

GROWING UP

by Ray C. Stedman

We are now well into the Christmas season, and everybody is enjoying the return of the great symbols of our faith in the incarnation of our Lord Jesus. The central symbol of Christmas, of course, is a baby. Perhaps the most loved carol is Martin Luther's cradle hymn, "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed/The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head." Yes, it's wonderful to focus upon the baby Jesus but we sometimes idealize---even idolize---babies.

In all honesty, we who have been parents and grandparents know that babies are not always pleasant to be around. I have often quoted the description, "A baby is a digestive apparatus with a loud noise at one end and no responsibility at the other!" Babies are notoriously selfish and self-centered. Immediately upon birth they bear the imprint of the fall of Adam; their whole world is centered around themselves. That is all they think about, all they know. Those who take care of them long for the day when they will begin to learn self-control: to sleep all night, to become potty trained, and to feed themselves.

It is the same in the Christian life. The Scriptures liken new Christians to babies. Peter, in fact, says, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow thereby." Like newborn babies starting out in life, new Christians are loved and welcomed; but they need special care and though they show a great deal of promise and potential, yet everybody waits and hopes for them to grow up.

In the letter to the Colossians we have come to that point in Paul's concern for these Colossian believers. The apostle has recognized the true Christian life of these believers. They have already shown the unmistakable marks of newborn babes in Christ. There is a new hope in their lives; a far cry from the hopelessness of their former lost condition. That hope is born of the fact that in the gospel they have learned that Jesus himself was available to them personally to help in the struggles of life. From that hope came faith: they believed that hope and had begun to count on Jesus' presence with them and to draw strength from him. Out of their faith, then, had come compassion and concern for others, especially their brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. Those are the marks of a Christian: faith, hope, and love, as Paul so beautifully puts it in 1 Corinthians 13.

But now the apostle is concerned that they go on and grow up. This is also the emphasis of much of the New Testament. The weakness of the church in many places today is that Christians often remain babies all their lives. They settle down and never grow up. The church, as a result, flounders in weakness and turns many people off. It is growing up that is important, as Paul emphasizes in these words:

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, with joy..."

I'm going to stop there briefly although it is difficult to stop anywhere in this wonderful paragraph because it is all one thought.

Paul knows that the Colossian Christians are living in a dangerous world. As we go on in this letter we discover what is threatening them. A seething volcano of false teaching has begun to erupt and engulf them, threatening to destroy the simplicity of the faith that is producing such beauty and liberty in their lives. Paul is in Rome, a prisoner in chains, and unable to travel to Colossae, a thousand miles east, to help them. There is nothing he can do physically for them. But spiritually, he is a powerful prayer warrior who can create in their midst a tremendous opportunity to know truth that will free them and enable them to withstand the assault of false teaching. That, then, is what he is doing: he is praying for them.

The striking thing about this prayer is the very first sentence of it: "For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you..." This was a continuing prayer. As far as we know, Paul had never been to Colossae. Apart from one or two among them, he did not personally know these believers. And yet he prays continually for them. When we come to statements like this in Scripture it is quite fair to ask, when did he do this? Day and night he is chained to a Roman guard, he never has a moment to himself. Awake or asleep, he is bound to his jailer. Furthermore, when he is awake, his friends are dropping by to see him to seek his counsel and instruction. He even ministers to the Roman guards, many of whom came to Christ, as we learn in the letter to the Philippians. He is busy writing letters, too, so when did he find time to pray for the Colossians?

The answer lies in the form of prayer that Dr. Carl Lundquist calls "living prayer." Here is a quotation from a recent letter I received.

This is the description of an ongoing life of prayer, used by Maxie Dunnam in his Workbook of Living Prayer. It refers to quiet, whispered prayers and praises that flow from our hearts all day long. Dunnam suggests that we use interruptions, people or events that break in unexpectedly upon our day, as calls to specific prayer. Most of us use mealtime---grace time---to think of God and to voice our thanks to him. But more than food can call us to prayer. Frank Laubach, the modern mystic, challenges us to use the newspaper or the television set in the same way. As world decision-makers are pictured before our eyes we can breathe a quiet prayer for them by name. We can read a newspaper prayerfully, whispering back to God our intercessions for those in need, about whom we are reading. When someone calls our attention to himself, even in an impolite way--- tripping us on the bus, jabbing us with an umbrella, dodging in front of us (in traffic)---Laubach suggests that of the four billion persons in the world, God may be calling that particular individual to our attention in order to inspire prayer for him.

