

THE WHOLE STORY

by Ray C. Stedman

I suppose there is no instrument of our day more awesome to common ordinary people than the great electronic computers which have made possible the exploration of space. We are very fortunate to have in our congregation a man who has been instrumental in developing the electronic computer, Dr. Gerhard Dirks, who is the inventor of the memory circuits of the computers. Dr. Dirks tells me that the computer is but a faint imitation of the human brain but that it operates very similarly to the brain, though it can do very much less than a brain can. In fact, if the capacity of the human brain were to be reproduced by computers, it has been estimated that one computer capable of doing what the brain does would fill a twenty-story building. But all of that is crammed into each of our heads right now. That demonstrates the amazing ability of God.

The human brain is relatively puny and incapable of assimilating a great deal of information, especially tending to lose the large scene. We can concentrate on small sections of human knowledge but when we try to encompass the whole range, we tend to blow a fuse. At least I do. Our brains are better adapted to the microscope than to the telescope. What I am saying is put much more briefly and perhaps better in the familiar proverb, "We are so close to the trees that we cannot see the forest."

This is true oftentimes of Christians and their experience. We tend to concentrate on sections of the Christian life and lose sight of the whole story, the great purpose and drive of God in our individual lives as well as in history. Therefore we need a miniaturizing process, a condenser, that puts revealed truth in brief capsule form. It is the way human beings are constructed, and since the Bible is the book that goes with man and thus explains us, it is not surprising to find passages in the Bible that are miniaturized statements of great encompassing truths; capsulated expressions of truth.

John 3:16 {RSV} is one: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That puts it all in one brief statement. And the verse we are to look at now does the same thing. It is a miniaturized statement of great and wonderful truths. It occurs in the ninth chapter of Second Corinthians, in the midst of a passage in which Paul is talking about money, collections, offerings -- very mundane elementary things such as that. In the midst of it comes the eighth verse:

And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. {2 Cor 9:8 RSV}

There the story of the Christian faith is reduced to one sentence. Some of you perhaps, like myself, have memorized that from the King James Version:

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you; that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may abound to every good work. {2 Cor 9:8 KJV}

Notice that the apostle begins where we should always begin in our thinking about Christianity -- with the power of God: "God is able," he says. There is nothing more evident today than the present weakness of the church. I am glad to see encouraging signs of renewal occurring here and there throughout the church, but in many places and in very many ways the church is exceedingly weak, and it is weak because it has forgotten or lost sight of the power of God. That is the basic problem with the church. It has only one kind of power it can operate on, and that is God's power. If it loses that, it is reduced to the same power the world or any worldly organization has -- the power of numbers, the power of political maneuvering, or the power of moral constraint. But it will lack the great power that makes the church like that described in the Song of Solomon as "fair as the moon, bright as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners," {cf, Song 6:10 RSV}. It is only the power of God that can do that kind of thing.

This verse is declaring that we must begin our thinking there: "God is able."

It is easy for us to see God's power in nature. I stood this weekend beside a mountain lake high in the Sierras on a bright moonlit night and looked out at the lake with the moon shining on its waters. I was surrounded by frowning peaks which were reflected in the waters of the lake. I was moved by the beauty and power of God in nature. How mightily God has wrought in the universe. I thought of those words in the opening chapter of Hebrews that say of the Lord Jesus that he "upholds all things by the word of his power," {Heb 1:3b KJV}. The great universe is sustained in its complexity by the power of God at work. We sing, *How Great Thou Art* and we are singing of the power of God at work in nature.

But when Paul wrote to these Corinthians he wrote about the power of God to supply material things they needed -- money, and material prosperity, whatever it took to get God's work done. He made a very practical application of the power of God. It was the power of God to supply. Perhaps we need a Poor People's March in our day if for no other reason than to remind us in rich America that there are many people yet, many of them Christians, who still desperately need the power of God to supply. We oftentimes take for granted the supply of our material needs and we need to be reminded that it, too, comes from God, and can be taken away from us as easily as it has been given. We must not forget that it is God who gives seed to the sower, and bread to the baker, and makes possible the sustenance of life at any level. It all rests upon the power of God at work.

