

How Far Away is God?

by Ray C. Stedman

I have just returned from visiting France, Germany, and England; and one of the things that I noticed about these three countries is that each is tremendously different. They have completely different languages, each has a different culture, the people of each nation have different characteristics, and, though they are very closely situated to one another (less than an hour's flight by airplane from Germany to England, for instance), nevertheless, these three European nations are tremendously different. Yet I was aware that, with each of these nations, there is a basic problem, one that is essentially spiritual in its nature, and it is exactly the same basic spiritual problem that we have here in the United States.

Perhaps one of the most influential men of recent times who is shaping the thinking of men is a Dane who lived in the nineteenth century; his name is Soren Kierkegaard. When he was a young boy, Kierkegaard was taken to church by his parents to the state church in Denmark every Sunday morning. He grew up in the church, and noticed that there was a great disparity between what was taught, and the way that people acted in church, and the way they lived the rest of the week. He was troubled by this, and eventually he wrote on this matter very penetratingly, very deeply, and very helpfully. His conclusion was that the basic problem of his nation, as with other nations of the world (of Western Europe, at least) was how to make Christians out of people who are already "Christians" – i.e., how to make "Christians" *Christian* – how to make men and women put into practice seven days a week what they so glibly state and sing on Sunday morning. This is the basic problem that is facing Europe today, and the United States as well.

As you open the pages of Scripture, especially here in the book of Romans, you see that this was exactly the problem with which Paul was confronted in the nation of Israel – the most religious nation on the face of the earth. This nation has never been exceeded in its religious zeal (it was true then and it is still true today). Yet it was a nation what was very, very far from God.

In Romans 9 we saw that the great theme was *the sovereignty of God and his electing grace*. It set forth the fact that not one of us would ever become a Christian, not one of us would ever remotely dream of seeking God, if it were not for the electing grace of God which sought after us first. The call of God awoke us out of the sleep of death, brought us to our awareness of our need, created a hunger in our heart, and set us to looking for him. That is the theme of Chapter 9.

By contrast, in Chapter 10 we have the matter of *the responsibility and the moral freedom of man* set forth. These are two themes that are usually regarded as opposed to one another. You can get into long arguments over this matter of divine election versus man's free will. There has been a great deal of heat (but very little light) that has been evidenced by the arguments that have gone on for centuries over this question. But you will notice that Paul puts them side by side and says that they are both true. I don't think that we will ever begin to understand the workings of God in our world today until we acknowledge that both of these great pronouncements are true: God must call us before we can possibly move toward him; yet, if we do not respond in a responsible decision, we are to blame for not knowing him and for continuing in our lost, fallen condition.

Paul places these two ideas side by side: See how he analyzes the problem of **the weakness of religion** – man presenting a religious facade, a false front, in life. This is what he has to say, beginning with Verse 30 of Chapter 9 and continuing through Verse 4 of Chapter 10:

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith, but that Israel who pursued the righteousness which is based on law did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it through faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling-stone, as it is written,

“Behold I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; and he who believes in him will not be put to shame.”

Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified. {Rom 9:30-10:4 RSV}

The countries that I have just visited, i.e., England, France, and Germany, are *religious lands*. I was struck by the fact that, in every land, the church is very evident – i.e., the buildings.

Paris is a city of churches. I climbed to the top of the tower of Notre Dame. (There are 250 steps to the top, and, when you get there, you are glad that there are no more!) I looked out over the city, and the one thing that impressed me was the tremendous number of church spires. Almost everywhere they pointed up to the sky, breaking the skyline of Paris, but Paris is a city that is very far from God. And, through France is a land that has been dominated and saturated by the pronouncements and teachings of the church for centuries, yet it is a land that is suffering deeply from God-hunger – a great and overpowering hunger for spiritual reality.

When I went through Germany I could not help remembering that this was the land of the Reformation, the land where Martin Luther lived. Once

the Reformation had swept with a vital power throughout the whole land, awakening it, and transforming it. Today the churches of the Reformation are everywhere in Germany, but it is the same story – West Germany is a country of full pockets and empty hearts.

In England it was the same. England is a land to which we are greatly indebted for the rich heritage that we have received from it. I visited Westminster Abbey and St. Paul’s Cathedral, and yet remembered that in London only 2% of all the population attend church. It was evident on Sunday in that land that there are very, very few who come into the churches. There, as in our own land, the problem is not the *absence of religion*, but of *religious depth*. There is plenty of the wrong kind of religion.

A number of years ago I remember reading a message by Roger Hull, the president of the Mutual of New York Insurance Company. He was speaking to a large crowd of business men in the city of Chicago, and he opened his address with these rather startling words. He said, “I am convinced the greatest problem that America faces today is that of the casual Christian.” Now, that was from a business man: The greatest problem that America faces is casual Christianity! It is amazing, when you stop to think about it, how easily we slip into hypocritical acts – even in church. I was rather surprised, and disappointed, to learn that last week on Sunday morning, here in this church, there were some folks listening to the World Series on a transistor radio while the church service was going on. I am sure that they didn’t think that this was irreligious, or irreverent. I am sure that they had no consciousness of what they were doing, but, when I heard of this, I thought of the words of Jesus to the woman at the well when he said to her, “God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth,” {John 4:24 KJV}, “for the Father seeketh such to worship him,” {John 4:23b KJV}.

