

THE LIVING WORD

by Ray C. Stedman

You who have followed with us through these studies together in the great First Letter of John know that the concern of this apostle is to share with everyone the fellowship he himself enjoys. He said at the beginning of his letter,

...that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. {1 Jn 1:3 RSV}

Perhaps one of the deepest hungers present in humanity today is its hunger for a God who is a Father. Men long to know that the universe is not merely a heartless, impersonal machine, no cosmic sausage grinder, but behind the universe is a Father with a Father's heart. You can sense this wistful searching after the fatherhood of God in many of the religions of the world, in much of the philosophy of mankind, and in man's constant restless cry for something beyond himself.

It is quite evident that man can see in nature all the proof he needs that there is a God. Oh, I know there are many who say there is no God. There is even a materialistic philosophy that has captured the imaginations and loyalties of almost half the earth which says there is no such a being as God. But it seems quite apparent, as one observes this phenomenon across a number of years, that beneath the surface is a great deal of evidence of a hunger and a search after God, despite the outward pronouncement that there is no God. Those who say there is no God have simply convinced themselves about something they have already determined to be true. But when man seeks for God in nature the God he discovers is always a distant God, a fearsome God, an austere God, a God who seems unrelated to the immediate needs, problems, difficulties, and heartaches of life. Men are never satisfied with a God like that. They are looking for a Father. The great announcement of the Christian faith is that God can only be discovered as Father, and known as Father, through contact and fellowship with the Son of God. As Jesus put it, "I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man comes to the Father but by me," {John 14:6 KJV}.

Now I realize that this claim to uniqueness on the part of Christian faith has given rise to a great deal of criticism. There are many who regard Christians as essentially bigots, narrow-minded religious fanatics, because they refuse to admit that any other line of approach to God is valid, that all men, if they find God as Father, must come through Christ. It does appear, superficially, that this is the case. But this uniqueness is essentially because of the nature of man himself.

As we have been learning from our studies together in the Scriptures, man consists of body, soul, and spirit. God is the creator of the body and the soul, but, according to Hebrews 12:9, he is "the Father of spirits." The God with whom we have to do is the Father of spirits and though he made us body and soul, he breathed into us a spirit, which was part of himself since he is the Father of spirits. But the problem is that in fallen man, as he now exists, as he is born into this world in this so-called "natural" state, the spirit is unresponsive. Man is dead, spiritually. The whole record of the Bible is that this is the underlying fact of human life which we must face if we are going to understand life at all. Man is not what God made him to be. He is unresponsive spiritually. He is dead in trespasses and sin.

Therefore, he cannot know God as Father because it is in the spirit that man understands fatherhood, and can know and appreciate the fatherhood of God. Just because man is dead in spirit, it is also true that no teaching can help him. After all, teaching only instructs the mind. No philosophy can touch that dead

and unresponsive spirit because philosophy is nothing more than an intellectual pursuit of truth. No ritual, no sacramental hocus-pocus, is able to change man spiritually, for these are things done by the body or the soul, and do not touch this realm of the spirit. That is the reason why all teaching, all philosophy, all religious performances of any kind are absolutely useless and bankrupt to help man in his spiritual need. They do not touch the heart of the problem, they do nothing to solve the basic difficulty.

The only thing a dead spirit needs is life, and the unique claim of Jesus Christ is that he alone has life. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life," {John 14:6a}. "In him was life," John says, "and the life was the light of men," {John 1:4 RSV}. Later on in this very letter he says, "And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son," {1 Jn 5:11 RSV}. Therefore it is only by the touch of the Son of God that life is imparted to the unresponsive spirit of man. As Paul writes to the Ephesians, "You he made alive [in spirit]," {Eph 2:1a RSV}. As they believed in Jesus Christ they were born again, made alive in spirit. And when the spirit is made alive by receiving the Son, then God is known as the Father that he is. It is then we begin to know and experience the father-heart of God. We realize that behind the universe is no impersonal mind, or impersonal force, but a Father's heart, with a Father's love, and a Father's concern, so that even a sparrow does not fall to the ground apart from his will, and he knows the number of hairs on our head.

Now that is what John is saying. "He who confesses the Son has the Father also," {1 Jn 2:23b RSV}. And having led us to that place of understanding, John goes on to show us how to experience this. It is one thing to have the Father (and everyone who has come to know Jesus Christ has the Father indwelling him, as well as the Son, as Jesus promised would happen), but it is another thing to know the Father, to experience the fullness of God. How do you do that? What is the process? This is where we begin now, for John has brought us to that place where he unfolds in two short verses the process by which all of God's intention may be realized in your experience, right where you are -- in your home, in your life, in your family, in your job, right now.

Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. {1 Jn 2:24-25 RSV}

There is the process. These are the logical steps that lead to the enjoyment of all God's intention for you. Notice them. There are three of them: Step No. 1 is an admonition to you. "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you." What is this that you heard from the beginning? That takes us right back to the very first verse of the letter. John begins, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life -- " {1 Jn 1:1 RSV}. That is the message of Jesus Christ, all that concerns him. It includes, primarily, what he said, what he came to unfold and manifest about God and about man. All the words and deeds of Jesus Christ; that is what men have heard from the beginning, the message concerning him.

It means, of course, all that he said. There is a tendency on the part of many today to take certain of the words of Jesus and to ignore others. I do not understand this. I must confess I fail completely to understand this asserted loyalty to Christ that is accompanied by an indifference to his words. For instance, I find those who say they believe Jesus when he says that he is the light of the world, and he is the door, and he is the one who came to bring truth to men, but yet they say he is mistaken about the time of his return, or that he did not understand nature, he was only a creature of his times with regard to scientific knowledge, and that he did not understand many of the things that we understand today. They say that surely we cannot expect him to know the psychology that has been discovered by eminent thinkers in this area today, and therefore that men today know more about man than he knew.

Now, I do not understand that, for if we take the words of Jesus about himself, we find ourselves confronted with the claim that all power is given unto him and that he is the ultimate answer to the searches of man in any direction. All human knowledge converges at last in Jesus Christ. If we are going to believe him, then let us believe him -- everything he says, whatever he says. Whenever we set ourselves up as a judge of what he says, as being right or wrong, we are really saying we know more about the subject that Jesus Christ. Now, John is simply reminding us here that if we are going to accept the words of Jesus Christ, we must accept everything that he said.

A friend showed me a book the other day, entitled *Jesus As Teacher*, in which there was a purported attempt to set forth the teachings of Jesus. But when I examined the book at length I discovered that the author had gone through and had taken out parts of sentences which Jesus had spoken and linked them with things he had said in another place; he had sometimes dropped out the whole point our Lord was making in a passage and inserted another point from another place, until the whole was simply a hodgepodge of collections from fragmented sayings of Christ, put together and labeled, *Jesus As Teacher*. But that is not a study of the teachings of Jesus, that is merely a study of the ideas of the author as to what Jesus taught. People are certainly not studying Jesus as teacher when they do that.

Sometimes you hear people say, "Well, we don't want to follow the Bible, we want to follow Christ. Christ is our authority, not the Bible." But, as you read the Bible, you can see that is an impossibility. You cannot distinguish between Christ and the Bible in the area of authority. It is the words of Jesus that form the Bible, and if we are going to receive the words of Jesus we must receive them as they are recorded in the New Testament. Our Lord himself reminds us of this. In the twelfth chapter of John he says these very significant words:

"He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge; the word that I have spoken will be his judge at the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority [i.e., I did not originate what I came to say. Well, who did?]; the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. [The very thing man is seeking is all wrapped up in these words which God has spoken.] What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has bidden me." {John 12:48-50 RSV}

That is why, when John wants to help us to understand and to grasp all that God provides for us, he says we will find it in the Word, the word of life. We will find it in the message which was given us from the beginning. That not only includes the words of the Lord himself, but it also includes the apostolic expansion of those words which we call the Epistles of the New Testament. As you read these letters through you will see they are simply a fuller exposition, given under the direction of the Spirit of God, of all that Jesus said in capsule form in the Gospels. There are no departures, no contradictions, no divergences. There is no place where an apostle goes off on his own and says something that Jesus did not say. They are simply taking all that he said, and, under the leadership and influence of the Holy Spirit, expounding it in fuller detail that we might understand completely what Jesus Christ came to say and to be to men. That is why the Apostle Paul writes to the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another," {Col 3:16a KJV}.

Now look a little more closely at the word which John employs here. He says, "Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you." That means more than simply reading your Bible once in a while. That means more than to read it in a rather cursory way, then shut the book and mark off on the list that you've done your Bible reading for today. This word abide, literally, means "to remain in you." Or perhaps the closer word would be, "possess you."

