

THE SECRET GOVERNMENT OF EARTH

by Ray C. Stedman

It would be provincial on our part not to have some comment on the event that has occurred for which this week will be forever famous in history -- man's first trip to the moon. We cannot help but be grateful to God for the safe return of these three brave men who ventured out on this perilous journey into space. Despite all the meticulous preparation that was necessary to make this possible, still (as any of the astronauts would have been first to acknowledge), something could easily have gone wrong and these men would never have returned to earth again. We are grateful that God has allowed that return to take place. We are grateful, too, to the men that they found it fitting that the first message to come to this planet from outer space was that of the opening words of Genesis. It was a most appropriate message.

But I cannot help but be concerned about certain aspects of this venture and perhaps you share that concern. I am concerned that this achievement, remarkable as it is, will contribute to man's insane confidence that he is capable of solving all the riddles of life and of the universe, apart from God. These scientific achievements have a way of doing that to the corporate thought of mankind, making them feel that man is capable of working out all his problems. But let us remember that this was a problem in the technological realm only, and in that realm man has shown considerable brilliance. But technology is a far cry from the solution of the deep-seated issues of life. Perhaps we do not have too much to worry about in this respect. I remember one comment made during the flight of the Apollo 8, to the effect that this was a most propitious time for this to happen, occurring perhaps at the critical moment, because now we will have some place to go when things get intolerable here on earth!

My second area of concern about Apollo 8's flight is that, in sinful ignorance, man will find some way to use this knowledge and experience to create even more awesome and destructive instruments of terror and death than he already possesses. This is a very real possibility growing out of this space exploration. Who knows what horrors may swing over our heads in 1970, or some other year in the near future, because of this event. But this brings us back to the subject of our morning studies together. If that happened, we would then have one of those *strongholds of evil* that Paul has been speaking about in Second Corinthians 10 -- a stronghold which Christians and the Christian church are uniquely equipped to destroy.

I want to stress that again. What we are talking about in these messages from Second Corinthians 10, concerning our warring against evil in its entrenched power in human life, is that in the gospel we have the only method by which these problems can be adequately solved. It is not one of many methods; it is unique. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the only hope for this world. If the church is not saying that, no one else will say it. But that is supremely the message of the church to this world. The good news of Jesus Christ is our only hope of working out these burning, pressing issues that confront us on every side, both in society and in the life of the individual. They are in society precisely because they are in the lives of individuals, and the gospel offers the only way out.

We are exploring in depth Paul's statement in Second Corinthians 10:5:

**We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, {2 Cor 10:5a
RSV }**

and we have been looking together at how the weapons of the Christian (truth, love, righteousness, and faith-prayer), operate to destroy these arguments, and to human pride, the independent pride which is behind evil in any form today, and thus to eliminate these terrible problems of society. Now we have come to the last of the ways in which the gospel does this. We have considered

- How truth works,
- How love works,

- How righteousness works, and
- Now we come to the use of the weapon of faith-prayer.

I remind you again of what we have already seen, that faith, in this context, is confidence that God can and will intervene in the affairs of men. It is a belief that there is around us an unseen kingdom which rules over the affairs of men and does not hesitate to intervene in these affairs. It is that intervention that constitutes the power behind prayer. Prayer itself is nothing. Prayer is merely a means of communication. Prayer can do nothing of itself; but, in the wisdom of God, prayer is the means that God has ordained by which supernatural forces are brought into play directly upon the situations that prevail in society and in the lives of individuals. Prayer is the request for divine intervention, based upon certain promises that God has made.

