

The Indispensable Need for Illumination

Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And what is the exceeding greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all.
(Eph 1:15-23)

Have you ever tried to explain something wonderful or beautiful to someone else, and you could tell by their expression that they just couldn't get it? You do your best with words, but you know you have not conveyed the experience the way you experienced it? You usually end up saying something like, "Well, you had to be there". That's Paul's experience as he completes one of the richest passages in the Bible. He started off by saying, "*Blessed be God, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.*" He then went on to show why God, to a believer in Christ, is so praiseworthy. He showed us how God the Father selected us. He showed us how God the Son saved us. He showed us how God the Son will be supreme, and we will be married to Him. He showed us how God the Spirit has sealed us so that we can never lose these spiritual blessings.

Now Paul, as a seasoned preacher, knows that there will be many blank expressions on the faces of his readers. He knows that these truths will seem far off, irrelevant and impractical to some. That is why the first word of verse 15 is 'wherefore'. In other words, he is saying, in light of these precious truths – I now say the following. And what does he say? He says, in light of the preciousness of these truths – I pray you will see them.

He prays that God may give his readers the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God. What does that mean? By '*spirit*' he means this is not something that our mere intellectual powers can produce, this is something Spirit-given - Spirit-taught wisdom and revealed knowledge about God. It is seeing what God wrote and intended. It is when the information becomes Spirit-taught wisdom and revealed truth.

He goes on to describe this process: 'that the eyes of your understanding', or your 'heart being enlightened'. There is more light, we can see – this is where we get the word illumination. What was dark and unclear, God enlightens – He makes it possible to see. And what do we go on to see? We see the hope of His calling; the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints; His immeasurable power toward us, which was exercised in raising Christ from the dead to supremacy.

Now the Word of God is brilliant. It has a way of proving its own point. If your eye skips over those words: 'hope of His calling, glorious inheritance in the saints, immeasurable

power toward us' and they do not cause any emotional, intellectual or volitional reaction in you, then the point is proved – you need illumination! If we read those phrases and they are merely theological terms to us – it is proof that we require God to give us the wisdom and the revealed knowledge of these things.

Paul is saying – the truths in the Word are so marvellous, that I want God to illuminate your eyes. I don't want you to miss the glorious truth of election, of redemption, of Christ's exaltation, of our inheritance in Christ, of our sure hope because of His sealing, of His mighty power which will finish the work He began in us. Paul is praying that the Ephesians will not simply skip over these words and carry on with their lives. He prays for illumination.

Illumination is the difference between merely processing facts about the Bible, and seeing them in all their wonder and beauty. It is the difference between being merely fascinated with some ideas, and being awed as the Holy Spirit teaches you.

A.W. Tozer:

The New Testament draws a sharp line between the natural mind and the mind that has been touched by divine fire. When Peter made his good confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16), our Lord replied, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (16:17). And Paul expresses much the same thing when he says, "No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost" (1 Cor. 12:3). The sum of what I am saying is that there is an illumination, divinely bestowed, without which theological truth is information and nothing more. While this illumination is never given apart from theology, it is entirely possible to have theology without the illumination. This results in what has been called "dead orthodoxy," and while there may be some who deny that it is possible to be both orthodox and dead at the same time I am afraid experience proves that it is. Revivals, as they have appeared at various times among the churches of the past, have been essentially a quickening of the spiritual life of persons already orthodox. The revivalist, as long as he exercised his ministry as a revivalist, did not try to teach doctrine. His one object was to bring about a quickening of the churches which while orthodox in creed were devoid of spiritual life. Revival can come only to those who know truth. When the inner meaning of familiar doctrines suddenly flashes in upon the heart of a Christian the revival for him has already begun. It may go on to be much more than this but it can never be less.

So, in other words, Paul is praying that his readers will be illuminated so that the inner meaning, the real impact of truths like Christ's supremacy, His power, God's grace to us, and our salvation come alive. When the Spirit illuminates these truths to us, we will abound with the uncontainable joy of Paul, in saying with him – "Blessed be God!"

Illumination is when God the Spirit shows us the beauty, the validity and the urgency of truth. I believe every believer has had some taste of illumination. Every believer has had some experience, however limited, of the truth of Scripture taking on a brilliance, a Christ-centredness. It is as if, the truth suddenly becomes personal. Personal in two senses – one in the sense that we see how to apply it personally, but two – in the sense that we see this is the will of a Person. This is the nature of a Person. This is the character of a Person. It becomes communion – God sharing Himself, His glory with the receptive heart. The believer that sees this is moved and changed.

