

## Five Steps to Maturity

by Ray C. Stedman

The purpose of the revelation God has given us is to make us grow up in Christ. It finds the fulfillment of its function in you and me. If it is not accomplishing this, then it was wasted as far as we are concerned. Its whole purpose is to keep us from “being any longer children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” {cf, Eph 4:14} which blows, and instead to make us stable, mature, able, effective instruments of the grace of God – to make us grow to spiritual maturity so that we might be bodies wholly filled and flooded with God himself. A magnificent statement of what Scripture is for is found in Paul's prayer in the third chapter of Ephesians, Verses 14-19:

**For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. {Eph 3:14-19 RSV}**

We have seen in the previous two messages that the Old Testament's function in this is preparation, and the New Testament's function is realization. It is impossible to enter fully into the realization until you have entered adequately into the preparation. Right here is where many, many Christians fail. They try to get everything out of the New Testament and never – or seldom – go to the Old Testament. You simply cannot appropriate all that is in the New Testament without the preparation of the heart which comes from the Old Tes-

tament. So we desperately need both of these mighty revelations of God.

Now we will return to the Old Testament and see how each of its divisions contributes to this work of preparing our hearts to receive and to realize the fullness that is available to us in Jesus Christ.

The first division consists of the first five books of the Old Testament – books with which we are familiar – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They are called the *Pentateuch* in Latin, which simply means “five books” – the five books of Moses.

How many of us have begun to read these books?

How many of us have finished them?

Usually we start off very well in Genesis and move on into Exodus, don't we? But about in Leviticus – where we get into all the strange requirements of the Law – we bog down, and we never quite get through into Numbers and Deuteronomy, much less into Joshua. This is the story of so many of us.

It reminds me of a cartoon I saw recently. A woman is walking by a movie theater, on the marquee of which is an advertisement for the film *The Ten Commandments*. She looks up at it and says, “Oh, yes, I've seen the picture, but I haven't read the book.” Most of us fall into that category. We have seen a great many of the motion pictures Hollywood gives us, but too seldom have we ever read the books.

Why do we bog down? It isn't because the Pentateuch isn't instructive or helpful. In many ways it is the most helpful part of the Bible. My own Christian life has been more greatly strengthened by reading the Pentateuch than perhaps any other portion of Scripture. Why do we bog down in it? Largely because we are reading without vi-

sion. We don't know why we are reading it. We don't know what to expect from it. We don't know what to look for. We read the text as it appears – a simple narrative which sometimes is interesting and sometimes gets very complex and complicated – without realizing why it says what it says or what it is driving at. We have very little motivation to probe into it and to find out the marvelous secrets which are there. And that is the purpose of this series of studies – to climb up on a mountaintop, look out over the whole surface of the land and get a bird's-eye view, so that we might see what we are going to run into, and why. We want to do that now with this section – the Pentateuch.

We begin with **Genesis**. The name means *beginnings*, and this is certainly the book of beginnings. It is the story of the beginning of our universe, the beginning of the human race, the beginning of sin, the beginning of civilization, and it is a fascinating record of the origins of the physical things we find in such abundance around about us.

The book opens with an awareness of the greatest material fact in all of human life, a fact we are all subconsciously aware of every moment of our life – the fact that we are living in a universe. There isn't a moment any one of us forgets this. We are aware that we don't live life all alone. We are living on a planet, shared with millions of other human beings like ourselves. And if we know anything at all about modern science, we are aware that our planet is part of a solar system. In some strange, mysterious way, this whole mass of earth upon which we are seated is winding its way on a prearranged path about the sun, circling continuously, precisely on schedule. We are also told by the astronomers that our whole solar system itself – the sun with all its planets – is making its way through a great whirling body of stars called a galaxy – a vast, almost incredibly immense system of stars, some three hundred thousand light-years across. And this galaxy is itself moving at incredible speed through the vastness of space in conjunction with millions and, some astronomers say, even billions of other galaxies like ours. Whenever we look up into the night sky and see the glory of the stars, an awesomeness settles upon our spirit, and we become very much aware we live in a universe.

The Bible opens with that majestic, amazing recognition – man is part of a universe (Gen. 1:1):

**In the beginning God created the heavens [in all their vastness] and the earth.  
{Gen 1:1 RSV}**

What a strange conjunction – to put all the heavens in one lump and our tiny planet Earth in the other! Then the book moves right on to tell us about man – insignificant man – this tiny speck of life living on a minor planet in the midst of this unthinkably vast universe. What a strange conjunction! But this brings us face to face with what in many ways is the greatest mystery of our life. David catches it up beautifully in the eighth Psalm. Probably one beautiful summer night he looked up into the glowing heavens above and sang (Verses 3-4):

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
the moon and the stars which thou hast established,  
what is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou dost care for him? {Psa 8:3-4 RSV}**

The God who made it all should visit him? Then, by inspiration, David answers his own question (Psa. 8:6):

**Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands;  
thou hast put all things under his feet  
{Psa 8:6 RSV}**

Thus the Bible begins with the confrontation of the greatest mystery we come up against – the mystery of man in relationship to his universe. Amazingly enough, this is the very theme of science today. It is the theme which has captured the attention of more thinking people the world over than ever before in human history: What is the place of man in relationship to his universe?

