

GOD'S ETERNAL PURPOSE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on October 27, 1957 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

In the time of Christ and his apostles Ephesus was one of the most prominent cities in the western part of what we know as Asia. Probably no city in all of Asia Minor was as significant as the city of Ephesus. It was on the direct route of trade from Rome to the East. That alone meant a great many travelers. Here there was a congregation of people from all of the known sections of the world. There was a colony of Jews who had their own synagogue. One of the seven wonders of the ancient world was there. The great temple of Diana was approximately three times the size of the Parthenon, and its equal in grandeur and beauty.

In addition to these considerations Ephesus was also a place where the apostle Paul had preached. At the end of his second missionary journey he had passed through Ephesus, and during his third journey he spent more than two years preaching the gospel there. At the end of his third journey he had talked to the elders of Ephesus at a nearby town called Miletus. Still later, he wrote to the Ephesian Christians one of the greatest of his epistles, the letter which bears the name Ephesians. In the heart of this letter there is a passage which contains some of the most profound teachings that the apostle Paul has given us. In fact, in none of the thirteen or fourteen letters which Paul wrote does he come closer to the center of Christianity than in this book of Ephesians.

From chapter three I read as follows: "Unto me, who am less than the least of all the saints, (he is thinking back to his days as a persecutor of Christians) was this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; (the inexhaustible riches of Christ) and to make all men see what is the dispensation which is the mystery which for ages hath been hid in God who created all things (the Old Testament period in which God's plan was only partially revealed); to the intent that now unto the principalities and the power in heavenly places might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God, according to the eternal purpose (it was not an after-thought, or something just for a time) which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord: in whom we have boldness and access and confidence through our faith in him. For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, that ye may be strengthened with power through his spirit through the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your heart through faith to the end that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and the length the height and the depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fullness of God." Then comes the doxology: "Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations forever and ever. Amen." (Eph. 3:8-21).

The Eternal Plan

In this passage I have underlined six brief statements which I would like to study with you. The first was "according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." Christ was no after-thought. Sending him to earth was no late development, for God's eternal purpose was that Christ, his only begotten Son, should come and reveal the will of God to men. We are aware, I think, that in the beginning God and Christ and the Holy Spirit were all present at the creation of the world. All had a part in making our universe. Back there in the beginning God loved man when he created him, and wanted him to know how to live and how to think and how to act in order for man's life to be full of blessings. He planned that Christ, his only begotten Son, should come into the world and reveal to man how he is to live.

I am thinking of passages like John 3:16, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him might not perish, but have everlasting life." Also Matt. 1:21, where Joseph was told by the angel, "She shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call his name Jesus; for it is he that shall save his people from their sins." God loved us and wanted us to be blessed, so he ordained from the beginning of time that Christ should come not only to tell us but also to show us how to live. When Christ was here he not only revealed the will of God, he also revealed God. On one occasion he said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." (John 14:9). God's eternal purpose was that Christ reveal him and his will to men.

Paul's Prayer

The second phrase that I have underlined reads, "I bow my knees unto the Father." This is simply the signal that what follows is a prayer. While it is not absolutely necessary to bow the knees in order to pray, all of us are aware that it equally means a more heartfelt and genuine prayer. Paul had already prayed one prayer in the book of Ephesians, so this is the second prayer that he prays. Quite often when Paul began a letter he mentioned prayer for those to whom the letter was written. So he does in this book also.

You can tell something about men by the way they pray. I do not know of anything that reveals more fully the heart of a man, the very soul of a man, than his prayers. You can tell something of the devotion of his heart. You can get the feel of the direction of a man's life by listening to him as he prays. The apostle Paul prayed often and his prayers are windows into the depths of his soul.

In this prayer Paul uses the word “that” several times. Four times it stands out in this brief paragraph, and these four “thats” open up to us the urgent appeal that he is making to God on behalf of the people of long ago who were Christians, and on behalf of all of us who are Christians.

### Strengthened ... In the Inner Man

“For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father ... that ye may be strengthened with power through his spirit through the inner man.” In the second letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians, at the end of chapter four, there is a paragraph that we have read so often at the time of death, “Wherefore we faint not; but though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.” Then he goes on to say, “For our light affliction, which is for the moment, worketh for us more and more exceedingly an eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal. For we know that if the earthly house of our tabernacle be dissolved, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.” (II Cor. 4:16-5:1).