It is exactly what we would mean when we say to a guest who comes into our house, "Make yourself at home." Of course, they know that we really do not mean that. It is a polite expression and does not mean, "Take over the house and do what you would like," but, rather, "In the rooms that you have

already been given access to, feel free to move around a bit, if you like, but don't go in the bedrooms, and stay out of the closets." But if we really meant that statement we would be saying, "Possess this house as though it were yours. Go anywhere you like, do anything you like, make yourself at home as though you were really home."

And that is what this word means. John is saying, "Let this message which was from the beginning make itself at home in your heart, in your life, possess you -- spirit, soul and body. Let it grip you, mind, emotion, and will. Let it lay hold of you, your whole being." This is the first and necessary step to the goal that he has in mind, the fullness of God manifest in you. See how he links this inescapably with the Word of God? Let the Word abide in you.

Now here is our trouble. When we read the Bible we really do not want it to move into the whole house, we only want it to move into one room or two. We want it to occupy the room of our mental acumen, the library, if you like, the study. Many people read the Bible that way. They study it intellectually for the knowledge of the times in which we live. Perhaps the prophetic passages because they are simply interested in discovering what the program of God is for the future. Or they study certain of the moral standards or ethical teachings of the Bible, like the Sermon on the Mount, since they are only interested in extracting from it certain intellectual, academic, moral teachings, and that is all they want.

There are others (I am afraid, perhaps, a majority), who study the Bible only for the stirring of emotions that it gives. You can do that, you know. That is why we love to read certain favorite passages. I know people who open the Bible and invariably read the same passages over and over -- the 23rd Psalm, the 14th chapter of John, or the 6th chapter of Romans. Why? Because these truths, as they read, stir them. It blesses and stirs their hearts. These are beautiful passages, and beautiful thoughts, and they stir the emotions. That is why we turn to these favorite passages. We love the good feeling we get from reading these passages that have spoken to us in the past, and reading them again wakens memories and we are stirred anew. But that is all. After we have read them and our emotions have been stirred, we close the Bible and go out to live just as we have always lived. There is no difference.

When this happens, we may be religious, certainly we are "churchy," and no one can deny that we are reading the Bible, but, yet, the Word of God is not abiding in us and that is the necessary thing. Now, John is urging toward this. He is saying let the Word grip you. Let it confront you intellectually first, that is always the gateway through which God makes his appeal to man. Understand what God is saying. Meditate on these passages until you see the truth, you know what God is saying. Read them again and again and let them burn into you, muse and meditate upon them until they grip you. Then as you find you understand the truth you will discover that it has done something to your emotions. It has moved and gotten hold of you, you are captivated by it, you are held by it, you are compelled by it. When that happens, that moving of your emotions, then respond to it: submit yourself, obey it. This is what the Scripture calls acting or living by faith; obeying the truth made known to the mind, gripping the emotions, and thus moving the will. That is the Word of God abiding in you, possessing you.

Let that happen, the apostle says, i.e., make provision for it, set a time for this, make room in your life for this. That will inevitably lead you to the next step which, as you notice, is an explanation for you.

If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. {1 Jn 2:24b RSV}

It is inescapable. If the Word, if the truth of God has possessed you, then you will be possessed by the Son and by the Father, i.e., by the fullness of God which is in the Son and the Father. Notice, it is the same word he uses, "then you will abide in [be possessed by, gripped by] the Son and the Father." This is, of course, nothing more than what Jesus himself had said to his disciples in the Upper Room, as

recorded in the 14th chapter of John. "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him," {John 14:21 RSV}. We will abide in him, we will dwell in him, we will move in him, we will go about with him wherever he goes. We will be with him at his work, we will be with him at his home, we will be with him in his relationships with others, we will be with him in his problems, we will be with him in his joys, we will be with him when he is confronted with temptations to anger and temper, we will be with him all the time. We will make our home with him. This is what John is saying. "If what you have heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father."

Now there is a difference, as you know, between being "in" something, and "abiding in" something. Our Lord made that clear in John 15 in the parable of the vine and the branches. He said, "I am the vine, and you are the branches," {John 15:5a RSV}. The branch was in the vine by virtue of union, and the life of the vine (or some of it, at least) was being imparted to the branch so that it could bear leaves. But it could not bear fruit under that relationship. He pointed out that if a branch is to bear fruit, it must abide in the vine, i.e., the fullness of the vine must be in the branch. Not just enough life to sustain it, but all that the vine is, is to be imparted to the branch, and the result would be fruit, and more fruit, and much fruit, to the complete satisfying of the owner of the vineyard. This is what our Lord called abiding, i.e., all the life of the vine accepted by the branch.