Have you ever prayed for people who cut in front of you in traffic, asking God to bless them, not blast them? That is what this is suggesting: that continual prayer arises constantly as a reaction to what you are going through. I am sure this explains the apostle's words here. Through the day he would think of the Colossians; how they were doing and what was threatening them, and he would breathe a prayer for them. This is what he means when he says, "we have not stopped praying for you." We can pray for each other in that same wonderful way.

The illuminating aspect of this is what Paul prayed for. Notice what he says: "...asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." That is the content of his prayer; everything else in the passage flows out of that. The one thing he asks for is that the Colossians might come to understand God's will. It is clear that this is the important thing to Paul. He knows that if they begin to understand the will of God, everything good that he desires for them will follow. Thus, the chief aim of a believer's life ought to be to know God's will.

Here is where many young Christians go astray. They think the will of God is an itinerary they must discover: where God wants them to go, and what God wants them to do. Most of their prayers are addressed with those thoughts in mind. What should I do today? Where should I go? Whom should I marry? etc. There is a deep and profound psychological principle involved in this. God knows us, and he knows that our behavior flows out of who we think we are. Have you ever asked someone who upset you, "Who do you think you are, anyway?" We instinctively know that offensive behavior is a result of who we think we are. That is why such challenges are given.

God, too, knows that. The glory of the good news is that he has made us into something different than what we once were. Therefore the primary course in the curriculum of the Spirit is to learn who you are now, what God has made you to be, and, especially, your new relationship to him. This is beautifully captured in a verse we consider so important we have written it right across the front of our auditorium, "You are not your own ...you are bought with a price." You no longer belong to yourself, so you are no longer to live for yourself. Your will, your pleasure, your comfort are no longer to be primary in your life, but what God calls you to be

and what he has made you to be. The more you understand who you now are, and what God has done to make you that, the more your behavior will automatically change and you will do the things that follow here in this passage. That is why Paul puts the knowledge of God's will first.

Where do we find that out? Paul goes on to say: "...asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." There are two things that enable us to discover the will of God. The first is "spiritual wisdom," i.e. wisdom that comes from the Spirit, not from the natural mind of man. In 1 Corinthians the apostle contrasts these two, saying, "our ministry is not according to the wisdom of man, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power." He goes on to say, "We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages, for our glorification." Paul is speaking of divine insights into human life---how to understand ourselves and how the world functions---which God reveals, but of which natural man knows nothing, no matter how well educated he may be.

I will never forget listening to a prominent psychiatrist a number of years ago telling me about his life before he became a Christian, of his honors and his wealth and how sought---after his advice was by industrial leaders all over the country. But his inner life began to break down and he felt more and more hollow and empty. At last, when he took his six-year-old son, dead, out of a swimming pool, he began to read the Bible. As he read, there came a moment when he sat with his head in his hands saying, "My God, what an ass I've been." His wisdom had led him to nothing worthwhile. Then he began to learn what God says about life.

That is what Christians need to discover: what God thinks about life. That is reality. If you want to be realistic, then read and study your Bible to discover how God looks at things. Everything else is fantasy. It is like perfume advertisements on television; outrageous, out-of-this world fantasies. But that is the way the world thinks. If you want to live realistically, learn spiritual wisdom, the wisdom of God.

The second thing necessary to discover the will of God is "understanding." That is the application of the wisdom you are learning to the specific circumstance you are going through. As someone has well put it, "a clear vision of what needs to be done." Some of you are struggling with problems and you don't know what to do. The first thing you need is to understand how God sees your problem and what he says about it, in his word. Then there will come, as you pray and seek his face, a clear vision of what needs to be done. What steps to take or not to take. That is how to discover the will of God.