The whole passage is introduced by “we faint not; though our outward man be decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day.” The outward man is the physical body--the arms, the legs, the eyes, the ears. The inner man is the spirit--that which lasts eternally. One of the deep tragedies of our world is that people are so exclusively concerned with the outward man. Even people who wear the name of Christ oftentimes spend more time and money and concern on clothing the outward man than they do in clothing the inner man of the spirit. How tragic it is that mankind generally feeds the outward man three times every day, yet feeds the inner man very seldom or perhaps not at all. The outward man will be here for three-score years and ten, a few more or a few less, and then will be laid to rest in some quiet graveyard to go back to the dust from whence it came. The inner man goes on and on eternally. Part of Paul’s prayer is that instead of making the blunder of all mankind, that we be strengthened in the inward man.

The only way that we can be strengthened in the inward man is with the power through God’s spirit. With proper spiritual food and exercise the inward man grows stronger, while the physical man, as the years go by, becomes tired and eventually is worn out. If there were not the inner man life would be a tragedy. Because the inner man can grow strong, and go on forever, we can with joy lay down the outward man forgetting the toils and the sufferings of the body in our joy and happiness in the spirit.

### In Your Hearts

The second “that” follows immediately, “I bow my knees unto the Father ... that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” You ask the average man, “Where is Christ?” and he will make a kind of vague gesture, “He is up yonder.” This is correct, for Christ left the earth and ascended into the heavens and is seated at the right hand of God. But if that is all that we know of where Christ is, we have missed much. While he is there with God, he is also here with us. Paul’s second urgent request in his prayer was that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Someone has told a story about Christians meeting for worship. After everyone was seated, when the worship was just ready to begin, the door opened and one person more came in. Dressed in white robe, presenting a picture a little strange to their western eyes, this figure came down the aisle and slipped into a vacant seat. Immediately the audience recognized him as the Lord. Then the song leader rose and the worship began, the singing was more fervent and more earnest than it had ever been before. When the prayer was led it was a prayer to be remembered for a lifetime. There was something wonderfully different about it. The sermon, too, had a fervor and an earnestness that it seldom, if ever, had had before. After a while when the Lord’s supper was served, it seemed that everyone entered into the spirit of it better than ever before. It was a period of absolute silence, a period of deep meditation. When the baskets were passed, there was greater generosity than usual. Everything was different and better that day.

This did not happen physically, but whether it happens physically or not is not greatly important. It does happen, if we will let it, every time we meet. Remember the words of our Lord, “Whosoever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt. 18:20). Paul’s prayer is that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith.

The third “that” in this great prayer is “That ye may know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.” Men need many things. They need medical attention, food, clothing, and other things, but I have come more and more to feel that the greatest need man has is for the love of God.

The other evening I was standing in the polio ward at Vanderbilt trying to talk with a man who was dependent for every breath of his life upon mechanical means. He was spending part of his fourteen hours a day on a bed that goes up and down, up and down endlessly. As we talked he was silent each time the bed went back-ward, for it was then that air rushed into his inert lungs. I have stood in other situations in that hospital and in others, and I have come more and more to feel that the greatest need is not for physical things, but to realize that God loves us. When Paul prayed, he prayed along with these other great requests, “that you may know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.” I often like to read Paul’s words to the Romans, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril or sword? ... Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things

present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:35, 37-39).

### The Fullness of God

Then comes the final “that” in this great text. “That ye may be filled unto all the fullness of God.” This passage has in it a great complement to men. Just think that we have within ourselves the possibility of taking in any of the fullness of God. Paul prays that we may be filled unto all the fullness of God. We are made in God’s image; that is our only hope. We have within us a spirit that is eternal. If we will, we can be filled with the fullness of God. I said a while ago that God’s eternal purpose was to send his Son into the world that men might see him and know God. That is what it means to be filled with the fullness of God.

In our world occasionally we see someone whose life is barren. He has never traveled beyond the borders of his own county. We think, “O, if we could only fill his life with some of the things we have seen, some of the beauties of God’s world.” There are others whose lives are barren because they have never known the great literature or the great music of the world. Again we say, “O, if we could only fill their lives with some of the world’s great literature and great music, how much happier they would be.” This passage teaches that if we will open our hearts and our lives to Christ he will fill us full of God’s goodness. God’s eternal purpose for men is that we may know the truth, the eternal truth and that we may be shaped by it for a happy life here and for an eternal life hereafter.

Finally, there is the benediction to the prayer: “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations forever and ever. Amen.” Will you let God’s eternal purpose work in you? Will you be his child? Will you be his obedient, faithful follower? If you will you are invited to come forward and obey his commandments thus becoming a Christian.