Here is where the Bible begins. And it goes on to tell us man is a strange and remarkable creature who was made to be the expression of God's love, the instrument of God, the dwelling place of the Almighty. Man is seen in the opening chapters of Genesis in a marvelous faith-love relationship with God – in communion with him. The verse in Genesis that says God walked in the garden “in the cool of the day” (3:8), rightly translated, should say

God walked in the garden “in the spirit of the day,” i.e., in a spirit of understanding with man – the impartation of God's life in communion. Here we get just a brief glimpse of God's intention for man.

Immediately this is shattered by the story of the fall. Beginning in the third chapter of Genesis, we get the record of the tragedy of unbelief. The Bible begins to confront us immediately with the awful error of faith in the wrong idea – the terrible destruction which can come to human life when man in his ignorance and his blindness begins to put faith in error. It shows us that man is made to be a creature of faith. People say, “I can't believe.” But that is the one thing they can do. It is the one thing human beings are made to do. We cannot help but believe. The question is, “*What* do we believe?”

So here is the story of man in his failure and fall. It is followed immediately by the story of the failure of the first creation and its eventual destruction in the flood.

The rest of Genesis is a picture drawn for us by God of man in his need. It is the story of the lives of four men. You know them well – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

We can think of them as four representative types of personality. One of them is like you. I know whom I am like – Jacob. Jacob fits me to a “T”.

The stories of these men, despite the marvelous lessons of spiritual victory which are involved, are basically given to show us the desperate need in each one's life.

- Abraham's story is the story of the need for a supplier. Here was a man who was always needing somebody to come and deliver something to him that he lacked. He was always short. The modern saying is: “A dime short and an hour late.” That is the story of Abraham's life. He was always in need. It is the story of a man whose need was continually being supplied by God.
- Isaac was a man who had another kind of need. He never ran short. There is no record of a famine in Isaac's life. But he was in need of a stimulator. He loved to just sit. He needed somebody to get him going. So God had to prod him repeatedly to get him moving into the place God wanted him to be. All of us consistently need this kind of stimulation.

- Jacob was a man who was in continual need of a bodyguard, a protector. He was always getting himself into a mess, into difficulty. So all life long he needed somebody to come and get him out of the trouble he got himself into.
- Then we have the marvelous story of Joseph. How different he was from Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob! What an admirable man in many ways! And yet the story of Joseph's life is the story of need – the need of a deliverer. He was always needing to be delivered from situations which were not his own fault, or into which he was placed without any failure on his own part. But he needed to be brought out of them. And his is the story of how God continually delivered him. It ends with the words in which the book of Genesis ends – “a coffin in Egypt.” In the coffin were the bones of Joseph. His last need was to have his body delivered from Egypt and taken up to the Promised Land.

So the whole story of Genesis is a message of the need of man.

Then we come to **Exodus**, which is the story of God's response to man's need. It is the marvelous lesson of redemption. The whole book gathers around three major incidents: the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. The first two of these, the Passover and the crossing of the sea, mark for us the forgiveness and the freedom which God gives – in order to teach us that freedom and forgiveness are wholly God's activity. Man can have no part in either of them.

The first part of the book is the story of how God began to move to set his people free. He arranged the marvelous encounters of Moses with Pharaoh and also the great miracles culminating in the passing over of the angel of death through the land while protecting his people from judgment, as celebrated in the Passover feast. All this is a picture of God at work, setting his people free. They did nothing. They could do nothing. There was nothing for them to do. They could not add to it. They could only receive it.

The crossing of the Red Sea is the story of setting the people free from bondage. They were brought into a new relationship as they left Egypt.

They came out of the land of the shadow of death, passed through the waters safely, and emerged on the other side no longer merely a mob of people but now, for the first time, a nation under God.

What did they run into on the other side of the Red Sea? Sinai and the giving of the Law. This is simply to indicate that when man is redeemed – when he is set free, when he is brought out of the slavery of the bondage of sin, passing by the death of Another into liberty from Egypt – he comes under the control of Another. The giving of the Law is but the expression of the Lordship of God. The message of Exodus is that a new relationship is begun, a new ownership entered into. In First Corinthians 6, Paul expresses the fundamental message of this book in brief form (Verses 19b-20a): “You are not your own; you were bought with a price.”