Throughout the whole record of history this has been a powerful weapon to change circumstances. Faith-prayer destroys strongholds and humbles pride by calling into activity forces superior to those "principalities and powers," those "world rulers of present darkness" {cf, Eph 6:12} which Paul describes in Ephesians 6, which are behind these strongholds of evil. Therefore by the prayer of faith you are directly attacking the source of these problems. You can see clearly, then, in this respect at least, why the apostle would say, "the weapons of our warfare are not worldly," {2 Cor 10:4a RSV}. They are not according to the flesh. The man of the world does not believe in prayer; he thinks it is a joke. He thinks it is some kind of magic abracadabra which Christians indulge in order to psychologically bolster their sagging spirits. He thinks prayer meetings are a joke. They are nice for Christians, if they believe that kind of stuff, but no thinking individual can do so. This is why the apostle so clearly states the fact that the weapons that we have are not the ones the world would employ, but they are mighty! They destroy strongholds. They accomplish what the world's weapons do not and cannot accomplish.

If there is anything we will all get out of this present series of studies together, I hope it is a renewed confidence in the weapons that are at our disposal, a renewed sense of the power of a Christian in society. We do not need to be ashamed, any more than the Apostle Paul was ashamed when he wrote to the Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God unto salvation," {cf, Rom 1:16}. You do not need be ashamed of anything that is powerful. The trouble with the church today is that it has lost its sense of the power of the gospel. It has lost confidence in its weapons; it has believed the surging lies that are all around. It has adopted the attitudes of the world and refused to believe its Lord. That is why the church has remained powerless, unable to do anything effective, and has deserved many of the accusations that have been brought against it.

Let us believe in our weapons. Let us take renewed confidence in what God has given to us. In this pressing age we desperately need this. It is the only way we can be strong again in the strength and the power of the Lord. Let us remember that faith-prayer is a mighty weapon, directly attacking the source of the problem, bringing into play spiritual forces superior to those dark spiritual forces that are behind the manifestations of evil in our day. As Lord Tennyson quite accurately observed,

"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of."

We have great encouragement in the Scriptures to employ this weapon. Remember the many exhortations and promises in Scripture that relate to this matter of prayer. You do not have to understand all about prayer in order to pray -- you learn what prayer is by praying; you learn as you go. That is always God's way of teaching. It is only as you obey what God says that you begin to grasp what God means. As you begin to pray, you will learn to pray. To that end we have great exhortations and great promises to encourage us.

The Lord Jesus said, "Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father might be glorified in the Son," {John 14:13 RSV}. The Father loves to be glorified in the Son, and the Son's whole purpose in coming is that he might glorify the Father. And, Jesus says, this is the way it is done: "If you ask anything in my name, I will do it, in order that the Father might be glorified in the Son," {cf, John 14:14, 14:13 RSV}. He said, too, "If you have faith as a grain of mustard seed (not very much; just a tiny grain of faith) you shall ask what you will and it shall be done unto you," {cf, Matt 17:20, John 15:7}. Those are great words, great promises. "If you have faith..." It must be faith in response to what God has said, not merely a blind leap in the dark. Faith is never hope, a sort of erratic, baseless, groundless hope that God will do something. That is

not faith. Faith is based upon what God has said he will do, and consists of our counting upon it. If you have faith even as small as a grain of mustard seed, you shall ask what you will and it will be done unto you!

All the apostles also confirmed these promises:

- The Apostle John says, "This is the confidence that we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. And if we know that he hears us ... we know that we have the petitions that we ask of him," {cf, 1 Jn 5:14-15}.
- The Apostle Paul has many passages that deal with this matter of prayer. In Ephesians, he says, specifically, about warfare against the spiritual powers of darkness, "Pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication," {Eph 6:18a RSV}. And he goes on to cite his own need along this line.
- The Apostle Peter says, "The end of all things is at hand." If Peter could write that two thousand years ago, having begun the last period of history before the Lord was to come again, how much more can we say it of today, when we see so many prophetic aspects of the Scriptures being fulfilled? "The end of all things is at hand: therefore keep sane and sober unto prayer," {1 Pet 4:7 RSV}.

Prayer is the weapon by which things are kept in line until God's purposes are fulfilled.

Also, how many examples we have in the Scriptures along this line: examples of how the prayers of God's people have actually intervened directly in the affairs of government, politics, or normal life, the working out of the normal operations of a nation.

