

**Conversion to Jesus Christ:
(10) God's Calling of a Sinner unto Salvation (part 1)**

Our study on conversion on the past three Sundays has focused on the work of God preparing the heirs of salvation for their conversion unto Jesus Christ. God prepares sinners for conversion, even before He bestows His grace that results in their conversion. Now if we could envision a person at this point in the process of the Lord bringing him to salvation, we would see that he is still estranged from God due to his sin. Yes, he has come to understand some matters of which he had been formerly ignorant. The Lord had caused him to see himself as a sinner, even a helpless, egregious sinner, who was under the wrath of God. The Lord may have caused him to hear the Word of God, and even to understand the nature and meaning of the gospel to a degree, but he had not yet been transformed by it. He had not yet seen the wonder, the beauty, and the power of the gospel to bring him salvation. But we now want to consider the actual work of God upon the sinner, even in the sinner, by which that one is converted to Jesus Christ. This is the act of God's free and sovereign will in saving a sinner who is both unable and unwilling to come unto Him. When the time arrives that God had purposed from eternity to bring is chosen one to Himself, God effectually calls that one unto Himself through Jesus Christ.

We may see that this is the initial work of saving grace in a sinner in Paul setting forth of God's acts of grace toward His elect. We read in **Romans 8:28-30**

And we know that all things work together for good to those that love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestinated to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He *predestinated*, these He also *called*; whom He called, He also *justified*; and whom He justified, these He also *glorified*.

Here are the steps of grace in which God brings His own to salvation by grace. He chooses them to become saved (election and predestination). At a point in time He *calls* them to Himself to receive salvation. He *justifies* the ones that come to Him; that is, He forgives them of their sins and credits the righteousness of Christ to them. He *glorifies* each of them that He has justified. Let us first consider...

1. The sovereign grace of God calling us to salvation

The grace of God in bringing individuals to believe on Jesus is through His work upon and in His chosen people. These actions of God are commonly described as the work of God's *effectual calling* His people to salvation. Here is a very good and concise statement of God's call to salvation:

Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered us in the gospel."

This is the answer to question #31 in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. The question and answer that follows gives us a more full understanding of what results from God's effectual call unto salvation:

Question #32. What benefits do they that are effectually called partake of in this life?

Answer. They that are effectually called do in this life partake of justification, adoption, and sanctification, and the several benefits which in this life do either accompany or flow from them.

These are God's works of grace in salvation, even the benefits of saving grace of the believer in this life. God brings salvation from sin's penalty (justification), salvation from our estrangement from Him due our sin (adoption), and salvation from the power of sin (sanctification).¹

In this definition set forth in the catechism, we read that the word, "calling", is preceded by the word, "effectually"—"they that are effectually called." This speaks of God's *effectual calling*. This word, effectual, is used for at least two reasons. First, the word sets forth the truth that this calling of God always accomplishes the end to which God purposed in that call. God is always successful in bringing the one He calls effectually unto their salvation. Everyone whom God calls effectually unto Himself, comes to Him. We see this truth set forth clearly and directly in Scripture. Our Lord Jesus declared, "Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Me" (John 6:45).

A second reason the word, "*effectual*", precedes the word, "call", is to distinguish this kind of call, which always results in salvation to the one elect by God before the foundation of the world, from the *general* call of God which is given to all people everywhere to repent of sin and believe on Jesus Christ for salvation.

There is a general call and there is an effectual call. The general call is the call of the gospel proclaimed by preachers and Christians as they witness to people in the world. The effectual call is the call of God of the specific individual sinner, which results in his salvation. Sometimes the general call of God is described as external, but the effectual call is internal. The general call is for all people at all times in every place. It can be often repeated before sinners throughout life. The effectual call, however, is a single call of God that occurs one time in a person's life, by which God calls him from sin and damnation to forgiveness of sins and new life in Jesus Christ.

God makes this general call to all people everywhere to come to salvation through the evidence of His existence through (1) *nature* and in the (2) *human conscience*. This general call of God comes primarily through the message of the (3) *gospel* to everyone everywhere, inviting them to come to Christ and receive freely the salvation that is in Him. When we witness to others, or preach to others, we are extending a general call to them to turn from sins and believe on the Lord Jesus.

The general call of God to turn from sin and to turn from God is a gracious call. God freely and sincerely offers life to all that repent of sin and turn to Him. But because of the nature of man's sinful condition, the general call to salvation is insufficient in and of itself to bring salvation. The fact is that *the general offer of the gospel is insufficient to bring salvation apart from an inward work of the grace by God leading and enabling a sinner to receive and respond to the gospel*. The general call of the gospel alone is simply insufficient to bring people to salvation. People need more than just hearing the gospel with the ear. *The Holy Spirit must apply the gospel to an individual's mind and heart before salvation can take place*. This work of God's grace is His effectual calling of His elect unto salvation.

