some consciousness of reassurance that things are going to work out eventually.

This beginning step is not your responsibility; it is God's. Doesn't that help? You don't have to start it. He does. All that is necessary is that you ask him for it. You ask, or someone else asks on your behalf -- one or the other. Paul prayed that these Ephesians might have this granted to them. And they could have prayed for themselves, if they had known what to pray for, because a prayer is nothing but a cry of helplessness: "God help me." When we ask on that level, God promises to give.

Remember what Jesus himself taught in that great passage on prayer in Luke 11, at the end of the story of the importunate friend: "What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent?" {Luke 11:11 RSV}. Would any earthly father do that? Would he tantalize, torture his son that way?

"Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?" {Luke 11:12 RSV}. What kind of a father would do anything like that? "No, of course not;" Jesus says, "neither will God." "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more ..." {Luke 11:13a RSV}. Do you feel the force of his argument? "... how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" {Luke 11:13b RSV}. He is not talking about how to be indwelt by the Spirit, but about how to recover from losing heart. The way to start, the first step, is to ask God to grant you that your spirit will receive a new infusion of strength, that you can drink again of the river of the Spirit of life which is in you, and that your spirit will be restored so that you can begin to operate as God intended you to. You won't feel this, necessarily. We sharply feel what occurs in the soul, but only sort of deeply sense things taking place in our spirit.

This moves us to the second step, which immediately follows. Paul prays that God may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit into the inner man so:

... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; {Eph 3:17a RSV}

Notice the connection -- literally, it is not "and that" but "so that." You are strengthened by his Spirit so that Christ may, literally, "make his home" in your heart. The strengthening of your spirit results in your sensing the personal presence of the Lord Jesus, as your reborn faith takes hold of his promise once again.

The key to that second step is the words "through faith." Why have you been languishing, why have you been growing weak and unable to operate? Well, because your faith is failing. You are not as clearly and as sharply believing the reality that God reveals. Your faith is dragging. What the infusion of the Spirit does is to awaken faith, so that you can begin to believe again. And the first thing to believe is the most fundamental fact of Christian life -- Jesus Christ has come to live in you. Even yet there may not be much feeling involved. It is just a fact that faith again rests upon Jesus' promise given in the Upper Room in John 14. Do you remember how he put it to Judas, not Iscariot? Judas said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" {John 14:22 RSV}. And Jesus answered him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him," {John 14:23 RSV}. That is what Paul is referring to. Faith is awakened now. You remind yourself that Jesus Christ lives in you. You are a believer. He has taken up his residence in you. He will not leave you. He is at home in your heart, and you belong to him.

That immediately brings the third step. Do you see how Paul is leading us, step by step, back to recovery?

that you, being rooted and grounded in love, {Eph 3:17b RSV}

Ah, love! Now feeling is beginning to return. Once again you are beginning to sense something, but it is the third step, not the first, when sensation comes back. Reassured by Jesus' promise to be with you, you now know that you are loved, and that he cares for you, and that he will not change that relationship. Therefore, your self-identity returns.

In other words, as Paul puts it, you are "rooted and grounded in love." There he is mixing metaphors. Plants are rooted; buildings are grounded. But Paul ties them together as beautiful figures of security. A plant that is rooted is solid.

Some time ago we had in our yard a tree which you could knock over by pushing. An agronomist came by and told us it was necessary to tie it down so that it couldn't move until the roots took hold. Now you can push it and it will not move. It is rooted and solid and can withstand the storm and stress.

And a building needs to be firmly fixed upon a foundation; otherwise it will shake in the wind and storm.

Paul is simply saying here that we need foundations for our experiences. We can't handle life unless we have a solid foundation, unless we are rooted and grounded -- in what? In love -- in the assurance that God loves us, and has accepted us, that we are dear to him, precious to him. When we know this, then we know who we are. Then we have a sense of well-being. Love always gives us that.

That is why a lonely, solitary life is so difficult -- because there is no sense of well-being. That is why it is the greatest cause of suicide in this world. What causes people to jump off bridges and blow out their brains? They don't feel loved. No one appreciates them. No one reaches out to them. But the Christian can find his ground of solidarity and security and love in Jesus Christ.

And when that stage is reached, then you are ready for the next -- the fourth step:

that you ... may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, {Eph 3:18 RSV}

Now we are climbing back to power and vitality. This sense of identity gives us power to relate to others "power to comprehend [or "realize" is literally the word] with all saints." This means that now we can begin to relate to somebody else, to reach out to someone else. And when we do, we will begin to lay hold of the breadth and length and height and depth.

I want to stress that we are not to live in isolation -- that is our problem -- but to relate to one another, to "realize with all saints," and not to try to work it out all alone. Many Christians attempt to live in solitary confinement. They resist relating, resist sharing. But you see, that is falling into the trap in which the world lives. The world talks a lot about privacy, longs for privacy, struggles to have areas of life that no one sees. It insists upon having private reserves, areas no one enters. But the price of that is loneliness. You can't have privacy without having loneliness. And if loneliness is your trouble, it is because you are insisting upon being private.

The church cuts right across this.