Next we come to **Leviticus** – and here is where we are likely to bog down. Leviticus is a book of instruction designed to make all that God is available to man, so that all that man is may be available to God. Its theme is access to God. It begins with the story of the Tabernacle, that wonderful building where God dwelt. If we could have climbed to a mountaintop and looked out over the wilderness area where the twelve tribes of Israel were encamped, it would have been a strange and wonderful sight to see this vast assemblage spread out on the plains in perfect order and symmetry, each of the twelve tribes in their particular place. As we walked down the mountain and passed into the camp, we would have come through all the thousands of Israelites until we came to the outer court of the Tabernacle.

Then, going through the great open gate, we would have passed the altar of sacrifice and the brazen laver, and would have come to the door of the Tabernacle itself. Moving through the mysterious and marvelous outer veil, we would have come into the Holy Place, where were the showbread, the altar of incense, and the great golden candelabra. Beyond stood the inner veil, and behind that – if we dared to enter – was the Holy of Holies. The only article in that room was the Ark of the Covenant. That mysterious vehicle was the dwelling place of God, with the mercy seat above it and the two cherubim with their wings covering it. There too, in a marvelous way, shone the Shekinah light of God's glory. It was a place of fearsomeness. The

only one who dared to enter was the high priest – and then only once a year with the blood of the goat of atonement, in order to make atonement for the sins of all the people. All this is a picture of God's dwelling in the midst of his people, showing how they could have fellowship with him.

The book of Leviticus is designed to teach us three major principles:

1. The first is representation. That is, we never would have been permitted into the Holy of Holies, had we been part of Israel. Only the high priest could go in. But when he did, he represented the whole nation. By that representation, the nation began to learn the wonderful principle of appropriating the value of another's work. After all, this is exactly what we are asked to do, isn't it? We are asked to believe Christ died for us, and that we died with him. And all of our victory rests upon our ability to appropriate the work of Another who is our representative. God began to teach this to the world in Leviticus.
2. The second great principle or truth God began to teach was his adequacy. The book opens with the institution of five offerings, each one speaking of Jesus Christ in his death for us, each one showing how a basic need of human life is fully met already in what Christ has done, and all of them together showing us that there is nothing we will ever run into which hasn't already been taken care of. Therefore it is absolute unbelief to come to God and start asking him to do something for us which he hasn't already done. What is necessary is not to plead with him to do something new, but for us to start believing and appropriating what he has already done.
3. The third great truth God began to teach was that all of the representation and all of the adequacy become expressive in our life, become actual in terms of our experience, by the simple act of obedience, of faith in action – faith moving, acting upon what has been done. Leviticus is that book of instruction. If you read it in conjunction with the book of Hebrews, it is one of the most illuminating studies in all of the Bible.

Then we come to **Numbers**, the book of the wilderness of failure. It begins at Kadesh-barnea, right at the edge of the Promised Land. When we get to the end of the book, we are back at Kadesh-barnea again. No progress whatsoever. In between are forty years of wandering in a desert. God's intention for the Hebrews was that they spend forty days between the edge of Egypt and the border of the Land; however, because of unbelief they wandered for forty years – forty years of murmuring, barrenness, loneliness, heat, blistering sand, and of harking back to the “joys” they thought they had known in Egypt and wanting to be back there – barrenness and defeat.

And the amazing thing is that, in spite of all the wonderful instruction they had in Leviticus, and the adequate provision already given to them entirely by God in order that they might enjoy his presence among them, when we read Numbers we see nothing but absolute failure because of the ignorance of the people. This is almost unbelievable!

I can never understand it, but I continually encounter this phenomenon, not only in others but in my own experience. How is it that people can read the Bible for years, go to a Bible school, attend a seminary perhaps, attend a Bible church, give themselves to the teaching, go through various courses, listen to the best of Bible expositors, and yet – sometimes after years of this kind of clear, unequivocal instruction in the truth – remain hopelessly helpless when it comes to walking in victory, as if they hadn't learned anything at all?

I recently talked with a woman who told me that she had sat under a string of great Bible teachers. She had been studying her Bible for years and years. She could list all types of things she knew – could easily pass an examination in Bible knowledge which would stump many Bible institute students. But she had come to me in complete defeat. Her faith was absolutely gone. Her family was falling apart, and her faith had instantly vanished when the pressure began to come upon her. Why? Because there had been no appropriation of all she had learned. She had not acted upon it at all.

This is the story of Numbers. It is the record of the failure of God's people to act on what God had told them. And, as a result, it is the record of their wandering in the wilderness – and also the record of God's fatherly care over them in love despite their human failure, taking care of them despite the grieving of his heart over them.