Those who come to Christ in salvation receive more than just an external invitation to come to Christ. They hear another call. This is referred to as a holy calling (2 Tim. 1:9), a high calling (Phil. 3:14), and a heavenly calling (Heb. 3:1). This is the call of God through Jesus Christ made powerful by the Holy Spirit convincing them of sin, convincing them of judgment, convincing them that salvation is in Christ alone, convincing and moving them to desire and seek Christ. Again, this call of God is effectual, that is, it always accomplishes the purpose for which it was issued--the salvation of God's chosen ones. Paul described his own experience of this effectual call of God in **Galatians 1:13-16**:

For you have heard of my former conduct in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and tried to destroy it. And I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my contemporaries in my own nation,

¹ Later in the catechism the benefits of God's grace are set forth that will come to the believer at his *death* and future *resurrection* :

Question #37. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at death?

Answer. The souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness, and do immediately pass into glory; and their bodies, being still united in Christ, do rest in their graves, till the resurrection.

Question #38. What benefits do believers receive from Christ at the resurrection?

Answer. At the resurrection, believers, being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the Day of Judgment, and made perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity.

being more exceeding zealous for the traditions of my fathers. But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, **and called me through His grace**, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles; immediately I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned to Damascus. (Gal. 1:15, 16).

Here Paul describes his conversion to Christ. Notice several points.

- (1) His coming to salvation was according to *the good pleasure* of God—“*when it pleased God*.” Paul was not pleased to come to Christ. Paul was pleased to persecute the church of God. He was converted to Christ because it pleased God to save him. It was of grace.
- (2) God’s designs upon Paul were before he was born—“*who separated me from my mother's womb*.” Before Paul knew God, God knew Paul beforehand--God foreknew Paul. God had designs for him. This is Paul’s way to describe his having been chosen by God to become saved.
- (3) The time came when God determined Paul to become converted to Christ--He “*called me through His grace*.” This is the effectual call that was issued by God that secured Paul’s conversion. It was not an offer to become saved; Paul was drafted. It was an application of Christ as Lord and Savior to Paul.
- (4) This calling of Paul was *through grace*— He “*called me through His grace*.” As Paul in another place described God’s grace working in others, he could say the same of himself; *it was God working in him both to will and to do of His good pleasure* (cf. Phil. 2:13).

The 18th century Baptist pastor and theologian, **John Gill**, wrote of the result of the effectual call of God unto salvation:

They were slaves to their sinful lusts and pleasures, and were brought into bondage by them, and held under the power of them, as in a prison; but in effectual calling, the shackles of sin are broken off, and the prison-doors opened, and they are bid to go forth and show themselves; they become free from the tyranny of sin, and sin has no more dominion over them: in their state before calling, they are under the power and influence of Satan, the strong man armed, who keeps possession of them, by whom they are kept in bondage, and led captive by him at his will; but when effectually called, they are taken out of his hands, and are turned from the power of Satan unto God, and are delivered from the power of darkness, and are translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son, where they are Christ's free-men. . . . They are called and allowed to make use of a liberty of access to God, through Christ, by one Spirit, and to enjoy all the privileges of the gospel, and the immunities of a gospel church-state, being fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God.

Now within the scope of God’s effectual call unto salvation, there are several aspects of God’s work of saving grace. Included under the heading of effectual call, there is God’s grace in **illumination** of the sinner unto salvation. Let us consider this work of God in bringing a person to conversion to Jesus Christ.

2. God’s grace in the illumination of the sinner unto his salvation.

When God extends this inward, effectual call to salvation, He calls His people to understand and to value spiritual reality, spiritual truth. We might consider Peter’s words, “But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that you should show forth the praises of him **who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light**.” This speaks about God dispelling the ignorance and the absence of interest or appreciation of a true understanding of one’s sin, of God’s righteousness, and God’s certain judgment. It speaks of an inward awakening to the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ and how one can come to know God through Him.

Now when we speak of God's illumination of the elect sinner unto salvation, let us remember that God is able, and does frequently illuminate people to spiritual truth, but *that illumination does not result in salvation*. God can reveal to people who never become saved understanding of His ways as well as insight into their own spiritual needy condition, and yet they are never converted to Christ.

The passage that bears this out is **Hebrews 6:1-6**. Let us turn there.

Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ²of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. ³And this we will do if God permits.

⁴For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

Verses 1 through 3 show the writer's expressed desire for his readers to grow in the Christian faith. He wrote, "*Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity.*" Although he had said they could not handle hard to understand teaching, nevertheless, they were to push forward. No purpose was served in going over the basics again. Why? Perhaps the best way to bring them to maturity was to "stretch" them (challenge them) with harder to learn material.

Then in **verses 4 through 6** the writer says that they needed to go forward anyway, for it is useless to rehash the basics before those who have turned away from Christ, for it is impossible to renew them to repentance.

⁴For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame.

This is the reason in the writer's mind why it is pointless to lay the foundation again, apostates are irrecoverable. Many Christians are troubled by this passage. Various teachings are presented, some being these:

- 1) One who has come to true saving faith can lose his salvation.
- 2) This is only a hypothetical situation. In other words, if it were possible (but it isn't), that if anyone experienced these spiritual blessings and they did fall away (but they wouldn't), then it would be impossible to renew them to repentance.
- 3) Apostates were never truly born again. God has abandoned them to their sin and will not reclaim them. There is no use for you to try and do so.
- 4) Apostates were never truly born again, humanly speaking, they cannot be reclaimed. God may bring them recovery if He so wills, but it is not likely.

The first two are not true. Either the third or fourth suggestion is the right interpretation.