Christian teaching and doctrine undermine this whole philosophy, because it tells us we are not to be private. We are to relate, we are to share. We are to be open. We are to "widen our hearts" as Paul puts it to the Corinthians. "Widen your hearts," {2 Cor 6:13 RSV} he says. "Reach out to each other. Bear each other's burdens," {cf, Gal 6:2}. Confess your faults one to another," {Jas 5:16}. The Christian is to have no private areas in his life at all. If he insists upon it, he is defying what God has called him to -- the sharing of the body of Christ in openness and freedom for all to see exactly what you are. As you begin to relate to and to share with one another, then, the apostle says, you begin to realize, to lay hold of, the height and depth and length and breadth.

What does he mean? There are many who have made beautiful suggestions about the meaning of these four dimensions. Some see in them the cross, with its height and depth and length and breadth. Some see it as a description of the love of God. But I think they are a reference to some of the things Paul has talked about in this letter already. The "length" is what he calls in Chapter 1 "the hope to which you are called" {Eph 1:18 RSV} -- that hope which began before the foundation of the world, in eternity past, and reaches on through all of recorded time and history into the ages ahead, into the unsearchable, limitless reaches of eternity yet to come. That is the whole length and scope of God's program. We are caught up in a vast cosmic endeavor to bring all things to one in Christ. We are part of that -- the hope to which we are called.

And the "breadth," of course, is what he refers to as "the riches of his inheritance among the Gentiles" {cf, Eph 1:18} -- the fact that Jews and Gentiles and all men alike are gathered up in the church, without difference or division -- black, white, rich, poor, slave, freeman, male, female -- it doesn't make any difference. All are one. All humanity is caught up in the riches of Jesus Christ, in the cross and in the church.

The "height" is the place to which we are raised with Christ -- risen to sit together with him in heavenly places, far above all principalities, all powers, all authorities, in this age and in the age to come. It is the place of authority as a Christian, the place of power to be freed from everything that would drag you down, the place of being given adequate equipment to live above all that would disturb and twist and injure and demolish and destroy in your life.

And finally, the "depth", of course, is what he has described in Chapter 2 as death, the living death out of which God has called us -- when we were victims instead of victors, when we were following the course of

this age, living unwittingly directed by the prince of the power of the air, following the passions of the flesh, doing what we thought was right and ending up being wrong in everything we attempted, "children of wrath," as Paul described us -- "by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind," {Eph 2:3 RSV}. Out of that living death -- the depths of human depravity -- God called us into the heights with Christ.

And, you see, all of this comes to us as we learn to relate to others. This is why the church has been so barren and poverty stricken, so narrow, so insular, so isolated. We have loved to come to services and just sit and listen, but not relate to anyone else. This is why we have been trying to have "body life" services and trying to encourage you to meet your friends and neighbors when you come to church, get acquainted with the ones sitting next to you. Because it is in reaching out to "realize with all saints" that there comes the ability to lay hold of all these great provisions in Jesus Christ.

The next step:

and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, {Eph 3:19a RSV}

That is the fifth step. Think of it -- to know the unknowable! How do you do that? Well, here is where experience reaches its full peak. You begin to know the love of Christ. Here is where feeling comes in full throttle. You can really begin to glow with this understanding of the love of Christ. You can't understand it but you can feel it. We all know how you can feel something you can't comprehend. A baby feels his mother's love. He senses how deeply his mother loves him, and there are times when he won't go to anyone else but his own mother because he knows his mother loves him. But what does a baby understand about a mother's love? He can't comprehend it. But he feels it, knows it. So the apostle tells us that as we begin to lay hold of these great truths we begin to see the love of Christ in everything that happens to us -- in our circumstances, in the world of nature around, in relationships, in life itself. We are simply overwhelmed with the sense of love of Jesus Christ. As we sometimes sing, "Heaven above is softer blue, earth around is sweeter green; something lives in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen."

And then we come to the last step:

that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. {Eph 3:19b RSV}

Now you have reached the top. And when you have, you have realized the purpose of your own creation. This is what God made humanity for. He made us to be vessels wholly filled and flooded with God himself.

Now, this is not a condition you attain only once or twice in your Christian life. It is a condition to which we are to return again and again. This is what Paul refers to as being filled with the Spirit. It is the condition in which God is in possession and control of our lives, enriching us, blessing us, and strengthening us. Our faith is strong and vital, and we are reaching out, ministering. And, as Paul puts it earlier, we are God's workmanship, and we will discover the good works to which we have been foreordained.

You say, "Can all this be, in the new year?" Well, we will simply close with the final verses of this chapter:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all, generations, for ever and ever. Amen. {Eph 3:20-21 RSV}

Who is going to do this? You? No, no. God in you.

That is the secret, isn't it?

God in you is able to do more abundantly all you can ask or think. What are you dreaming about for the new year? Well, if you insist upon manipulating it and trying to bring it to pass, the best that you can hope for is what you can ask or think. But if you put your case in the hands of this mighty God, and follow these steps, obeying him about yourself, and praying for others in this same way, you will discover that, though he might take you in ways you don't understand and at first seem to be almost tragic in their nature, nevertheless, out of

them he will bring you to the place where you stand in amazement and awe and wonder at what he has brought into your experience and your life -- beyond all that you can ask or think. That is the nature of the God with whom we have to do, and that is the power at work in us right now.

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