Luke 24:27 tells us: "And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."

After He disappears listen to their words:

“And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?”

Would you say this is the case with the average Christian? We know it is not. For the average Christian, spiritual boredom is epidemic. There is sometimes an interest in spiritual things, but no relish for them. There never was a more knowledgeable Christian church; a church so filled with facts, with information, with systematised, studied and researched Biblical truth as our 21st century church. But, I daresay, there never was a church more carnal, lukewarm and idolatrous than our modern 21st century church. The problem is not a lack of information; it is a lack of illumination.

There are no doubt a number of reasons why the modern church does not experience much illumination, but I want to suggest three:

1) ***An obsession with novelty.*** Our culture teaches us that whatever is new is interesting and worth looking into. What is known and old is irrelevant. Too many Christians have the novelty bug. They read a Scripture, or listen to a sermon, and they inwardly say, “I already know this, tell me something new”. They think new truth is the answer. That is why people gravitate toward teachers who come up with weird allegorical interpretations of Scripture because it’s ‘new’. People say, “Wow! I never saw that before!” Probably, because it was never there. And if we chase novelty we will miss illumination. God illuminates His ancient, eternal truth.

It’s an obsession with novelty that makes some Christians think the answer to spiritual boredom is to try and dress up the truth. They think the problem is the format in which the truth is delivered. They say: “Preaching is old-fashioned and boring – we need something fresh. We need louder bands, more impressive presentation techniques, better ways of presenting the Gospel”. They hope that superficially dressing it up with brighter lights, louder music, and a sing-song of innovation will somehow brighten up what has come to be drab and dull to them. As someone said, they try to make truth more attractive than truth. They try to dress the truth up in a format they think is more attractive than truth. And they always say, “We’re making the truth relevant”. I’m all for relevance. But I’m convinced the problem is not in the presentation, it is in a lack of illumination.

2) ***An obsession with immediacy.*** Our culture teaches us that we ought to have what we want, when we want it. Waiting patiently is becoming a lost art. If something bores us, we change the channel. If the service is slow, we leave the restaurant. If the car in front of us takes .5 of a second too long to pull off, we hoot. Microwave ovens, blenders, high speed internet, fast food, continually teach us – the sooner, the better. And when we bring this into our walk with the Lord, it is disastrous. God illuminates those who unhurriedly ponder His Word, and wait for Him to reveal Christ. He does not rush to give us truth simply because we are used to everything appearing immediately. In fact, I believe He often withholds it to test us, and to train us to sit still long enough to hear his voice.

3) ***An obsession with busyness.*** We are taught that you must at all times be giving your eyes something to look at; your ears something to listen to; your mouth something to chew on or swallow or say, and your hands something to do. Now certainly, we are not promoting idleness. But the opposite of idleness is productiveness, not frantic, non-stop busyness. Work certainly fills the majority of our days, as do the various errands we have to run, shopping and paying bills and fixing cars, etc. But the truth is, when we have quiet moments, we too often are quick to fill those moments with the TV, or a silly magazine, or idle chatter on the telephone. As such, we never are in a contemplative mood. We are never in a devotional mood. We are never pondering, thinking, chewing on truth. The result is – we remain shallow, and we know it, and dislike it, but do not do anything to change. Illumination comes to those who deliberately clear off blocks of time to sit and think and pray with God. Often, our efforts to save time and have more money result in us having less time and less money.

So, we can see the problems. But what is the procedure. Does the Bible offer guidance as to how illumination takes place? Paul prays for illumination. We ought to as well. But how does it take place? What is the process by which the Holy Spirit reveals Christ?

I think the clearest Scripture is Proverbs 2:1-6:

“My son, if thou wilt receive my words, and hide my commandments with thee; So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and apply thine heart to understanding; Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding; If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasures; Then shalt thou understand the fear of the LORD, and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding.”

Now in these verses we clearly see illumination, and what God requires for it.

In verse 5 we see...

I. The Result

Then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. Clearly this speaks about an experiential understanding. To find the knowledge of God means to know God by revelation. God reveals Himself to us. We come to a place of awe, of reverential wonder, of amazed worship – this is the fear of the Lord. It has an emotional component, a mental component and a volitional component. And we would do well not to try and separate them or make one better than the other. We are told to love God with *all* our heart, *all* our soul and *all* our mind – not part of each of them. So Solomon describes illumination in terms which sound just like Paul – the eyes of the understanding are opened, there is an enlightenment so that we know by experience the great truths about God.