Now we read of four characteristics of these apostates. Note they appear so much like the real thing; There was a time you could not distinguish them from true Christians. They seemed to experience everything that true Christians experience and yet they were never saved. We know this from the statement of 6:9, in which the writer says of his readers, "But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, yes things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner." Whoever these ones were described in verses 4 through 6, they did not have the "things that accompany salvation."

What had these "lost" people experienced?

- 1) "Who have once been enlightened"
- 2) "They had tasted the heavenly gift"
- 3) They "had been made partakers (sharers) of the Holy Spirit"
- 4) They "have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come."

Some would argue that these four characteristics could only be said of true Christians, who have been born again of the Holy Spirit. But this is not so. The first speaks of God enlightening people to truth. Now every true Christian has been enlightened, but there are occasions when God also enlightens non-Christians to spiritual truth. One can be enlightened and yet not born again. Second, “tasting of the heavenly gift” could also be said to be the experience of some unbelievers. They have come to some knowledge of Jesus Christ. They have tasted of the Lord and have proved that He is good. Just as there were some of the Israelite spies who had gone into the land and had enjoyed some of its fruit, but nevertheless later failed to enter God’s rest, so it is that there are unregenerate people who have experienced many of God’s blessings but fail to be converted in the end. But what of having been made “partakers of the Holy Spirit?” It does not say that they were born again by the Spirit, nor does it say they had been sanctified by the Spirit, nor indwelt by the Spirit nor sealed by the spirit. But they had been partakers of some of the graces of the spirit, the gifts of the spirit, the blessings of the Spirit, and yet they remained unconverted. Paul wrote that one can be greatly blessed and gifted by the Spirit, and yet be unsaved (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1ff). And lastly, they had “tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.” This could be said of Judas Iscariot, though he was no converted man. These people are may have these graces of the Spirit and yet be as:

- Simon Magus (Acts 6)
- Stony ground hearers (Matt. 13:21)
- Heretical teachers (Jude 4; 2 Peter) -- Hymenaeus, Philetus, Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17)

Unregenerate people may:

- have a form of godliness (2 Tim. 2:5)
- pray frequently and long (Matt. 23:14)
- fast often (Luke 18:12)
- hear the word gladly (Mark 6:20)
- be zealous for the work of God (Matt. 7:21ff.)
- be very knowledgeable about the Word of God (John 3)
- teach others the Word of God (Jude, 2 Pet.)

Why would God illuminate people to gospel truth and truth about their lost condition and yet not bring them to experience salvation? We cannot always know the ways of God’s providence, but we can say that one reason God deals with people in this way is so that those who are truly Christian might not become complacent and careless about their own walk with the Lord. Presumption of salvation is dangerous. Some people believe that they have solid basis for their assurance of salvation, but actually it is just presumption. When Christians see others about them seem to go far in the way of the Lord, but then fall away, it causes them to be more careful and watchful of their own souls.

But thankfully *there is God’s illumination of the sinner that does result in salvation*. When God brings salvation to an individual, *God Himself teaches that person that He is a sinner and that Christ is the Savior*. This is not to take away from the human instrument of the preacher or Christian witness. But when the individual whom God intends to save hears the Word of God taught or preached, and if it is in God’s timing, God Himself opens the eyes of that person to understand the reality and importance of the truth.

We might liken this grace of illumination to the anointing of God that we read about in **1 John 1:27**:

But the *anointing* which you have received of him abides in you, and you need not that any man teach you: but as the same *anointing* teaches you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, you shall abide in him.

3. God’s grace in the illumination of the sinner is credited to all three persons of the Blessed Holy Trinity.

God the Father gives spiritual understanding to sinners. The Son of God illuminates sinners. And of course the Holy Spirit reveals to the sinner spiritual truths regarding God and the sinner himself.

Consider these verses that speak of **God the Father** illuminating people with regard to salvation.

John 6:44, 45 -- “No man can come to me, *except the Father that sent me draw him*: and I will raise him up in the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘And they shall all be taught of God.’ *Every one that hath heard from the Father, and hath learned, cometh unto me.*”

Matt. 16:17 -- “And Jesus answered and said unto him, ‘Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for *flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father* who is in heaven.’”

2 Cor. 4:4ff, “In whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them. For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake. *For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.*”

But spiritual illumination is also attributed to **God the Son, Jesus Christ**.

Luke 10:21-22. “In that hour Jesus rejoiced in the Spirit and said, ‘I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. ²²All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, *and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.*”

The non-christian is characterized as having spiritual blindness. This can only be cured by the Great Physician who has an eye-salve that may bring healing. Revelation 3:18 our Lord said, “I counsel thee to buy of me eye-salve, that thou mayest see.” We also read in 1 John 5:20 of the illumination the Son of God gives His people: “We know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true; and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ: this is the true God, and eternal life.”

And of course spiritual illumination is also attributed to **God the Holy Spirit**.

1 Corinthians 2:9. “But as it is written: ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.’ *But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit*. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.”

4. The nature of God’s grace in the illumination of the sinner unto his salvation.

First, let us recognize that the grace of God in illumination that results in salvation is a sovereign act of God’s power that is as great as His work of creation of this world and the universe. In **2 Corinthians 4:1-6** we read of the Apostle Paul’s work of the ministry of the Word of God used by God to convert sinners unto Christ.