But I am often surprised to find many Christians who do not believe in God's power to do other things. They do not say this, but it is reflected in their attitudes and comments. There are half a dozen verses in the New Testament that use the phrase, "God is able." It is helpful to think about what is stated in those verses:

- There is that well-known one in the 24th verse of Jude, "God is able to keep you from falling." I wonder how many Christians really believe that God is able to keep you from falling? I find a number who seem to reflect the attitude that God is not able to do this, that there are circumstances they can get into from which he is not able to deliver them and that there are pressures that are too great for them to bear and God cannot help them. This is reflected in what they say: "I can't help myself, I have to do this thing." "I lose my temper and I can't help it." Or, "I get subjected to pressure and after awhile I can't stand it any more. I give up." Which means, of course, that they do not believe that God is able to keep them from falling. But the Scripture says he is. He is able to keep us from falling.
- Then there is the verse in Romans 14:4 about other Christians. I find that it is quite possible to believe that God is able to keep me from falling, but I sometimes have great doubts about you. Often it is what the other person is about to do that troubles us. Well, that is why this verse is given. It says we are not to judge our brother who stands, like us, before God, because, the verse goes on to say, "he will be upheld, for the Master [or God] is able to make him stand," {Rom 14:4b RSV}. Did you ever read that verse? "God is able to make him stand." That means when you are praying for someone else and are bothered about his weakness, remind yourself of this. God is able to make him stand. He doesn't need your criticism. That is the suggestion of the verse. Don't run him down, don't criticize. He may need helpful brotherly counsel, or encouragement, or even rebuke, if given in "the spirit of meekness," as Paul says in Galatians {Gal 6:1 KJV}. But he does not need your carping judgment, your cutting remarks, your sarcasm. God is able to make him stand. I like Phillip's rendering of that verse. He says, "God is well able to transform men into servants who are satisfactory," {Rom 14:4b J. B. Phillips}. That's putting it well. We have assurance that God has ability to move in the lives of others, as well as ourselves.
- Then there is that very wonderful verse in Ephesians 3:20, "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that is at work in us." There is the power of God to excel, to exceed whatever we can think. Isaiah said God's thoughts are not like our thoughts, nor his ways like our ways. We are so limited! If we could only understand this. We are limited in our concepts about life, the world, and the universe. We tend to think that God operates like we do, therefore we get restless, disturbed and upset when God does things quite differently. When he chooses to operate in ways that we do not understand we begin to assail him and to criticize, even to become atheistic or agnostic, and say, "Perhaps there is no God." But it is only because God is

operating in ways beyond us. God says he will do this.

But do you get the point of the verse? He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we can ask or think. Even our greatest imaginings will be excelled as we wait upon God to work it out his way. Now if we insist on doing things our way, he will let us. One of the most dangerous things about Christian faith is that if you insist on having your way, God will let you have it. But it will be the sorriest day of your life when you have gotten what you wanted. But if you let him have his way, he will work it out exceeding abundantly above all that you ask or think. Remember that when God says things, he means them. He will do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. He will excel our dreams, even our imaginations, such is his wisdom, his power, his might, and his ability to act.

- Then there is another verse, in Philippians 3:21, that has encouraged me often. We are told, concerning the body and its resurrection, that God is able to subdue all things unto himself. I like that, because I get troubled at times with people who resist the will of God and who are not even Christians. It is bad enough when Christians resist the will of God, but sometimes we are frightened by men who renounce God, who say, "There is no God," and who fling out their chests and assert that they have the ability to do whatever they want to do. Men of power, men with armies and in control of governmental machinery, the Hitlers, Stalins, and others; dictators strutting in pompous pride, declaring that they are a law unto themselves. The trouble with many of us is, we take them at their word. We think they can do it because in certain limited ways they can demonstrate it. But we forget that God is able to subdue all things unto himself. Nothing has encouraged me more than the words of the Lord Jesus as he stood before Pontius Pilate. When he refused to answer a question, Pilate said to him, "Do you not know that I have power to crucify you?" {John 19:10 KJV}. And Jesus looked him right in the eye, and said, "You could have no power except it be given you from above," {cf, John 19:11}. That has been a great help to me, because it reminds me that above all the imperial processes is the might and wisdom of God.
- As the book of Proverbs puts it, "The king's heart is in God's hand, and he turns it whithersoever he will," {cf, Prov 21:1}. He is able to subdue all things unto himself. So we need not fear when the tyrannical powers of earth are loosed and stride up and down the earth in military might, uttering pompous threats against faith.

God is able to subdue all things unto himself. All these verses give us a glimpse of a vast reservoir of exhaustless, limitless, immeasurable power that is available to us in God. Every bit of it is behind the promises of God. He is able to do what he says. That is what encouraged Moses in Egypt. He believed in One who was able to fulfill what he said. And that is where we stand today. We are to look at the power of God.

Now the apostle moves on in Second Corinthians 9:8 to give us the channel by which this power comes to us: The provision of God. "And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance..." "Every blessing in abundance," or as the King James Version puts it, "all grace shall abound." That is the literal rendering of the Greek. The word is *grace*.