- Remember Abraham's great prayer for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, which came within an inch of sparing those cities from the judging wrath of God. God acknowledged the fact that had there been but six more righteous in the city of Sodom, Abraham's prayer would have saved those cities.
- Remember also the prayers of Daniel, how he prayed for his nation in captivity. When he saw that the promise of God was that the nation should remain in captivity for seventy years and those seventy years were now drawing to a close, Daniel laid hold of the promise and prayed a mighty prayer that God would begin to stir his people to move them back to Jerusalem. In a wonderful way, abundantly above all that Daniel could ask, that prayer was answered. Not only did the people begin to move, but Daniel himself was given a vision of the future that encompassed all of time down to our own day, and beyond.
- Recall also the prayer of Elijah, who prayed that it would not rain for three years and for three years it did not rain in Israel.

Now that does not mean that you can pray that, because you do not have Elijah's command, or promise. But when you pray on the basis of a promise that God has given you, you can be as confident as Elijah was that that prayer will be answered.

- Note how the church in the book of Acts prayed when Peter was in prison. They did not know quite how to pray (as Paul reminds us in Romans 8); they did not have the faith to ask that the prison doors be opened, but they prayed for Peter, asking that God would do something. And God did, abundantly above all that they could ask or think! He opened the doors and took Peter out of prison, right past the guards, astounding the rulers of the Jews the next morning when the report was brought to them. They had sent to the prison to have Peter brought before them, and the guards did the most famous double-take in history when they found him gone.

Thus prayer operates to change circumstances and situations, sometimes radically and dramatically, as in the cases I have been citing to you; other times only slightly and subtly, and yet very effectively.

Perhaps at this point we must interject certain warnings about the use of prayer, for I find that many have very childish ideas about prayer. I would like to mention two things that need to be remembered when you are

dealing with this subject of prayer:

1. First, we must obey the laws of prayer that are clearly defined in the Scripture. Prayer is not a magic device to obtain our own way, as many people seek to employ it. It is a means, rather, of participating in the exciting process of accomplishing God's will, of being a partner with God in what he is doing on earth.

The boundaries of prayer are always the will and purpose of God. Therefore we must know what God has said about what he will or will not do. We have no right to ask God to do something that he has said he will not do, or to ask him not to do something that he has said he will do. Therefore, we must not use prayer to "play God." That is not the purpose of prayer. We cannot act as the final arbiter of what goes on in the community or in a life. God is still sovereign and he will decide what is the final outcome. But we are privileged to have a part in this.

God has assigned us a great responsibility and one apart from which he will not act. He sees far wider and deeper than we. We see only a part; he sees the whole. We see only the present; he sees the past and future, the end of all events, as well as the beginning. Therefore, in prayer, we cannot dictate to God as to when he shall do something. Time God reserves to himself, as he says again and again in his word. We must learn, in prayer, not to tell God when he has to act. If we learn that we will discover that much of the problem of so-called "unanswered prayers" will be solved.

2. Then, second, we must expect variety in the way God answers prayer. He has announced to us that he is infinitely wise and powerful, far above us in these respects. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither my ways are your ways," says the Lord, "for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts and my ways different than your ways," {cf, Isa 55:8-9}. The Apostle Paul speaks of this, "O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God; how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out," {Rom 11:33 KJV}. How then are you going to anticipate how God is going to work? You cannot.

Therefore, in prayer, we must not dictate to God as to how he is going to accomplish the thing we ask. We must expect surprises, unanticipated approaches, unusual ways of doing things, and not have it all worked out in our mind very neatly just how God can get done what we want done, and which we have asked of him according to his will. This is the problem with many of us. We pray, and then we start thinking, "Now, let's see. If God would do this, or move that; if he would just change this person, then it would all work out." We then expect it to happen according to our plans. When it does not happen that way then we say, "Oh, our prayers are not answered." But God has his own way of doing things.