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. ²But we have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God’s word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone’s conscience in the sight of God. ³And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. ⁴In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. ⁵For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ⁶For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Paul was contrasting his ministry of the Word of God with the deceptive and flawed ministry of false teachers. They had corrupted the Word of God before the people. They sought to manipulate people’s feelings and actions, in order to gain their confidence and secure their following. But Paul would have none of their methods and he rejected their message. He would be faithful to proclaim the Word of God fully and faithfully. He would not be silent on doctrines because they would upset some people, and turn them away. He would

speaking boldly and clearly the Word of God. Oh yes, some would not understand, would not receive the gospel, but that would not be his fault of having not spoken clearly. It was because the devil had them blinded so as to prevent their understanding that was the cause of their indifference or opposition. But then Paul declared that through His gospel, when God purposes to save a sinner, God would perform a great work of illumination of that sinner. Just as God had originally spoke His Word, “Let there be light” and light flooded a dark world and universe, so God performs a great creative act in revealing the truth of the gospel to a poor lost sinner blinded by the devil, God imparts “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” resulting in his salvation.

Secondly, let us recognize that spiritual illumination is more than a knowledge of biblical words and theological ideas. The essential message of the Bible is readily understandable by all. This is called the *perspicuity* (“clarity”) of the Scriptures. The reason that the Protestant Reformers of the 16th century desired greatly that the Bible be translated into the language of the common people was that they believed strongly that the common people could understand the Bible. This does not negate the need for teachers of the Word, but it does mean that reasonable readers of the Scripture may understand its message because God has put it in an understandable form in our Bibles. People may obtain knowledge of biblical ideas and theological concepts of sin, salvation, the person and work of Christ apart from the work of the Holy Spirit. ***Jesus Christ must be seen and embraced as Lord and Savior.***

Thirdly, let us recognize that spiritual illumination is both through the Word of God and the operation of the Holy Spirit. What we have already considered certainly affirms this reality. **John Flavel** (18th c.) wrote of this in his classic book, *The Fountain of Life Opened*. Here is the first of several quotes that we will call forth from this book. Referring to the passage in 2 Corinthians 4 which we read above, he wrote:

It implies the utter impotency of man to open his own heart, and thereby make the word effectual to his own conversion and salvation. He that at first said, “Let there be light,” and it was so, must shine into our hearts, or they will never be savingly enlightened (2 Cor. 4:4, 6). A double misery lies upon a great part of mankind, viz. Impotency and Pride. They have not only lost the liberty and freedom of their wills, but with it have so far lost their understanding and humility as not to own it. But, alas! Man is become a most impotent creature by the fall; so far from being able to open his own heart, that he cannot know the things of the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14), cannot believe (John 6:44), cannot obey (Rom. 8:7), cannot speak one good word (Matt. 12:34), cannot think one good thought (2 Cor. 3:5), cannot do one good act (John 15:5). O what a helpless, shiftless thing is a poor sinner! Suitably to this state of impotence, conversion is in scripture called regeneration (John 3:3), a resurrection from the dead (Eph. 2:5), a creation (Eph. 2:10), a victory, (2 Cor. 10:5). Which does not only imply man to be purely passive in his conversion to God, but a reticency, and opposition made to that power which goes forth from God to recover him.

Thirdly, let us recognize that spiritual illumination may be understood as involving two stages. Some have referred to both external illumination and internal illumination.

a. External illumination occurs when God gives understanding of His Word.

This is a work of the Holy Spirit in which He reveals the reality and the significance of biblical truth to individuals. Either while reading the Bible or hearing the Bible taught, God enables people to understand through His work of illumination.

This illumination may be quite remarkable and have quite a significant impact on a person. The Holy Spirit opens the eyes of a person to see the truth of what God says about sin, God’s righteousness, and the certainty of God’s judgment. The person is made vividly aware of the person of Christ and the way of salvation through Him. This person because the truth is so vivid may embrace it, or so it would seem. He may do many things to show that He “believes” what he has been made to understand.

But *something more is yet needed* for salvation. For a person can go so far as even being instructed by the Holy Spirit Himself, and yet be short of true salvation. Paul wrote,

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing. (1 Cor. 13:2)

Peter wrote of false teachers in the church who had been ordained to condemnation, who had, nevertheless, encountered a measure of moral reformation in their lives through the knowledge of Jesus Christ, yet they were still unsaved. We read in **2 Peter 2:20f**,

For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, they are again entangled therein, and overcome, the latter end is worse with them than the beginning. ²¹For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. (2Pe 2:1 NKJ)

So you see that God must do more than merely help people to understand the *truth intellectually and emotionally*.

b. Internal illumination occurs when God gives understanding of His Word so as to transform a person.

God causes his elect one to see the reality and the relevance of what God says respecting his sin, his need for salvation, his need for repentance, and his remedy that is in Christ alone. This internal illumination is evident when the knowledge of the gospel produces a true turning from sin unto Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. This person is convicted of personal sin. This person comes to understand that Christ is more than just “a” savior. He confesses, “Jesus is my Lord and Savior.”