What is grace? Remember the small boy who was asked in Sunday school, "What is grace?" He thought the man said, *grease*, and replied, "It's what makes the face shine." He was right, because grace does make the face shine -- better than grease. Grace is a general term for all that God is, made available to us. It is God's character, God's virtue, all God's Being made available to us.

Another way of describing grace is to call it the life of Jesus Christ in us. Paul says, "For I bear about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus in order that the life of Jesus might be made visible in my mortal flesh," {cf, 2 Cor 4:10}.

I was struck by a recent report of a conversation that occurred when a friend of mine was visiting Major Ian Thomas' Bible School in the north of England, at Capernwray. This gentleman and Major Thomas were standing together in the hall of the great castle, engaged in talk. A German pastor, who had just arrived with a group of young people from Germany, suddenly came up to the two men and interrupted the conversation. Without a word of introduction he turned to Major Thomas and said, "Major, I'd like to ask you a question.

Tell me, what is your purpose in life?" Without flickering an eyelid, Major Thomas replied, "My purpose is to make the invisible Christ visible. And yours, sir?" The man's chin dropped and tears came to his eyes and began to roll down his cheeks. He stood there without saying a word. Major Thomas opened the door of his study and said, "Step in here a moment," and within five minutes he had led the man to Christ.

"To make the invisible Christ visible," that is God's grace. The life of Jesus Christ in us, supplied to us, living through us, ministering to our every need, that is grace, the glory of Christianity. If your Christianity does not have that note in it, it is a false Christianity. That is what Christian faith is all about. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" {Col 1:27b}, says the Apostle Paul to the Colossians. Jesus Christ proposes to clothe his life with your body, and live it again in this 20th century as he lived it in the 1st century. He will, in terms of your circumstances, be what he was 1900 years ago on the hills of Galilee, but he will be it where you are. That is Christianity, that is God's grace. As Paul says in Ephesians as he prays for the people of God (and these were ordinary people like you and me: bankers, lawyers, shopkeepers, housewives, and servants; all the motley array of people from an ordinary Roman city), "I pray that you may be a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself," {cf, Eph 3:19b J. B. Phillips}. That is God's grace, and it is for every Christian. Grace means all that it takes to meet whatever pressures you are under. That is God's provision.

Grace has one peculiar mark about it. It is a gift. It cannot be purchased, it cannot be worked for. It is unmerited. That is the problem. That is why a great many Christians do not know anything about the power of God, because that power comes only through the channel of grace. They keep trying to bargain for God's power, but if you bargain for it, then it is no longer grace. To bargain with God is like turning off the tap. You cannot experience the power of God if you are trying to earn it. Paul, writing to the Romans, says, "It is either grace or works. And if it is works, then it is no more grace; if it is grace, then it is no more works," {cf, Rom 11:6}. One cancels out the other. This is why many Christians cannot get hold of the power of God because they say, "Lord, if I do this for you, will you do that for me? If I am faithful to teach Sunday school, or to attend church every Sunday, surely you ought to take care of me so that I won't get sick." But that cancels out grace. God's power cannot come by any other channel than God's grace.

This tendency to bargain is revealed in people's complaints. They say, "Why should this happen to me?" with the implication, "I've been living the kind of life that deserves more than this. God shouldn't do this kind of thing to me." That shows they have been trying to bargain for the grace of God but you cannot do it. You can have all God's power freely if you do not try to bargain for it. He will give it to you, but you cannot buy it at any store. You can have all you need if you will just take it. If you present yourself, and say, "Lord, I'm not much, but here I am, and all I am I put at your disposal," then he will take the greatness of his Being, displayed in many, many ways, and put it at your disposal, saying, "Whatever you need you can take." That is what grace does.

The apostle moves on now to the program of God, how this provision works out: "So that you may always have enough of everything." That is God's program. That is the way he expects his people to operate, to have enough of everything. God is no miser. God does not deal out so much patience, so much love, giving only a limited supply. He does not put you on rations and say, "Sorry, you can only have a little bit, there's not quite enough." No, you can have all it takes, any time. He will give you exactly what you need, but never too much.

See how this is pictured in a dozen ways throughout the Scriptures:

- There is the manna in the wilderness. Every day it came, just enough for the people, but never too much, never enough for the next day (except on Friday, when there came enough for two days).
- Remember the widow's cruse of oil. There was just a bit in the bottom of the vessel, but Elisha said, "Pour it out and make me a cake," {cf, 1 Ki 17:13}. When she poured it out there was as much left as there was when she began. It kept pouring for weeks and months, never filling up the vessel, but never lowering it either, until the famine ended and then the oil stopped. That is the way God gives, just enough, every day, enough.
- The bread and fishes that our Lord multiplied were enough for everyone and a little bit left over, but everyone had all they needed.