Yet, we can expect results in prayer. As the Lord Jesus himself told us, prayer follows certain categories, certain divisions. There are three kinds of prayer, reflected in those words, "Ask ... seek ... knock," and they fit three different types of situations. But in every case, Jesus himself said that the results were guaranteed. "Ask, and you shall receive; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened," {cf, Matt 7:7}. Then, lest we miss the point, he went on to say, "Everyone that asks, shall receive; and he that seeks, will find; and to him that knocks, it shall be opened," {cf, Matt 7:8}. Let us take those words seriously and remind ourselves that God means exactly what he says. If we pray along the lines he has taught us, we can be confident of the results.

How does prayer change things? What, specifically, does prayer do in certain situations? I want to suggest to you now three major ways in which prayer operates, that we might be clear about what God will or will not do in response to prayer:

1. First, prayer is intended to open blinded minds and hearts. The problem with most of the situations that occur in our lives, both socially and individually, is that we act out of ignorance. We are blind to the factors involved in a situation. That blindness is apparent on every side. I am continually astonished by the way the leaders and thinkers of our nation and of the world seem to be blind to the fundamental fact of human evil. It is amazing to me how they repeatedly seem to feel that groups of people will act differently than they will as individuals. It seems to be a clear matter of simple logic.

Individuals act in a certain way; when you put them in a group they will continue to act in the same way. They do not act differently. They cannot suddenly reverse themselves and be different thinking people: they act in the same way. These leaders, statesmen, and editorialists seem to be astonished at the selfishness and brutality of nations, and the presence in society of war and riot, yet they are utterly blind to their own inability to eliminate arguments, selfishness, and passion in their own homes. Yet these all arise from exactly the same source. That is clearly an evidence of the blindness that pervades the thinking of men.

This blindness is evident also in the fantastic proposals that are being made today to cure the moral illnesses of men. I read just this last week a most amazing but very serious proposal by certain scientists to screen the chromosomes of babies and thus detect latent abnormalities in their genetic structure. They would then register these babies and watch them. As they grew up and began to show aggressive tendencies or hostile attitudes they would be provided with certain pills to take when they felt an attack of aggression coming on. Or, in the absence of pills, these scientists seriously proposed that such people could be fitted with individual power packs, attached to various areas of the brain with buttons to press to offset any attack of hostility that might be forthcoming. That is what the man said! That is how blind people can be!

But prayer has an amazing power to remove the blindfolds from men's eyes and to allow men and women to see themselves as they really are -- perhaps only momentary glimpses of what we call "moments of truth," but they are very helpful opportunities to see themselves and others as they are realistically, in true focus, as they appear in the eyes of God.

Read the prayers of the Apostle Paul and you will find that this is the predominant emphasis of his prayers. He is always praying that eyes might be opened. He says, "I bow my knees before the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" {cf, Eph 3:14}, praying for you Ephesians, "that the eyes of your heart might be enlightened," {cf, Eph 1:18}. His prayer is that they might see. In Ephesians, Chapter 3, he prays that they might "have power to comprehend" {Eph 3:18a RSV}, power to understand reality. This is one of the major accomplishments of prayer, this ability to open blinded eyes and help men to see reality.

This last week I heard the story of a husband who was drifting in unbelief and in his ignorant sinfulness, was beginning to destroy himself and his family. His wife and two friends began to pray for him. They never told him they were praying, they just began to pray. Without a word from them to the man, his attitudes began to change. Soon he evinced a strong interest again in the things of God. I met him at the door last Sunday and he took me by the hand and said, "Well, I'm back. I'm not only back at church, I'm back with the Lord," and there was a big smile on his face. What a tremendous thing! What changed his attitude? Not reasoning, or persuasion, but prayer changed it.

2. Not only does prayer open blind eyes, but prayer can impart courage and sustaining grace and patience to someone at a critical moment, at a time when they badly need it. This is what Paul is asking for in his letter to the Philippians (Verse 19 of Chapter 1) as he is facing a possible encounter with Nero Caesar. He says, "Yes, and I shall rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance," {Phil 1:19 RSV}. Here is the mighty apostle, reckoning on the prayers of these Philippian friends to uphold him in the moment in which he must stand before the emperor, that he will be granted boldness and courage to speak as he ought to speak. Prayer can do this. In writing to the Ephesians he asks again. "Pray for me, that utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel," {Eph 6:19 RSV}. Prayer does that. It can impart courage by the faith that one individual possesses to another who is up against a moment of crisis.

