

LIFE'S ESSENTIALS

by Steve Zeisler

One of the memorable things that Jesus said is, "If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32). There are two great notions that are wedded together in the statement, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." There is a component of knowledge that Jesus says comes first: a banishing of deception and apprehending of what really is, an opening of our minds and our hearts to not only see truth as God declares it to be, but to be overtaken by that truth and committed to it. And having apprehended the truth, the other notion is that there is a result in the way we live our lives—we become free! What used to bind us, frighten us, or inhibit us no longer does. Jesus was saying, "You will know the truth, and the truth will make its effect on your walk in the real world where you are: You will become free.

I've been thinking about these ideas with regard to parenting of late. The first of our children is headed to college in two days, and in some ways we're at the end of an era with her. As I look back over the eighteen years of her life, I realize that both truth and freedom have been concerns of mine for her as well as for all my children; I'm sure that is true for most parents.

If you love your children, you're concerned that they be taught about life as it is, that they not go through life with some insight withheld from them or some possibility cut off from them, that they not be deceived as to how things are. This communication of truth starts very early. For instance, little ones are prone to put everything in their mouths, and you want them to know pretty quickly that it's a bad idea to do that with sharp objects. And we find ourselves concerned to teach them many other things. There are parents in this community who, the day they find out they are pregnant, rush down to the school district to sign their child up for a particular school, even though school won't happen for more than five years. They're concerned about getting their child in the right school so that they get the proper education. We want our children to know the truth.

But we also want the truth to have the effect of setting them free. If we are good parents, then we will desire that our children have relationships that are loving and healthy; that they will find worthwhile work to do, things that matter in which they will be challenged and delighted; and that they will have creative and challenging personal interests in which they can engage. We want our children to accomplish things, take on life with vitality and joy, and become someone—to know the truth and to be set free.

There are many, of course, who learn things and never see them translated into their lives. Jerry was telling a story earlier about how as a new Christian he studied the Bible every day and kept vast notes on what he studied; however, he did it primarily so he could say he'd done it, not so he would apprehend the truth at any depth or change much. He just wanted to be able to say he knew a great deal more than he had known before. I remember hearing the story of a seminary student at the end of four years' grind saying with a sigh, "Thy word have I hid in my notes that I might not sin against thee." We can become great storehouses of information without its ever making a difference or translating into freedom. But that is not God's intention. His intention is that we should learn the truth and then that the effect should be to set us free.

Now, I'm convinced, having thought about my role as a parent, pastor, and other things, that the key to all this business of gaining real knowledge and real freedom is not the investment of the teacher, parent, or leader in doing what is required on behalf of the young person. The real key to all this is prayer, because to overtake someone with truth and to break the bonds that surround them is something God has to do. That's why we will find the prayer of the apostle Paul that begins in Colossians 1:9 to be particularly helpful to us. This prayer—one of the great prayers of the Bible—is about this subject: how a person may be filled, overtaken, and engulfed with the truth, and how that should have an effect on the life that they subsequently live.

Let me just say before we read this prayer that I urge you always, when encountering a prayer in the Bible, to make note not only of the theological information in it but also of the fact that it is a prayer, and to let it become an encouragement to you in your own prayers. The earliest disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray; prayer is something we have to learn. So observing the prayers that men and women have recorded in the Bible can be very helpful to us.

Verse 9 of Colossians 1:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it....

Before I read on, that phrase harkens back to the preceding paragraph, in which we were told that a man named Epaphras had traveled to visit Paul, who was under house arrest in Rome, and had given him a report of the Colossian church. Paul had a great deal to be joyful about because of the report of what was happening in Colossae. These were people whose lives evidenced faith and love, which were based on hope, and so on. I also mentioned to you last week that we would come to sections in which he would recognize that they were in danger as well. But it was essentially a good report from a healthy church. So Paul says in verses 9-14:

...since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

As you can see, this is very concentrated truth. Magnificent theme is stacked on magnificent theme, and they are related tightly together. The number of ideas that are crammed into this relatively short text is remarkable. Also, as is typical of the apostle, most of this is all one 107-word sentence, so we have clause upon clause that we will have to work our way through. But I urge you to stay with me as we do so, because this passage will richly repay our attention.

There is a simple outline we might make to start with that is reminiscent of Jesus' statement, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." First, in verse 9 Paul is praying that his hearers, and by extension not just the first-century ones but we as well, will be filled with knowledge. Knowing the will of God is the beginning point. We'll talk about what that means in a moment. But then, as we noted before, this knowledge is to result in something; it is not just knowledge for its own sake. Verse 10 says, "...that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects...." The result of gaining this knowledge is that in the very ordinary world where our feet walk every day, we will live lives worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him. These are the two main points of this prayer, and as we'll see, there is a great deal connected to them.