This, you will notice is a reciprocal relationship. To the degree that you act in faith, obeying the Word, to that same degree the Father and the Son will be in you, performing the Word. This explains why there is sometimes so much difference between Christians. One Christian, even one relatively young in the faith, can seem to be so abundantly full of the character of Jesus Christ, manifesting the fruit of the Spirit in such abundance, while another Christian who, perhaps, has been a Christian for years, is still crabbed and ugly in temper and disposition, and there is little of the fruit of the Spirit. What is the difference? One has allowed himself to be possessed by the Word, and thus he is possessed by the Father and the Son. If you obey little, you will experience little. If you obey much, you will experience much. To the degree that you give yourself to God in understanding and obeying his Word, to that same degree he gives himself to you. That is what John is teaching us.

That is why the Apostle Paul in that wonderful 3rd chapter in Philippians says, "I am not claiming absolute perfection, but I press on that I may apprehend that for which I have been apprehended, i.e., that I may lay hold of that for which he has laid hold of me, that I may possess him in order that he may fully possess me," {cf, Phil 3:12 ff}. Now if this reciprocal relationship is true, this suggests certain conclusions that must inevitably follow. If it is true, as it surely is true, that God gives himself to us in the same degree that we give ourselves to him, then I see three things that result from this:

First, you can have all that Christ is, if you are ready to take him. There is no limit to the degree to which he will give himself to you, if there is no limit to the degree to which you are ready to believe and obey him. You can have all that he is, in any situation, at any given moment, if you are ready to take it by an act of obedient faith. Second, if that is true, then it is also true that you will only have as much as you are satisfied with. God will never give more to you beyond what you really want. God never forces blessing upon anyone. This is why Christians can live, sometimes for decades, in weakness, and folly, in barrenness, fruitlessness and despair, because they do not really want more from God. Nothing has awakened them to hunger and thirst after righteousness. They are content to live at that low level, and God will never force more upon them. Oh, he will try to wake them up, by one means or another, but he will never bless them, cannot bless them, beyond that which they are willing to take. The third conclusion is: You have now, therefore (if you understand this), all that you really want from God. Your present level of life is indication that is all you want. So do not blame God if your life is not filled with the blessing and fullness that the Scriptures seem to promise. It is not his fault. You now have all that you really want, because you can have from him all that you are ready to take. If your life is not

satisfying to you, as a Christian, it is not God's fault; it is that you are not yet willing, for one reason or another, to take from him all that he is ready to give, out of the fullness of his being. Now, just what is that? This is where John ends. He summarizes, by describing to us what this is, in one phrase:

And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. {1 Jn 2:25 RSV}

I am quite aware that phrase is greatly obscured by the traditional view that has been poured into these words, eternal life, through centuries of Christian teaching and preaching. Most of us read the words as though they only meant heaven some day. "Everlasting life," we call it, life that never ends. Now that is not inaccurate. Eternal life *is* life that never ends, but the essential factor about eternal life is not quantity, but quality. What John is speaking of here is not merely something we are going to get in heaven someday, but it is something we can experience and enjoy now. It is fullness of life, the full quality of divine life lived out right in your situation, right now, and increasing in fullness of enjoyment forever. In other words, eternal life, as John is using it here, is the daily adventure of experiencing God's solution to every problem, instead of yours. It is the discovery of God's program for every opportunity, instead of yours. Every time we are confronted with a problem, there are only two things we can do:

We can either sit down, in the weakness of our own intellect, relying upon our own human resources (much as any wordling would do who never knew God at all, or even an atheist who denies the existence of a God), we can try to solve the problem and work it out. When we do, the result is inevitably the same. Sooner or later life dissipates into a drabness, a boredom, a routine that leaves us utterly uninterested and desiring to be uninvolved. That is our program.

Or we can have God's program, we can have God's solution to any problem or any opportunity. If we are ready to follow this simple formula that John provides for us here, to be obedient and understanding, obeying the Word as God unfolds it to us, then, in any situation, we can say, "Lord, you are in me and you have come in me to live through me. This situation has been brought about by your planning and your programming. I wouldn't be in it, if it were not for you. Now, Lord, do through me what you want to do with it." Then we watch to see what God does, and we become instantly available to him to move in whatever direction it looks like the situation demands. As we do, we discover that his program begins to unfold in that situation. Every obstacle becomes a glorious opportunity. There is no more reason for despair and gloom because every situation, no matter how frightening it might be for the moment, is but an opportunity to display the fullness of glory, wisdom and power that is in the God who has come to live within us and make his home in us.