This all comes from the Spirit. These are not natural abilities. They are given by the Spirit, and therefore possible to all believers. So when you open the Bible, pray that God will help you to understand what it says. I often pray Henry Van Dyke's beautiful prayer,

Grant me the knowledge that I need
To solve the questions of the mind.
Light Thou my candle while I read,
To keep my heart from going blind.
Enlarge my vision to behold
The wonders You have wrought of old.

That is asking for what Paul speaks of here: spiritual wisdom and understanding.

The apostle goes on to say why he wants them to understand God's will. It is what he knows will follow if the Colossians gain the knowledge of his will. Here is what he says will happen: "And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and with joy give thanks to the Father." There are five things here, the first three of which are activities that believers have a choice in---we can deliberately choose to do them---and the last two are results that will grow out of these three.

First, that you may "live a life worthy of the Lord." When you understand what God has made you to be, though you don't deserve it at all---his child, cherished by him, your guilt and sin taken care of, and that God is your loving Father who protects you, guides and guards you, and when you see him in all his majesty and

beauty then you will become concerned about whether your behavior reflects his beauty, and what others will think of your God when they are watching you. That is "a life worthy of the Lord." In others of his letters the apostle urges Christians to "walk worthy of their calling." This is the first thing we are to be concerned about: our impact upon others, how our lives are impacting theirs, and what our actions make them think about our God.

The second activity that will flow from a knowledge of who we are is to seek "to please him in every way." The chief aim of every believer ought to be that he is pleasing to God; that he seeks to live in a way that delights God. What quality of life is pleasing to God? The Scripture probably puts it most effectively in a negative way. In the book of Hebrews we are told, "Without faith it is impossible to please God!" Faith is what pleases him. Every time Jesus approved or commended people it was because of their faith. "You have great faith," he said to the woman who pled with him to heal her flow of blood. "Your faith is great," he said to a centurion who asked him to heal his servant. Whenever our Lord commends people for anything it is because they believe him and act on what he says. They don't conform to the customs of people around. Rather, they swim against the stream of life and stand firmly upon what he says, trusting him. That is what pleases God.

Here is the third result: "bearing fruit in every good work." The "fruit," always and everywhere in Scripture, is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, and peace, in our relationships and actions with regard to others; concern, compassion, encouragement, and help in a time of stress, bringing a word of peace into a troubled, hostile atmosphere. "Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God." That is what Paul is talking about: "bearing fruit in every good work."

After these begin to take place in our lives, two results will follow. The first is given at the end of verse 10: "growing in the knowledge of God." Paul has been praying that the Colossians come to know God's will. Now he says that as they put these things into practice they will know God better than ever before. Seeking to walk worthy of God, and to please him with fruitful activity results in knowing God more and more intimately.

Now I want to call attention to what I am going to say next so that you will not miss it: knowing God is the most exciting thing that can ever happen to you! Knowing God is the secret of excitement and vitality in a life. People who know God are never bored for the opposite of knowing God is boredom. If you are bored, as a Christian, it is because you do not adequately know your God. In his presence it is impossible to think of anything else. He is an exciting, captivating Being, filled with fresh ideas, concepts and possibilities of which you never could have dreamed.

To know God means that you are always turned on about everything because you see God everywhere: in nature, in people you meet, in trials, hardships and challenges, everywhere. That is why people who know God are always exciting to be with. They lift your spirits when you meet them. Faces light up as they enter a room: They know God, and the excitement of that captivates and changes them. That is what Paul says will happen as we "grow in the knowledge of God" and put into practice these three goals in our lives. This is what Jesus means when he says to the woman at the well, "I will put in you a well of water, springing up unto eternal life." It is always there: that refreshing quality of knowing God.

The second result is found in verses 11 and 12: "being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, with joy, giving thanks to the Father." These days there is a new cycle of emphasis in the Christian world upon signs and wonders as the mark of spiritual power. I have lived through several of these cycles, so I know what will happen. All the initial enthusiasm will ebb and fade, and life will inevitably return to the spiritual doldrums. That is because these signs and wonders are never the emphasis of Scripture. The sign of true spiritual power is right here: people who learn how to become patient and longsuffering, with joy! It is these who have touched the wellsprings of true spiritual power. It is as plain as the nose on your face. Paul says: "being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might."