Being filled with knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding is a profound thing to pray about. Many times in your life you have probably asked the question, what does God intend for me? Shall I move to another state or country? Shall I take a particular job? Shall I pursue a relationship that seems to have possibilities? Shall I challenge some evil I see that needs to be challenged? What is God's will for me? Many of us who care to know God want to know what he thinks and what his concerns are for us.

The deepest reality of all is the heart, mind, and being of God. Once we have encountered God as a living person, we realize that he has thoughts and convictions. He hates some things and loves others. And once we have some sense of what matters to him, we find ultimately that he is personally concerned about each one of us. Our discovery of the will of God begins with his being, proceeds to his mind and convictions, and lastly applies itself directly us as individuals.

Let's think for a moment about what all this means. First of all, the prayer is that the one who hears this letter would be filled with knowledge of God's will-not someone else's. It's the will of God that should make claim

on us, not the will of our employer, let's say. Many of us will spend time in the ordinary course of our lives worrying about what our boss thinks of us. Sometimes we will have a performance appraisal that makes it very clear. Other times we are given clear statements, but we know that behind them there is probably a hidden agenda. And so we wonder, am I really pleasing him? Will I advance in the company? Will I catch the eye of the customer? How am I doing?

We frequently find ourselves measuring ourselves against some authority other than God. It could be your parents and the question of whether you have discovered their will for you, especially if you grew up in a dysfunctional background, and erratic parenting has been your experience; you never know whether you've pleased your father or mother or some other authority figure in your life. You long to find their approval. But the question of the will of someone else for your life is subordinate to, and in fact is nothing, compared to the question, what is the will of God for me, his thoughts and concerns for me? And so the first choice we have to make is to see whether we have been caught up worrying about the approval of others and their hidden agendas, if you will, rather than knowing the thoughts of God for us.

A second point we could make about knowing the will of God is that it is an overwhelming experience. We don't get information about the will of God in a shallow way as it is described to us here. It doesn't come in a note scribbled on the back of a napkin or something. It is a profound thing to experience. Paul says we are filled with knowledge of God's will; it engulfs us, overtakes us, and fills up our whole experience. It doesn't just sit on the desk and wait for our attention. The word knowledge here is a word in Greek that doesn't mean just ordinary knowledge, *gnosis*; but that word is modified by a preposition to form *epignosis*, which means intensified, clear, and personal knowledge. We are to be filled with an intensified knowledge of the will of God. Furthermore, it takes all spiritual wisdom and all understanding in order to be able to apprehend the will of God for us. The phrase "all spiritual wisdom and understanding" conveys depth, practicality, and application. It takes all of our focus to know the will of God.

The last point we might make in this verse is that submission to the will of God is, *a priori*, a prerequisite to gaining knowledge of the will of God. If God is going to make himself and his plans for me known to me, I must have already determined that I will love what he loves, go where he sends me, think as he teaches me to think, humble myself as that is required, and rejoice as that is required. I must have already given myself to his will. I can't be overwhelmed by the knowledge of his will without having already decided that I am in agreement with it.

So often I will speak to people about trying to figure out what God is doing in their lives, and I realize after I've talked to them for awhile that what they want is a sort of blueprint of God's will so they can vote on it! They want his plans for their future all laid out for them so they can stand back and decide if they are willing to go along with them or perhaps modify them a little bit, and so on. They want to hold the trump card, so to speak. But that makes no sense at all if you look at what the apostle is writing in verse 9. In order to be filled with the intensified knowledge, the *epignosis*, of the will of God, we have to have already decided, "Lord, I have bowed my knee; I will join you in your enterprise. I will be who you have called me to be."

As we have already said, knowledge must lead to a life that is different than it was. Knowledge for its own sake is no good. I mentioned a few months ago that I had a hard disk that crashed, and I ended up having to buy a new disk, which had even more storage space than the one I had before. It struck me that you could go up many stages from where I was; you can store unbelievable amounts of information on these tiny little disks. But it's fairly ridiculous to have more storage on your computer, or to be heaping chunks of information on top of each other, if it's never going to do you any good. If it's never a tool to create insight about your life and do anybody else any good, what is the point of having the capacity? Without a willingness to be touched personally by what we learn, it profits us nothing. The Greeks were very comfortable with knowledge for its own sake; that was part of their culture. The Hebrews thought, and the thinking of Scripture has always been, that if we learn something it's because we're going to put it into practice. It's going to make something of us, influence our character, change our hearts, establish our direction, and so on. Information needs to be wedded to real life.