Now that is something different, is it not? What a life that is, what quiet excitement that involves. It is described in that well-known passage in Isaiah 40, where the prophet says, "But they that wait upon the Lord [i.e., those who are expecting God to be at work] shall exchange their strength [for what? -- for his strength, for his power, for his wisdom, for his understanding -- and then what?], they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint," {cf, Isa 40:31}. That is a description of the mind, the emotions, and the will of man:

"They shall mount up with wings as eagles." They shall be intellectually stimulated, captivated by the great range of truth that God is working out through the humdrum, commonplace circumstances of life. Their minds shall be challenged, their mental vision opened so, like the eagle mounting up, they can see afar and understand what life is all about.

"They shall run and not be weary." We speak of "running" the gamut of emotions. That is what life is made for. We are never intended to be placid, unmoved people journeying through life, never reacting to anything, dull, stolid, indifferent. We are intended to react; to show joy, to express sorrow, to experience gladness and relief, to run the gamut of emotions. That is perfectly proper, perfectly human. You see the

Lord Jesus doing this through the three-and-a-half years of his ministry. Ah, but the trouble is, if we are not doing this in God's strength, it breaks us down. We get anxious, fearful and trembling. We get frightened and break down under the strain. We have a mental breakdown, an emotional breakdown, or a nervous breakdown. Why? Because we are trying to run out of inadequacy, without strength to lean upon.

"But they that wait upon the Lord, [who are exchanging their strength for his] shall run and not be weary." There is never a breakdown, never any failure in this wonderful experiencing of life -- life that is always vibrant and vital, changing constantly, but always joyful. "And they shall walk and not faint." Walking consists of the steps that we take by the choices of our will, moment by moment. All of life is filled with decisions. You know that, do you not? Sometimes you say, "Decisions! Decisions! Decisions! Nothing but decisions!" Yes, but that is the way life is intended to be, a constant program of decisions which you take step after step after step, walking through life. "But they that learn to wait upon the Lord shall exchange their strength," exchange your deadness for his life, exchange your weakness for his strength, exchange your emptiness for his fullness. They shall walk -- and not faint. Life will be a constant series of experiencing the undergirding power and strength of God, so that every decision is a strengthening experience.

Now, is that not what you read of all through the New Testament? I look back across some thirty years of Christian experience and remember, as a young Christian, reading that great promise in Ephesians, "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," {Eph 3:20 KJV}. I remember looking at that verse, and saying to myself, "Is that really true? Does God really offer to do for me beyond that which I can ever ask or think at this moment? Why, that's fantastic! I can ask a lot of life. I can dream and imagine a great many wonderful experiences that I would love to have, to bring satisfaction to my life and heart." I even had the program outlined in my mind, just how God could do it. But as I look back across these thirty years, I can see that God did not take my program and do it my way, but he has abundantly fulfilled the promise. My life is richer than I ever dreamed it would be when I was a young Christian. My life is fuller, more satisfying, moment by moment, than I ever thought was possible when I was young. God has fulfilled his promise, not because I have fully and always entered into the fulfillment of this formula, because I have not. Many times I have failed. But despite all the failure, despite the times of weakness, I can bear testimony that the times I have walked in the strength of God have been so superbly above all that I could ask or think, that, even with all the failure taken into account, my life is still an abundant fulfillment of this promise. "Now to him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we could ask or think (in any given situation)."

If we are ready to give ourselves to the Word of God, to let it possess us, to understand it, and to obey it -- if "that which you heard from the beginning abides in you," you also will abide in the Son and in the Father. The experience of that is eternal life!

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this clear word from the apostle's heart, concerning the program you have for men. Grant to us now, Lord, through all the feeble searchings of our heart, the discovery of these things in experience. We know, Lord, that you have already given the Holy Spirit to those who know Jesus Christ to be our guide into this very discovery, and we pray now, as we begin this new year, 1967, that we will give ourselves to His program. We will begin to let the Word possess us as we understand it, read it, and grasp it; to let it grip us, that we might abide in you and experience the fullness of eternal life. We thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

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