Finally we come to **Deuteronomy**. The name means “second law.” In Greek, *deuter* means “second,” and *nomos* means “law” – the Second Law. That is an odd name, isn't it? Why was the Law given again? For, as we read the book, we discover that it is indeed a second setting forth of the Law. It begins with a marvelous message by Moses, reviewing all of God's love and blessings to the people. The major part of the book is a resumé of the Law. Then it closes with a wonderful message from Moses, which is a revelation of the marvelous blessings that are in store. But why the Law again?

Well, remember that Paul tells us the Law has a purpose in our lives. In Galatians 3, he says the Law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. It is when the Law says “thou shalt not covet, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not commit adultery,” etc., that we become aware for the first time of the hungering to do these things – and of our rebellious attitude toward anyone who says, “No, you can't.” It is then that we become aware that we not only can't do these things, but that we really don't want to. And that, in turn, makes us cry out in desperation for the Savior, for the Redeemer. So the Law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ. This is really the message of the first two chapters of Romans also.

Ah, but the Law comes in again in Chapter 7 of Romans. Why the second time? Well, the first time was to teach us we are sinful. The second time is to teach us we are helpless. Despite the fact that we have a redeemed nature and we want then to do the will of God, we still can't do it. We were never intended to do anything on our own. We are totally, absolutely helpless. Here, you see, is what God accomplished in the book of Deuteronomy. For forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness, until at last they learned they could do nothing till the old generation died. When the new generation came to be, God reminded them of what he had done, and he gave them the Law again. And instead of responding as they did at Mount Sinai – “All that the Lord has said, we will do” – this time the response of the people was, “We don't have, of ourselves, what it takes to do this.” They were then ready to be led into the land by Joshua. *Joshua* is the Hebrew name of Jesus. *Jesus* is the Greek form.

When we come to the end of the book of Deuteronomy, we find that at last God has prepared his people for that which he wanted to give all along. The whole five books (Pentateuch) of Moses are to bring the people to the edge of the Land. Moses could not take them in. Moses represents the Law. As Paul says in Romans 8:3, "What the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do, God has done in sending his own Son [Jesus (Joshua)], God condemned sin in the flesh" and led them into the Land.

You can see this in just two brief passages from Deuteronomy: Beginning in Chapter 29, Moses exhorts the people to heed the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded him to make with them. Then in Chapter 30, Verses 19 and 20, he closes with these words:

**I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life, that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice, and cleaving to him; for that means life to you {Deut 30:19-20a}**

Or, as the King James Version has it, "for he is thy life." Does that sound familiar to you? That is the New Covenant, isn't it? "For Christ is our life," {cf, Col 3:4 KJV}.

**and length of days, that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. {Deut 30:20b RSV}**

And when you come to the end of the book, you find a marvelous setting forth in beautiful poetry of what God will do with a heart which is ready to rest in the indwelling life of Jesus Christ. Verse 29 of Chapter 33:

**Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you,  
a people saved by the Lord,  
the shield of your help,  
and the sword of your triumph!  
Your enemies shall come fawning to you;  
and you shall tread upon their high  
places." {Deut 33:29 RSV}**

So the book of Deuteronomy closes with the people ready for Joshua.

That is the Pentateuch. These five books give us the pattern of God's program. This pattern is stamped upon almost every page of the Bible. You will find these same five steps over and over again throughout the Scriptures:

- The book of Psalms is divided into five divisions, which agree exactly with these steps.
- The five offerings Israel had to make agree exactly with these five steps.
- The five great feasts which Israel celebrated agree with these steps.
- And each of the Testaments is divided into five sections following this pattern -- Old and New Testaments alike.

Someone has even suggested that perhaps God, wanting us to remember this, gave us five fingers on each hand and five toes on each foot. For the number 5 is stamped throughout the Scriptures, and each time it is a repetition of this pattern that God will follow. It is the pattern God follows in our lives:

- First, an awareness of our need;
- Second, a picture of God's activity in moving to meet that need – his response in redemption;
- Third, the instruction in how to worship, how to approach God;
- Fourth, always inevitably failure on our part to do so; and,
- Fifth, culminating at last in the arrival at the place where self-effort ends and the Law strikes again to crush us in humiliation and helplessness, until we say, "Lord, on my own I can't do a thing." And God says, "Good, that is right where I have been wanting to bring you. Now I will begin to move through you to do it in you, and thus to accomplish it all."

This is the Pentateuch. You will never know the Bible until you know the Pentateuch.

**Prayer:**

Our Father, we thank you for this look at your marvelous book and the wonders of it. We pray that we grow in understanding of it and become able workmen of your Word, in Christ's name, Amen.

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