So now we turn to verse 10, having been filled with the knowledge of God's will, and we are impressed that we must then "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please him in all respects." That is an astonishing

statement to begin with. Everybody I know at some point in their life, if they are at all honest with themselves, asks questions about their own value, self-worth, self-image, self-concept; we use all kinds of language for this. There are things about us that only we know-"cracks," failures, disappointments, lies; we have a public front and a private self. And it is a deep and abiding human concern whether we have done anything that's worth doing, whether we have become what we ought to be, whether we can value ourselves or not, whether there's any basis on which we can spring out of bed in the morning and be excited about being who we are. But here we are being called to live a life that is not just worthy of ordinary humanity, but worthy of the Lord! And that is not in some exalted spiritual never-never land, but living a life in the real world that is worthy of the Lord.

Now look carefully at two phrases that go together here. It does not say only a life pleasing to the Lord. It says a life *worthy* of the Lord that pleases him. There is an important point to be made here. A parent will sometimes be pleased with their child even when objectively speaking the child is doing nothing to be pleased about. "That's my boy!" they'll beam. He's playing the trumpet and he can't get one note out of ten right. But when he gets that eleventh note, they exult, "That's my guy, he's terrific! He ought to be in the band! Isn't he wonderful?" And what they're doing is being sentimental. They are pleased with their child just because they have so much love in their heart for him; a virtual volcano of loving parental pleasure takes place. And if all that were being said here is that the life we live is pleasing to God, we might fear at times that he is sentimental too, that he is a tender and merciful heavenly Father who will be pleased with anything. My life may really be a waste, but he loves me anyway. But it doesn't say that. It says we live a life that is worthy of him, and he is pleased with it. There is a sense in which a third party standing outside both God and us, if that were possible, would objectively find value and worth in someone's life, so no wonder it pleases God.

My son is thrilled with the possibility of playing football; it's a big star in his sky right now. In order to get ready, he's been lifting weights. The weight room at his high school has plaques on the wall with their names, and after they've bench-pressed each increment of 25 pounds their plaque gets moved from one list to another. The coach cheers the guys on, and every time they go up 25 pounds he gives them a T-shirt. Jeff came in the other day with his 200-pound T-shirt on, and later with his 225. He's excited, the coach is pleased, everybody can see there's honor, and so on. But Jeff's accomplishment is also true objectively. Even if no one else ever saw, he did bench-press the poundage. The coach's pleasure is based on something substantial that really happened and could be measured. That's what the apostle is saying here: When we're overtaken by the knowledge of the will of God and our lives are changed, they become really valuable, worth living, honorable, joyful, and different. And God likes it!

Now, the apostle describes this worthy life in four ways: bearing fruit, increasing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened, and giving thanks. The first two, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God, are tied together. In verse 6 of chapter 1 that very same construction, bearing fruit and increasing, is used. It's an interesting connection of ideas tied up together. First of all we have good works. These are things that a person can do throughout the day: conversations you'll have, thoughts you'll think, places you'll go, acts of courage you'll engage in, simple kindness you'll show. What good works you do is also related to discovering what your spiritual gifts are in Christ. And it is recognizing that he is present not just in the religious compartments of your life-Bible studies, prayer meetings, and church services-but he's involved in everything.

These are the "good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). God is at work in these good works that he has prepared for us to do, so there is fruit-bearing. Increasing and fruit-bearing are agricultural terms. The idea that Paul is conveying is of the vitality of well-watered and well-fertilized plants that can't help but grow. There are more of them every day, and the fruit gets juicier, fuller, and more valuable. Our lives are like that-they are bearing fruit and increasing in the choices we make to give ourselves over to the activity of God, to hear his voice all during the day every day, to go where he commands us to go, to stop doing what he tells us to stop doing, to give ourselves to his service and to what he would make of us.

Now, this idea of fruit-bearing and good works, as I said, is tied to the idea of an increasing knowledge of God. This is the same word we saw in verse 9, *epignosis*. If you would know God better and find yourself more deeply in love with him, more sensitively aware of him, more thoroughly approving of him, more

spontaneous in your praise of him, that increasing knowledge of him will be connected to whether you choose to be used by him in fruit-bearing and good works.

The third phrase that Paul adds is the notion of power, impact if you will, and strength. Verse 11 says, "...[being] strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; [with joy]...." There is actually a question as to whether the idea of joy goes with the preceding phrase, attaining steadfastness and patience, or with the following one, giving thanks. It could both logically and grammatically go with either one, and I find it useful to apply it to both. Listen to the beauty of what he's saying, the power of the modifiers in these phrases. Notice too the abundant use of the word all. The book of Colossians is crammed full of the words all and every; everything is always to the nth degree!