We see clearly that the Lord Jesus illuminates people to truth in the account of our Lord on the day of His resurrection when He met and spoke with His disciples. In **Luke 24:27** we read that our Lord conducted a Bible study with two of His disciples who were traveling to the village of Emmaus “And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.” This would be an example of the *external* illumination that the Lord gives His people.² But we read later that our Lord met with the disciples in Jerusalem. We read that then our Lord gave them a more full understanding of the truth of these matters. **Luke 24:44f** read, “He said to them, ‘These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ *And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.* This is an *internal*, and inward comprehension in which the relevance and importance of the truth of the Scriptures.

John Flavel wrote of the need and importance of this internal illumination of God to the sinner:

And indeed, there is but little excellency in all those petty notions which furnish the lips with discourse, unless by a sweet and powerful influence they draw the conscience and will to the obedience of Christ. Light in the mind is necessarily antecedent to the sweet and heavenly motions and elevations of the affections: For the farther any man stands from the light of truth, the farther he must needs be from the heat of comfort. Heavenly quickening are begotten in the heart, while the sun of righteousness spreads the beams of truth into the understanding, and the soul sits under those its wings; yet all the light of the gospel spreading and diffusing itself into the mind, can never savingly open and change the heart, without another act of Christ upon it; and what that is, the text informs you; “Then opened he their understandings, that they might understand the scriptures.”³

² Of course we may assume that the Lord was also working inwardly in these two disciples at this time to give true understanding of the Scriptures.

³ John Flavel, *The Fountain of Life Opened*. The quotations we have provided are from chapter 10, in which he set forth the prophetic office of Jesus Christ.

Both internal and external illumination is necessary. One might describe this need as the importance of informing the mind, but also the necessity of informing the heart. Again, John Flavel wrote of the Lord Jesus illuminating the two disciples on the road to Emmaus:

Christ's act upon their understandings: He opened their understandings. By understanding is not here meant the mind only, in opposition to the heart, will, and affections, but these were opened by and with the mind. The mind is to the heart, as the door to the house: what comes in to the heart, comes in at the understanding, which is introductive to it; and although truths sometimes go no farther than the entry, never penetrate the hearts, yet, here, this effect is undoubtedly included.

Expositors make this expression parallel to that in Acts 16:14. "The Lord opened the heart of Lydia." And it is well observed, that it is one thing to open the scriptures, that is, to expound them, and give the meaning of them, as Paul is said to do in Acts 18:3, and another thing to open the mind or heart, as it is here. There are, as a learned man truly observes, two doors of the soul barred against Christ; the understanding by ignorance; and the heart by hardness: both these are opened by Christ. The former is opened by the preaching of the gospel, the other by the internal operation of the Spirit. The former belongs to the first part of Christ's prophetic office, opened in the foregoing sermon: the latter, to that special internal part of his prophetic office, to be opened in this.

And that it was not a naked act upon their minds only, but that their hearts and minds did work in fellowship, being both touched by this act of Christ, is evident enough by the effects mentioned, verse 52, 53. "They returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple, praising and blessing God." It is confessed, that before this time Christ had opened their hearts by conversion; and this opening is not to be understood simply, but *secundum quid*, in reference to those particular truths, in which, till now, they were not sufficiently informed, and so their hearts could not be duly affected with them. They were very dark in their apprehensions of the death and resurrection of Christ; and consequently their hearts were sad and dejected about that which had befallen him, ver. 17. But when he opened the scriptures and their understandings and hearts together, then things appeared with another face, and they returned, blessing and praising God.⁴

5. Spiritual Illumination is an act of God's grace through the instrument of His Word being taught and preached.

Revelation speaks of God revealing Himself by imparting His Word. Illumination speaks of God revealing Himself by giving understanding of the Word He has already given. You are not going to learn about God as to what you are to believe or as to how you are to live, but through His giving you understanding of the Word that He has already given to us in the Scriptures. As the prophet said, we say,

To the law and to the testimony (i.e. the Scriptures); if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. (Isa. 8:20)

Sometimes the grace of illumination may come *gradually*; at other times God grants a *sudden*, unveiling of truth to the soul. When we were pastoring in Munich, Germany, I had the privilege of observing God's work of grace in people from different cultures and backgrounds. Some would seem to come suddenly and remarkably to the truth about Jesus Christ, but others did not. I observed Germans, for example, as being rather slow and methodical in the manner that they came to truth. A German non-Christian would visit church hear a sermon, go away and think upon it. He would ask questions. He would perhaps go to others who taught differently and compare and consider carefully what he himself believed. But after careful and sometimes prolonged consideration, he would step forward and commit himself to Jesus Christ, embracing the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the gospel. And his commitment was a solid one and he stayed faithful to the things of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Ibid.

But there would be others, and Americans would be among them, who seemed to become quite enthused with a single exposure to scriptural truth. It is as though they were ignorant before coming to church, and when they home they did so having a whole new world opened to them. God works in all kinds of people in different ways to different degrees.