But notice in verse 7:

II. The Reason

Notice the word ‘for’. Because, The Lord gives wisdom you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God because the Lord gives wisdom. Illumination comes from God. Even Charles Spurgeon put it this way: “Purify flesh and blood by any educational process you may select, elevate mental faculties to the highest degree of intellectual power, yet none of these can reveal Christ. The Spirit of God must come with power, and overshadow the man with

His wings, and then in that mystic holy of holies the Lord Jesus must display Himself to the purblind sons of men.”

God must illuminate His Word. He will not share the glory of His wisdom with our intellect. Certainly, we must think, and think hard, but it is God who finally completes the circuit, as it were, and opens our eyes. Tozer said: “Scriptures simply take for granted that the saints of the Most High will be serious-minded, thoughtful persons. They never leave the impression that it is sinful to think. But thinking apart from the inward illumination of the Holy Spirit is not only futile, it is likely to be dangerous as well. The human intellect is fallen and can no more find its way through the broad expanse of truth, half-truth and downright error than a ship can find its way over the ocean alone. God has given us the Holy Spirit to illuminate our minds. He is eyes and understanding to us. We dare not try to get on without Him.”

So, the result is illumination, and the reason is because God gives it. But this is given only on a condition.

III. The Requirements

Notice there are three ‘ifs’ in this passage, in verse 1, verse 3 and verse 5. The Bible says if you do this, and if you do this, and if you do this – then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God, because the Lord gives wisdom. So there are conditions. Now illumination does not come because we meet these conditions, it comes because the Holy Spirit gives it. But it does not come without meeting these conditions. In other words, the Holy Spirit gives illumination in response to us meeting these requirements. The Word promises us that if we will approach God’s Word in this way – we will, certainly experience the illumination Paul prayed for.

Eager Reception

Notice the first words are, “*my son, if you will receive my words*”. This immediately implies humility and submission. If you receive or accept something, you admit you did not have it before and you now need it. Proud people are often very good at giving, but the test of humility is if you can receive, and admit you need to receive. The first requirement for illumination is to come with a humble heart that submits to the Word of God, and wants it. It does not come with proud, preconceived ideas, it does not come thinking, “I already know what this passage is about”. When we have that attitude, we are not ready to receive.

James told us to be slow to speak, quick to hear before the Word could be received. Pride overtly or indirectly shows that it does not want to receive God’s Word. It either does this by not reading the Bible, not listening to it, or when reading or listening, by inwardly rejecting it or modifying it, or correcting it. There are many who will never be illuminated, because before God can speak, they are already talking, already saying in their minds, “I’ve read/heard this before” or “I know about this”.

Humility places itself into a submissive, teachable position, where it regards the Word of God as the voice of the Lord. You must be convinced of the Word’s nature as God’s speaking voice. You must submit to the *apparent* foolishness of reading a book thousands of years old, trusting that this is where God will reveal Christ.

Now Solomon actually helps us to understand what it means by receiving the Word, because he qualifies it with the words: “*So that thou incline thine ear unto wisdom, and*

apply thine heart to understanding” The words incline thine ear have the idea of ‘pricking up the ears’. When an animal hears a sound that intrigues them – the ears actually prick up. The idea here is, when the Word is to be read or heard – prick up the ears of your heart. *Incline the heart*’ carries the idea of stretching your mind out to grasp and receive these words. Now those ideas mean that the reception of God’s Word is not passive. When we think of receive, we think, sit back and be served. But God explains receiving His Word is an active thing. It might be humble, but it is not lazy. It is not like watching TV, where we turn off our brains and are fed a lot of images. It is not like watching cheap entertainment. Receiving the Word of God is like hosting an important guest – there is work to be done. We need to do heart preparation. As we studied previously, we are to do some heart surgery. Pray – Lord, incline my heart to your Word. Purify my heart of its sin and pride. Open my heart to receive thy Word. Unite my fragmented heart to fear you. Enlarge my heart to be able to handle what you give me. Satisfy my heart with yourself. There is to be an eager reception that clears out what ought not to be there, and makes sure it is in a ready state to receive the Word. We must put out the welcome mat, so to speak. There is to be an eagerness to see God in the Word. It is so eager that it will shush other voices down, so that God’s may be heard. It quiets the heart, so as to hear. That eagerness comes to the Word listening, not teaching, submitting, not instructing. It humbles itself, and says – ‘speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.”