That, by the way, is the basis for the appeal in Scripture for prayer for government leaders and authorities. And how should you pray for them? Well, pray that God will sustain them, open their eyes, help them to see reality; and then give them the courage to act on the basis of reality. Pray that God will give them grace to act wisely and not impetuously or impulsively; to weigh decisions carefully and thoughtfully; to tell the difference between right and wrong, true and false. Prayer can do

mighty things in these respects. When you pray for a man this way you are doing far more for him than writing a letter to him to influence him, or change his mind. Write the letter, too, but above all, pray for him. That is what changes the hearts and minds of government leaders.

Dr. Dick Hillis, on our recent trip together around the world, was telling me about the crisis in Formosa which occurred right after the Communists had evicted the missionaries from the mainland of China, and Chiang Kai-shek's government had fled to Formosa. Things were in chaos. There were no defenses on the island to stop the Communists if they had decided to take it over. Free China could easily have been captured at that time. But Mme. Chiang, who is a Christian, gathered together certain women, who were also Christians, around her, and they began a prayer meeting. They prayed that God would thwart the plans of the Reds, preserve the peace and freedom of Formosa, and steady them through this time of crisis, helping them in the erection of proper defenses, etc. Madame Chiang has given testimony many times since that it is her profound conviction that God saved Formosa. Prayer intervened as the only defense of that island in a time of crisis.

Do you think prayer has nothing to do with what is happening, as reported in our newspapers? Of course it does. It is a power that can be brought to bear directly upon these situations.

3. Now, a third element: prayer can restrain violent forces, and quiet turbulent situations. Let me read to you Paul's charge to young Timothy, as he begins his first pastorate in the city of Ephesus. In Chapter 1, Verse 18, he says, "This charge I commit to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophetic utterances which pointed to you, that inspired by them you may wage the good warfare," {1 Tim 1:18 RSV}. He is talking about the problems Timothy will run into in Ephesus. Paul has also been in Ephesus. He knows what a turbulent city it is. This is the place where he "fought with wild beasts" {1 Cor 15:32b RSV}, he says, and where he himself was involved in a riot that threatened his life. Now young Timothy is going there. What does he say to him in his charge?

Beginning with chapter 2, he says,

First of all [note that, *first of all*] then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. {1 Tim 2:1-2 RSV}

That is the result that you can expect from prayer for those in high positions, "that we may lead a quiet and peaceful life, godly and respectful in every way." That is first in the warfare that Paul is exhorting this young man to wage in this pagan city. Then he goes on in Verse 8 to say,

I desire then that in every place the men should pray [the men should pray, no ladies' prayer meetings], lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling. {1 Tim 2:8 RSV}

Why the men? Well, because men ought to be more concerned about what is going on in their community, and more informed about it: therefore they are the ones that ought to be praying about these matters. If violence in society is a result of the influence of seducing spirits, arousing and enraging men by influencing them in their thinking, then prayer calls angel powers, angelic forces, into a counterattack to quell these violent forces and restrain the evil powers. That is why, when we pray about these matters, we are engaged in direct counter-warfare.

Let me share with you an experience some of us had in prayer meeting last year. Many of you will recall the occasion when the Dow Chemical recruiters visited the campus of San Jose State College, and a considerable disorder resulted. Some months later the recruiters were coming back to the campus, and the ones who had organized the first riot announced publicly that they intended to organize a far larger disturbance than they had before. The campus and police prepared for this, and everyone was concerned about it. I was at this time teaching a small group of Christians who were meeting on the campus of San Jose State College, and we talked about it together, and agreed to pray about it. Also the group which meets here at the church began to

pray about the matter. We prayed that God would restrain violence, that he would not allow a riot, but that he would thwart the plans of these who were trying to arouse the antagonism of the students. I went home the next day, and picked up the paper, and the first thing that met my eyes was a headline that said: "Apathy at San Jose State Puzzles Agitators." It went on to say that the agitators spent three hours trying to arouse the students, but they couldn't get anyone to react. They finally gave up in disgust and went home.