When you are faced with irritating circumstances, or difficult people, it takes power to remain patient and longsuffering. Our natural tendency is to get upset, to scream in impatience, or to become resentful and angry.

It takes power to resist these when you feel them rising within you. Every believer has that power, and the sign is that they lead quiet, cheerful lives, that hang in to the end. That is what is meant by endurance. The word is best translated "stick-to-it-iveness." People who have this quality don't quit. They hang in there with their relationships, despite the pressures of their work or their circumstances. Endurance is a word that relates primarily to circumstances. The second word, translated here "patience," is really "longsuffering," a willingness to wait and not pay back in kind. It has to do with willingness to forgive and refusing to take revenge.

The third mark is that of joyful gratitude, a cheerful spirit that never gets discouraged. Years ago I read of a Christian businessman who had a cleaning woman named Sophie. He said to her one day, "Sophie, why are you always so cheerful? You don't have much in life but you're always cheerful. What's your secret?" She replied, "Well, it's the way I read my Bible." He said, "I read the Bible too but I don't find myself being cheerful like you are." She said, "You don't read it right. My Bible says, 'Glory in tribulation.' G-l-o-r-y doesn't spell 'growl.' That is what you do. You growl in tribulation. If you gloried in it, then you'd find yourself looking at it as a challenge, as an opportunity for your Lord to display what he can do, and you'd be cheerful about it." There is a great lesson in that story. It is what will reveal that we are growing in the knowledge of God.

The closing paragraph states clearly the three things that we can always be grateful for. We may in weakness feel like complaining about a few things, but we can always come back to these three things for they are continually true of every believer. The more we think about them, the more an attitude of gratitude will control our life. Paul continues,

"...giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins."

Such a marvelous statement of truth hardly needs any exposition. Here are three things to be grateful for. First, for privileges we don't deserve. We have been qualified by God (not ourselves) "to share in the inheritance of the saints," in the resources available to all the saints. What are these? A Father's love, a Savior's presence, a family of brothers and sisters to support and uphold, a certain destiny of glory after death. Nothing can take these away from us. If we remember these we can rejoice in the midst of whatever comes. These are privileges we don't deserve for which we have been qualified by God.

Secondly, there are perils from which we have been delivered: "He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness." Oh, what that ought to awaken within our minds! Think of the terrible things that might have happened to you if you had never become a Christian. Did you ever think where you would be if Christ had not intervened in your life? Knowing my own heart, my own rebellious spirit and devil-may-care attitude, I think I'd either be dead or in jail! I almost made it anyhow! But we have all been delivered, as if by one of those SWAT teams that snatch a victim out of a dangerous situation. So the Lord Jesus has "rescued us from the dominion of darkness," from increasing uncertainty about life and from groping after futile goals. He has delivered us from blindness and death.

The third category is pressures from which we have been freed: he has "brought us into the kingdom of the Son that he loves." We have been freed from the feeling of being unwanted. That is one of the most devastating feelings any human can experience: the feeling that nobody cares, nobody wants us, nobody loves us. That is forever rendered untrue by the work of Jesus. He has brought us into his kingdom and, with him, we share the love of the Father.

Near, so very near to God,
Nearer I could not be.
The love with which He loves His Son,
Such is His love for me.

We are wanted, cherished children of a loving Father.

We have been delivered also from the feeling of being unworthy. We have "redemption, even the forgiveness of sins." I often think of that wonderful verse in the old hymn, Beneath the Cross of Jesus:

Upon that cross of Jesus
Mine eye at times can see,
The very dying form of One
Who suffered there for me.
And from my smitten heart with tears,
Two wonders I confess:
The wonder of redeeming love,
And my unworthiness.

By natural birth we are all unworthy, but love has set us free, and made us both wanted and worthy. The forgiveness of sins means we can start every day with a fresh, clean slate. All of yesterday's mistakes have been washed away, not in order that we might go back and repeat them, but that we might have nothing against us as we begin again. Every day we start in afresh until we learn to do it right. God is with us. He cleanses the past continually. The forgiveness of sins is something we ought to rejoice in every day, because the burden and guilt of yesterday is no longer dragging us down. We are free to walk into liberty and peace. How grateful we should be for these incredible blessings!

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