The gradual or sudden coming to spiritual truth through God's grace of illumination is reflected in Paul's praying for the Christians in the church at Ephesus. He wrote to them these words:

¹⁵Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: ¹⁷***that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, ¹⁸the eyes of your understanding being enlightened;*** that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power (Eph. 1:15-19)

Paul wrote, *"I do not cease...making mention of you in my prayers that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him."* The phrase "knowledge of Him" may be somewhat misleading. We tend to be rather Greek in our thinking rather than Hebrew. The Greeks focused on obtaining an *intellectual knowledge about* things. When we look at this phrase we might think it is referring to knowledge *about* God. The Hebrews' concern was for *relational knowledge*. The emphasis is on knowing God rather than knowing about God. Paul was praying that God would give them a realization of their relationship to God. He prayed that *"that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him."* He saw that their greatest need was that they understand more fully their relationship with God. This remains our greatest need. *"This is eternal life, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent"* (John 17:3).

Now notice, we see from **verse 17** that if a Christian is to know God, God must reveal Himself. God cannot be found or discovered; God must reveal Himself in order to be known. This is why Paul was praying to God--that God might give them an understanding of Himself. This is the grace of *illumination*.

We see here that God illuminates people in two ways so that they may know Him more fully. Paul prays that God would do so in both ways for these new Christians.

a. Paul prayed that God would give them a spirit of wisdom. This would be that understanding of one's relationship with God that gradually deepens as he/she learns the Word of God. This is an accumulated knowledge of our relationship attained through the prayerful study and hearing of God's word. Never study the Bible without having offered prayer first. Never attempt to listen to God's Word taught or preached without first having prayed that God would give you a spirit of wisdom so that you may understand the truth of His Word when it is taught. We are to pray as the psalmist, *"Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law"* (Psa. 119:18).

b. Paul prayed that God would give them a spirit of revelation. How does this differ from a "spirit of wisdom?" Whereas a spirit of wisdom is a gradual accumulation of knowledge through hearing, thinking, and reflection, *a spirit of revelation is a sudden, perhaps astounding apprehension and comprehension of God and one's relationship to Him*. It is a sudden enlargement of understanding that impacts the mind and heart. It is spiritually to your understanding like it is visually when you come forth from the trees and see a vast panorama before you that would almost overwhelm you.

The Greek word translated "*revelation*" is *apokalypseos (ἀποκαλύψεως)*, the same word used for the last book of the Bible, the Revelation. This is not a reference to dreams and visions; rather, it is the sudden awareness of God that can only be experienced through to prayer. The idea is reflected in **Job 42:5**, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You." Job had obtained a fresh understanding of his relationship with God only due to God having revealed Himself to Job. In the same way, Paul wanted God to show these new believers all that they were and deserved due to their sin, but what they had indeed received fully and freely by His grace through Jesus Christ. If these new believers were enabled to see these truths, they

would be forever be firmly planted in the faith and set on a course that would lead them unto their eternal blessed destiny. This was so important to Paul that he restated his prayerful activity for these believers later in chapter three. We read in **3:14ff**,

For this reason *I bow my knees* to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, *that He would grant you*, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner m that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, *being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend* with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – *to know the love of Christ* which passes knowledge; *that you may be filled with all the fullness of God*.

And so, Paul, once having heard of the new faith of the Ephesians began to pray that God would give them a more full comprehension of who they were in sin when God came to them in grace and saved them through His grace. Paul desired that that their “eyes might be enlightened” by God to behold these great and mighty things. If this were to occur, they would never be the same. As one once described this:

If the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of God be conferred, then the scales would fall from the moral vision, and the cloudy haze that hovers around it melts away. It is as if a man were taken during the night to a lofty mountain shrouded in vapor and darkness, but morning breaks, the sun rises, the mist departs, rolls into curling wreaths and disappears, and the bright landscape unfolds itself to his delighted vision (John Eadie, 19th c.).

Since all that we have said today speaks of the need of God’s work of grace in giving us understanding and applying the truth to minds and hearts, do you see the futility of resorting to other means other than the plain and clear proclamation of the Word to secure some kind of response or commitment to Christ? The Bible is the only sufficient means by which God accomplishes His work in His people. All other gimmicks, programs, methods, are ineffectual substitutes that only delude people into thinking that they are spiritual and have some kind of relationship with Jesus Christ. But even in all of our reading and teaching and proclaiming, we need the blessed grace of our triune God to intervene and do a great work of converting the soul, or that soul will remain dead to the things of Jesus Christ. How dependent we are on the work of the Holy Spirit in the application of the Word of God to our hearers! May God give us confidence and boldness and conviction to resort to His instrument of His Holy Word even as we rely on His grace to accomplish His purposes in our lives.

But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. (1 Pet. 5:10)

Extract from
The Fountain of Life Opened
by John Flavel (1627-1691)

For your benefit, I have included the following extract from John Flavel’s *The Fountain of Life Opened*, the book from which I quoted above. Here are his practical words of advice to the sinner in need of conversion when reflecting on the prophetic office of Jesus Christ to reveal salvation to the needy sinner:

Inference 1. If this be the work and office of Jesus Christ, to open the understandings of men; hence we infer the miseries that lie upon those men, whose understandings, to this day, Jesus Christ has not opened; of

whom we may say, as it is in Deuteronomy 24:4, "To this day Christ has not given them eyes to see." Natural blindness, whereby we are deprived of the light of this world, is sad; but spiritual blindness is much more so. See how dolefully their case is represented in 2 Corinthians 4:3 and 4: "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: whose eyes the God of this world has blinded, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them:" he means a total and final concealment of the saving power of the word from them. Why, what if Jesus Christ withhold it, and will not be a prophet to them, what is their condition? Truly no better than lost men. It is hid "*tois apollumenois*", to them that are to perish, or be destroyed. This blindness, like the covering of the face, or tying the handkerchief over the eyes, is in order to their turning off into hell. More particularly, because the point is of deep concernment, let us consider,