Some of you are saying, "Where were you when San Francisco State broke loose?" Well, we were praying about it! Where were you? As soon as we heard of the problems up there we began to pray for them. It does not take a great many Christians to effect changes, but it does take some. This is a warfare, and these things do not always yield to the press of the magic button of prayer; sometimes it takes a prolonged attack. But I will say that we were encouraged, in praying for S.F. State, that, after we began to pray, the very first thing that happened was the appearance on the scene of Dr. Hayakawa, and, second, a rainstorm moved in. From then on the weather was so inclement that the demonstrators could not carry on their demonstrations outside with any degree of comfort at all. "Well," you say, "all this is just coincidence." Perhaps so. But I am in favor of perpetrating some more of these coincidences, if possible. No, the promise of God in the revelation of his word is that these things are the direct activity of God, the response of God to his people as they are concerned about these matters and bring them before him in prayer.

In closing, I want to ask you this question: Do you believe in the power of prayer? Do you believe that God will and does act directly in the affairs of men in response to the petitions of his people?

Our problem is that we profess this, but in our deeds we deny it. We really believe, I think, that God is going to work it all out, no matter what, so there's no use praying. But that is a disobedient attitude, setting aside God's program and declaring that he must find some other way of doing it. He will not. God will act as he has said he will act, and only as he has said he will act.

It seems to me that if we really believe this, our prayer meetings will be filled. Oh, I know you can pray at home, but I question that many really do, when they say that. It remains true that the church always acts most powerfully when it acts as a body, because it is a body that is the intended vehicle of the life and strength of Jesus Christ. The church is the body of Christ, and that is why, from New Testament times on, the church has gathered together for prayer. If we really believe this, if we take this at all seriously, then every parent who has children in high school or college in this area, or any place where these violent eruptions are occurring, should be at prayer meeting, praying together that God would lay a restraining hand upon threatening situations, and open them up for a proper discussion and proper approach to these problems. Prayer is not merely intended to suppress revolt, but to open the thing up and expose it to the light of truth, under restraint, so that problems can be solved without violence; without the explosive damage that is caused by the overflow of passion.

How much do we believe this? I have entitled this message, *The Secret Government of Earth*, because that is what the church really is. It is God's secret community, spread throughout the earth at every level of society, designed to bring to bear powerful forces to control the affairs and events of men, in line with God's purposes, and thus to bring about things in the affairs of earth that would never otherwise happen.

Do you think of yourself that way, as part of the secret government of earth?

What an honor when a man is appointed by the President to go to Washington and have a part in the government of earth. Yet, in a sense, that is but a puppet government. All earthly governments are puppets, subject to powers behind the scene. But a church prayer meeting can be a far more effective force to bring about peace and order in a community or a nation than a meeting of the leaders of the Pentagon, or of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That is the revelation of the Scripture.

If we do not utilize this amazing power, we are like soldiers attacking a strong fortress who have a powerful cannon available to them that could knock down the doors of the fortress, but they never use it. Instead, they keep peppering away at the walls with popguns. That is the church that does not utilize this powerful force of prayer.

My challenge to you in 1969 is to pray.

Concentrate on the Bay Area and make this Bay Area, under God, an island of peace in the midst of a sea of violence, as a testimony to the power of God to control violence among men.

Prayer

Our Father, help us to take these things seriously. Surely we can see how seriously the apostles and the early Christians took them, and what mighty results obtained as they believed you and acted. Forgive us our unbelief, Father; forgive us our self-indulgence; our refusal to take seriously your words and to act upon them and our carping complaints because things don't go right; our fears and anxieties as we see events disintegrating and deteriorating around us while we refuse to employ the weapons you have given us to use. God grant that we may see ourselves as we are, and change these things in 1969. We ask in His name, Amen.

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