How strong is the glorious might of God that speaks into being the universe and changes the course of history with a word? How powerful is the one who holds the heavens in his hand? The strength with which we are strengthened is in accordance with that! It's remarkable. You would expect that kind of power, impact, and energy to be aimed at changing, overturning, destroying, raising up, making circumstances and things different. But it is not aimed at these kinds of activities. This being strengthened according to the power and glorious might of God is used to attain patience and steadfastness. We're strengthened to be able to stand what we can't change. And there are even two words for that. One, *hupomone*, means patience in circumstances that we can't change. The other, *makrothumia*, means steadfastness with people who are difficult and whom we can't change either. The strength of God allows us to love, stay the same, and remain steadfast and unbroken by things that are hard and that we can't change.

There's been a great deal of death in the air of this church recently. Last Sunday was the memorial service for Bob Smith, the last one of the founders of this church. And many of you know Mel and Vivian Bryant; Mel is very sick at this point in his life. He too has been a pillar of this church for many years. We pray for Ray Stedman, whose life is less than it once was, asking that God give him more. But clearly he's been ravaged by cancer. You find out a lot about who people are when they are in those kinds of circumstances. I have been deeply encouraged to see the strength of the faith of family members as well as these individuals themselves under the kind of pressure that the power of God will not change. (He could change it; he sometimes does, but not always.) And being strengthened in this life that is worthy and pleasing to God to live with what we cannot change is one of the greatest evidences that he is at work, that we have understood the will of God, that we are becoming who we ought to be.

The last modifying clause is joyously giving thanks to the Father. Thankfulness is woven throughout the text of Scripture at almost every point. It is very often a quiet notion. People who choose to be thankful in joy don't often call attention to themselves. And yet if anything is a mark of maturity, it is the honestly grateful recognition that no matter what else is true of me, God loves me and he has chosen me; I am his, and that relationship cannot be broken.

Now, all of this is worth all the consideration we can give it. The prayer is that we be overtaken by knowledge of the will of God, filled up, applying all spiritual wisdom and discernment to it, engulfed in the glory of who God is and what his intentions are for us. And having learned all of that magnificent truth, our lives are radically changed. We're set out to live lives worthy of him and pleasing to him. We find ways that can happen, specific things that are new, different, and changed. It's thrilling!

The final verses we'll consider this morning remind us that all of this is centered in Jesus Christ. We give thanks to the Father because he has "qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light...He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." If we looked at agricultural imagery earlier, now we have the imagery of battle and dominion: the domain of darkness; the kingdom of God's beloved Son; our being transferred from the darkness to the light; our gaining an inheritance that we hadn't once; and our citizenship's being changed from the tyranny of the darkness to the glorious kingdom of his love, the kingdom of the Son.

Again, we will find as this book unfolds before us that what matters is the person, work, glory, and honor of Jesus Christ in particular, trinitarian though we are as Christians (believing that God has expressed himself as Father, Son, and Spirit). The focus of our faith and the center of our life as Christians is God's having become

one of us in Jesus. It is Jesus on whom we count, and that is why this prayer ends with the recognition of our transference into the kingdom of God's beloved Son and the redemption and forgiveness of sins that are in him. All of this is what undergirds the life that we find being prayed about here. Next time we take up this text, we will find as magnificent a description of Jesus as perhaps there is anywhere in the Bible.

We need to stop now and ask ourselves where we are in the issues raised by this prayer. Are we the kind of people for whom God is in a compartment, the kind of people who occasionally think of his will in certain circumstances, but for whom there are others whose influence weighs more heavily on us? Or are we being filled with the knowledge of his will? Is it captivating to us? Is there more depth to this knowledge than we've ever seen before? Are his heart, his purpose for us, the reason for our existence clearer in any sense? Are we bearing fruit in every good work? Is that process teaching us more about God and in turn bearing more fruit? Are we being strengthened according to his glorious might so that when we're under pressure we're able to stand it because his power is at work within us? Are we joyously giving thanks? These are important questions to ask and things to pray for. Paul didn't expect them to happen instantaneously, without any thoughtfulness. He prayed that this work would be done. We can pray for ourselves and those we love that such things should be done among us.

This is sort of an Elvis Presley anniversary, and we're always given glimpses of people for whom he is the center of life this time of year. I was reading this week about a woman who has a shrine to Elvis in her living room. Every time you go into her living room some music of Elvis' is playing; and I suppose that in this shrine there are pictures, posters, and mannequins of Elvis, and so forth. But her life is filled with the memory of someone who was a drug-besotted wreck of a man at the end of his life.

Others have politics at the center of their life. The political season is on us, and nothing matters more than the events, the currents, the polls of the political world; what should happen and what won't happen. Or sports can take over our lives. Our children can take over our lives. Even the desire to travel can take over our lives. But Paul's prayer is for a life filled with knowledge of the will of God. I urge upon us that prayer and its impact, and ask that we become the kind of people who take seriously this call and allow God to bring about the changes that he will.

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Steve Zeisler
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