The next ‘if statement is in verse 3 where we read: *“Yea, if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding;”*

This we could call an **Earnest Request**.

When someone is willing to ask, they have forsaken the “I know it all attitude”. They humble themselves enough to, as it were, make their ignorance public. And that humility is rewarded with wisdom, so there is no foolishness in asking good questions. It is foolish to be quiet and remain foolish. Solomon says the kind of attitude that will have illumination is the heart that doesn’t just allow the Word to pass through its mind like water through a pipe, but it clears its throat and asks questions. Who does it ask? Well, in one sense, it asks human teachers. Godly Christians who are knowledgeable in the Word are a gift from God. I enjoy asking Christians I greatly respect how they understand some Scriptures or some things about God. It is helpful to ask Christian teachers, whether in person or in books for help. But I think another area that we are to ask questions of is the Bible itself. We are to ask the text we are reading questions. What is it saying? Who was it written to? Why is it said like this? Why were those words used? What does this tell me about God? How should I respond? If we would stop to ask the text we are reading some questions, what great fruit it would yield.

And in another sense, it asks God – ‘open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” “Shaw me thy glory” God, explain this to me.

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being

evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?
(Mat 7:7-11)

The final 'if' statement reads: "If thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as *for* hidden treasures;" I think we can call this...

An Expectant Dig

I do believe much of the reason why many Christians do not experience illumination is that they do not seek for it, and they do not wait for it. They ritualise their reading, making it more like a religious duty to be ticked off, rather than a chance to meet with God. And Solomon says the condition for illumination is the kind of diligent seeking that characterises someone after treasure. Someone who is hunting for treasure is expectant of finding. They are not sight-seeing, hoping to see something nice. They are not channel-surfing, to see 'what's on'. They are not flipping through a magazine. A treasure hunter has a goal – treasure. They do not stop hunting till they find it. This speaks of a vigorous, hungry, relentless pursuit of the knowledge of God. Seeing God is seen as a prize, a thing of great value, worth pursuing to gain. How many Christians keep the prize in mind when approaching the Word? How many refuse to give up until they find what they are looking for? This speaks of effort, of hard work. It speaks of long, hard, thinking. Tozer said "We cannot know God by thinking alone, but we can never know Him very well without a lot of hard thinking."

Paul said to Timothy: "*Think over what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.*" (2Ti 2:7)

I think one of the keys in using the analogy of seeking for treasure is that we all understand treasures are usually buried. They are seldom on the surface. The Bible is clearly teaching that illumination requires some digging. Sifting through the layers, digging into the text – what does it mean, what does it say, what does it reveal. Here is where we might use our pens to write notes, or read out loud, or memorise – anything to break us out of lazy, unthinking reading. We apply ourselves wholeheartedly to see God in the text. If we rake the surface, we get leaves; if we dig we can get diamonds. We stay, wait, ask questions, think long and hard, and seek to know what God is saying, and what He is saying to us through the Scriptures. Jim Berg said

"Believers must take the time and effort to hike into the forest of God's Word and harvest the logs of truth from that massive timberland. They must by reflection split the logs and stack them on the fireplace of their own heart while they pray for the illumination from God to set the logs ablaze. The resulting fire will provide the light that directs their paths and the heat that fuels their passion for God.

Unfortunately, most people accumulate only a few sticks of kindling from their pastor's Sunday sermons – not because he doesn't present great truths from God's Word but because they think little upon those truths, even during the message. Even when God does ignite those splinters of truth, their fire blazes only momentarily because there is so little truth for the Holy Spirit to burn."

Those who earnestly seek, find. Why should God give the treasure of Himself to lazy, casual, indifferent hearts? If men pursue things worth less than God with great effort and

energy, how much more, should the greatest Treasure of all be worth our best effort to see Him in the Word?

“And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.” (Jer 29:13)

And when do that, Solomon promises, you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. There must be Eager Reception – submitting to the Word as the voice of the Lord and inclining the heart and pricking up the ears so as to put the welcome mat out for it. There must be an Earnest Request – asking the text questions, asking God for wisdom, and asking other Christians. And there must be an Expectant Search – expecting to see God in the Word as we vigorously search for it.

If Christians are to have a revival, where God’s Word and truth comes alive to us in all its brilliance – it won’t come because we try to dress the truth up. It won’t come because we keep busy with more programs and more ministries. It will come because Christians approach the Word with the humility that submits, becomes teachable and hungers after God in the Word.