This is what God wants to teach us here. You do not need to expect a great surge of power coming through you so that you glow like a TV screen. No, as God said, "As thy day, so shall thy strength be," {cf, Deut 33:25 KJV}. Whatever the pressures, there will be adequate strength to meet it. There is no limit in time. "Always," he says, you may always have enough. No matter whether you are old or young or middle-aged, no matter whether it is day or night or in between, always. There are no limits in time, and there is no limit in amount. You shall have enough. No matter what the demand is, no matter how great the pressure is, you shall have enough of grace. And there is no limit in variety, "for everything." It does not make any difference what the kind of a trial may be, whether it is material, spiritual, social, psychological, or personal. Whatever it is, there is enough at any time, always available.

Then notice how he concludes with the great purpose of God. What is all this for, in your life? Well, it is that you "may provide in abundance for every good work." In other words, that you may be engaged in work that blesses, strengthens, and helps others. That is what God is doing in this world. In Ephesians Paul says, "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus [made new again in Christ Jesus] unto good works," {Eph 2:10a KJV}. That is his ultimate purpose.

So many Christians fail to get this. They think that the blessings of the Christian life are designed to make them happy. They always want a good feeling. That is why some people come to church. They only want a good feeling, something that makes them feel a little better as they go out, and they are satisfied if it has done that for them. Some want a riot of emotionalism, to work up a sort of religious "jag" once a week, which will serve to carry them until the next week. But this is not what God is aiming at. It is that you may be involved in doing good works, as the Lord Jesus, who "went about doing good," {Acts 10:38b}. That was his purpose. That will involve speaking the truth, and practicing love, self-denying love, toward another. There is the formula to change the world.

You young people are looking for something to change this generation and I don't blame you. Well, there it is:

- Practicing love, and
- Speaking the truth,
- Doing good

as you go about everywhere. God has equipped you for it. God's call to a piece of work is his guarantee that you will have whatever it takes to perform it. So go to it.

My question to you as we close is this: Is God obtaining his purpose with you?

Is it all working out to good works in your life, works that help others, works that minister to the needs of others? That is what God is after. Or are you denying him his right to use your body for his purposes in the world?

In *Eternity* magazine, this month's issue, there is a very helpful editorial commenting upon the fact that in the early church there was a group of people who called themselves, *the Parabolani*. That comes from a Greek word, *paraboulomai*, which means "to throw yourself alongside someone, or something." It is best translated in English, "to risk," or, "to hazard," "to gamble," even. This is what *the Parabolani* of the early church were: They were men and women who risked themselves. They formed a group, agreeing together to move into any place of danger or risk, to serve and help others. Whenever anyone was sick with a dangerous disease, they would go and minister to them. When they learned of men who were in dungeons, dangerous criminals, they would risk their lives to help them, to do something for them. In 252 A. D., when the city of Carthage, in North Africa, was subjected to a plague that swept through the city and decimated the population, bodies were left lying all over the streets. No one would bury them, and because they were rotting and decaying in the sun, the plague was spreading throughout the city. The Bishop of Carthage called upon the Christians of Carthage to be *Parabolani* and to risk their lives to bury these bodies. They did this and the city of Carthage was spared. The plague was finally arrested because the Christians dared to risk their lives.

That is what God is talking about. The noun, *parabolani*, does not occur in the New Testament but there is a

verb form used when Paul writes to the Philippians about Epaphroditus, saying he "*paraboleuomai*-ed" himself, risked his life, for you when he was sick. That is what God is calling for today.

Where are the *Parabolani* of our day? Where are those who will risk themselves, hazard themselves for the cause of Jesus Christ?

- I have been grieved this last month by the fact that we had to close our Primary church because no one would risk himself to take care of it during the summer months. We have vacant places in the teaching ministry of the church because there are some who will not risk themselves to teach and instruct young people in the ways of Christ and truth.
- There is ministry outside the church unto a sick and hungry world, waiting for *Parabolani* who will make themselves available to God and say, "Lord, here I am. You equip me, give me everything I need. There is then no excuse why I cannot be available to you for this need."

Where are the *Parabolani*? After all, do we not sing?

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.
Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

That is God's call, is it not? -- to be *Parabolani* in these days -- ready to risk, to hazard ourselves. "He that throws away his life," Jesus says, "for my sake, shall find it; but he who tries to save it, he who hangs on to it, refuses to risk it, will lose it."

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