The judgment inflicted, and that is spiritual blindness. A sore misery indeed! Not an universal ignorance of all truths, O no! in natural and moral truths they are oftentimes acute, and sharp sighted men; but in that part of knowledge which wraps up eternal life (John 17:2), there they are utterly blinded: as it is said of the Jews, upon whom this misery lies, that blindness in part is happened to Israel. They are learned and knowing persons in other matters, but they know not Jesus Christ; there is the grand and sad defect.

The subject of this judgement, the mind, which is the eye of the soul. If it were put upon the body, it would not be so considerable; this falls immediately upon the soul, the noblest part of man, and upon the mind, the highest and noblest faculty of the soul, whereby we understand, think, and reason. This in scripture is called "pneuma", the spirit, the intellectual, rational faculty, which the philosophers call "*to hegemonikon*", the leading directive faculty; which is to the soul what the natural eye is to the body. Now the soul being the most active and restless thing in the world, always working, and its leading, directive power blind, judge what a sad and dangerous state such a soul is in; just like a fiery, highmettled horse, whose eyes are out, furiously carrying his rider up on rocks, pits and dangerous precipices.

I remember Chrysostom, speaking of the loss of a soul, saith that the loss of a member of the body is nothing to it; for, saith he, If a man lose an eye, ear, hand or foot, there is another to supply its want: *Omnia Deus dedit duplicia*, "God has given us those members double;" *animam vero unam*, "but he has not given us two souls," that if one be lost, yet the other may be saved. Surely it were better for thee, reader, to have every member of thy body made the seat and subject of the most exquisite racking torments, than for spiritual blindness to befall thy soul. Moreover,

Consider the indiscernableness of this judgement to the soul on whom it lies: they know it not, no more than a man knows that he is asleep. Indeed it is "the spirit of a deep sleep poured out upon them from the Lord" (Isa. 29:10), like that which befell Adam when God opened his side, and took out a rib. This renders their misery the more remediless: "Because ye say you see, therefore your sin remaineth" (John 9:41). Once more, consider the tendency and effects of it. What does this tend to but eternal ruin? For hereby we are cut off from the only remedy. The soul that is so blinded, can never see sin, nor a Saviour; but, like the Egyptians, during the palpable darkness, sits still, and moves not after its own recovery. And as ruin is that to which it tends, so in order thereto, it renders all the ordinances and duties under which that soul comes, altogether useless and ineffectual to its salvation. He comes to the word, and sees others melted by it, but to him it signifies nothing. O what a heavy stroke of God is this! Most wretched is their case, to whom Jesus Christ will not apply this eye-salve, that they may see. Did you but understand the misery of such a state, if Christ should say to you, as he did to the blind man (Matt. 20:33). That wilt thou that I should do for thee?" You would return as he did, "Lord, that my eyes may be opened."

Inference 2. If Jesus Christ be the great Prophet of the church, then surely he will take special care both of the church and the under shepherds appointed by him to feed them: else both the objects and instruments upon and by which he executes his office, must fail and consequently this glorious office be in vain. Hence he is said "to walk among the golden candlesticks" (Rev. 1:13; 2:1), "to hold the stars in his right hand." Jesus Christ instrumentally opens the understandings of men by preaching of the gospel; and whilst there is an elect soul to be converted, or a convert to be farther illuminated, means shall not fail to accomplish it by.

Inference 3. Hence you that are yet in darkness, may be directed to whom to apply yourselves for saving knowledge. It is Christ that has the sovereign eye-salve, that can cure your blindness; he only has the key

of the house of David; he opens, and no man shutteth. O that I might persuade you to set yourselves in his way, under the ordinances, and cry to him, "Lord, that my eyes may be opened." Three things are marvelously encouraging to you so to do God the Father has put him into this office, for the cure of such as you be (Isa. 49:6). "I will give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation to the end of the earth." This may furnish you with an argument to plead for a cure. Why do you not go to God, and say, Lord, didst thou give Jesus Christ a commission to open the blind eyes? Behold me, Lord, such a one am I, a poor, dark, ignorant soul. Didst thou give him to be thy salvation to the ends of the earth? No place nor people excluded from the benefit of that right; and shall I still remain in the shadow of death? O that unto me he might be a saving light also? The best and most excellent work that ever thou wroughtest, brings thee no glory till it comes into the light! O let me see and admire it!

It is encouraging to think, that Jesus Christ has actually opened the eyes of them that are as dark and ignorant as you are. He has revealed those things to babes, that have been hid from the wise and prudent (Matt. 11:25). "The law of the Lord is perfect, making wise the simple" (Psa. 19:7). And if you look among those whom Christ has enlightened, you will not find "many wise after the flesh, many mighty or noble; but the foolish, weak, base, and despised; these are they on whom he has glorified the riches of his grace" (1 Cor. 1:26f).

And is it not yet farther encouraging to you that hitherto he has mercifully continued you under the means of light? Why is not the light of the gospel put out? Why are times and seasons of grace continued to you, if God have no farther design of good to your souls? Be not therefore discouraged, but wait on the Lord in the use of means, that you may yet be healed.

Question. If you ask, what can we do to put ourselves into the way of the Spirit, in order to such a cure?

Solution. I say, though you cannot do any thing, that can make the gospel effectual, yet the Spirit of God can make those means you are capable of using effectual, if he please to concur with them. And it is a certain truth, that your inability to do what is above your power, does no ways excuse you from doing what is within the compass of your power to do. I know no act that is saving, can be done without the concurrence of spiritual grace; yea, and no act that has a remote order and tendency thereto, without a more general concurrence of God's assistance: but herein he is not behind hand with you. Let me therefore advise,

That you diligently attend upon an able, faithful, and searching ministry. Neglect no opportunity God affords you; for how know you but that may be the time of mercy to your soul? If he that lay so many years at the pool of Bethesda, had been wanting but that hour when the angel came down and troubled the waters, he had not been healed.

Satisfy not yourselves with hearing, but consider what ye hear. Avow time to reflect upon what God has spoken to you. What power is there in man more excellent, or more appropriate to the reasonable nature, than its reflective and self-considering power? There is little hope of any good to be done upon your souls, till you begin to go alone, and become thinking men and women: Here all conversion begins. I know, a severer task can hardly be imposed upon a carnal heart. It is a hard thing to bring a man and himself together upon this account: but this must be, if ever the Lord do your souls good (Psalm 4:4). "Commune with your own hearts."

3. Labour to see, and ingenuously confess the insufficiency of all your other knowledge to do you good. What if you had never so much skill and knowledge in other mysteries? What if you be never so well acquainted with the letter of the scripture? What if you had an angelical illumination? This can never save thy soul. No, all thy knowledge signifies nothing till the Lord show thee by special light the deplorable sight of thy own heart, and a saving sight of Jesus Christ, thy only remedy.

Inference 4. Since then there is a common light, and special saving light, which none but Christ can give, it is therefore the concernment, of every one of you to try what your light is. "We know, (saith the apostle, 1 Cor. 8:1) that we all have knowledge." O but what, and whence is it? Is it the light of life springing from

Jesus Christ, that bright and morning star, or only such as the devils and damned have? These lights differ in their very kind and natures. The one is heavenly, supernatural, and spiritual, the other earthly, and natural, the effect of a better constitution or education (James 3:15-17)

They differ most apparently in their effects and operations. The light that comes in a special way from Christ, is humbling, abasing, and soul-emptying light: by it a man sees the vileness of his own nature and practice, which begets self-loathing in him; but natural light, on the contrary, puffs up, exalts, and makes the heart swell with self-conceitedness (1 Cor. 8:1).

The light of Christ is practical and operative, still urging the soul, yet lovingly constraining it to obedience. No sooner did it shine into Paul's heart, but presently he asks, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:13). It brought forth fruit on the Colossians, from the first day it came to them (Col. 1:6); but the other spends itself in impractical notions, and is detained in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). The light of Christ is powerfully transformative of its subjects, changing the man, in whom it is, into the same image, from glory to glory (2 Cor. 3:18). But common light leaves the heart as dead, as carnal and sensual, as if no light at all were in it.

In a word, all saving light endears Jesus Christ to the soul; and as it could not value him before it saw him, so when once he appears to the soul in his own light, he is appreciated and endeared unspeakably: then none but Christ; all is but dung, that he may win Christ: none in heaven but him, nor in earth desirable in comparison of him. But no such effect flows from natural common knowledge.

They differ in their issues. Natural common knowledge vanisheth, as the apostle speaks (1 Cor. 13:8). It is but a Mayflower, and dies in its month. "Does not their excellency that is in them go away?" (Job 4:21). But this that springs from Christ is perfected, not destroyed by death: it springs up into everlasting life. The soul in which it is subjected, carries it away with it into glory (John 17:2); this light is life eternal. Now turn in, and compare yourselves with these rules: let not false light deceive you.

Inference 5. Lastly, how are they obliged to love, serve, and honour Jesus Christ, whom he has enlightened with the saving knowledge of himself? O that with hands and hearts lifted up to heaven, ye would adore the free grace of Jesus Christ to your souls? How many round about you have their eyes closed, and their hearts shut up! How many are in darkness, and there are like to remain, till they come to the blackness of darkness, which is reserved for them? O what a pleasant thing is it for your eyes to see the light of this world! But what is it for the eye of your mind to see God in Christ? To see such ravishing sights as the objects of faith are? And to have such a pledge as this given you of the blessed visions of glory? For in this light you shall see light. Bless God, and boast not: rejoice in your light, but be proud of it; and beware ye sin not against the best and highest light in this world. If God were so incensed against the Heathens for disobeying the light of nature, what is it in you to sin with eyes clearly illuminated with the purest light that shines in this world? You know, God charges it upon Solomon (1 Kings 11:9) that he turned from the way of obedience after the Lord, had appeared, to him twice. Jesus Christ intended when he opened your eyes, that your eyes should direct your feet. Light is a special help to obedience, and obedience is a singular help to increase your light.