The great problem of our land, and of other lands, is exactly what Paul outlines here:

- A superficial religion,
- A seeking after their own righteousness,
- A contentment with making the outside appear right,

- A complacency and satisfaction with the inside, even though it is completely wrong.

I know, when we begin to face this problem, the remedy that is usually suggested is to find some way to get people to take their religion seriously and get more involved in the activity of the church. In other words, if we can find a way to turn the casual Christian into a concerned Christian the problem will be solved. In our country, more than in Europe, we have found a way by which we have enlisted people in religious activity, and our churches, in contrast to those over there, are full. We have people lined up in a program right up to their necks!

- They are immersed in it.
- They are on this committee and that committee.
- They belong to this group and that group.
- They are continually busy in a constant round of religious activity.

But we haven't solved the problem, because, as Paul points out here, Israel is forever an example of the falsity of this approach. The answer is not just "getting busy for God." It isn't just trying to be more active in the things that the church is doing. Zeal is no substitute for reality. Warming up a pot of spoiled meat doesn't change its rottenness. Or, as C. S. Lewis so graphically put it, "No clever arrangement of bad eggs will make a good omelet." Putting a man to work is no answer. The answer is not a program, the answer is a Person. It always is.

Paul says of Israel, "They have stumbled over the stumbling-stone," and he quotes from Isaiah, where God says: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall; but he who believes in him will not be put to shame," {cf, Isa 28:16 RSV}. By these words he is saying that God never offered man anything except through Jesus Christ, and the transforming of a man, or a home, or a nation, is never accomplished except by a new appropriation of Jesus Christ – that is all.

Now, I would like to ask you, "Is your life weak, and fruitless, and afflicted with a great deal of casual Christianity?"

Well, if it is, the answer is not to try harder, the answer is not to get yourself involved in more programs. The answer to how to make "Christians" *Christian* is Christ – not activity but receptivity, not effort but faith. Laying hold anew of the reality of the presence of Jesus Christ is the answer.

If I would gather up the impressions that were left upon me in this recent tour of Europe and put them in one phrase, it is, simply, that in every country that I visited, as in our own country, the great need is for men and women, individually, to come face to face with the Lordship and the sovereign claims of Jesus Christ in his or her life.

Now, at this point, someone always says, "Well, how do I do this? What do I need to do in order to find this new power and this transformation, this saving grace?" Paul answers that question by outlining for us **the simplicity of faith**. Look at Chapter 10, Verses 5-13:

Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on the law shall live by it. But the righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" (that is, to bring Christ down), or "Who will descend into the abyss?" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. For, "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved." {Rom 10:5-13 RSV}

When I was flying out of Berlin, through the air corridor, I was very interested in what was going on in the villages and countryside beneath me, because that was the Eastern Zone of Germany. As we flew along, we came to a little town and my friend, Dr. Dirks, leaned over and said, "That town is Eisleben, where Martin Luther was born." Then, of course, I looked at it with renewed interest.

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Down in that little town was born Martin Luther, and, later, when his life drew to a close, he returned to that same little town, and there it was that he died. It was a strange feeling to look down into that little town where Luther was born, and had died, and to think that it was now behind the Iron Curtain, and there was no religious ceremony of any sort permitted in that little village. And I recalled the story of Martin Luther –

- How, as a monk in the Augustinian monastery, he sought to make himself acceptable to God,
- How he would spend long, weary hours lying flat on his face on a cold stone floor, praying hour after hour, beating his breast, weeping and crying over his sins, trying to discover some way of release and of forgiveness,
- How he put himself under punishment and made his body undergo suffering in order to do penance for his sins, and
- How, finally, reading through the Scriptures in this very book of Romans, he was struck by one phrase out of the first chapter – “the just shall live by faith” {Rom 1:17b KJV}.

Those words hit him like a sledgehammer, and he realized that God was saying that it wasn't necessary to *do* anything. God isn't asking us to *do* a thing. He is asking us to believe what Christ has already done. Martin Luther stood up and began to walk in the strength of that verse, and it gained power upon his soul and his heart until it gripped him, and he sent it in flaming letters of fire across Germany. It created the Protestant Reformation: “The just shall live by faith” – not by *doing* anything!

The most deadly question that a man can ask is the question we ask when we begin to sense that we need something from God: “What shall I do to win God's favor?” Well, there is nothing to do, Paul says. If it depended upon *doing*, if you were going to *accomplish* what had to be done to deliver you, this is what you would have to do:

1. You would have to climb up into heaven and bring Christ down from heaven.
2. You would have to go down into the grave and bring Christ up from the dead.

Now, who can do that? Obviously, all that needed to be done was far beyond our ability to do it. The great word of the gospel is that it has all been done. Now, believe it! Believe it, and walk in it!

This is what we have difficulty doing. But it is the simple walk of faith that, when the heart begins to rest upon it, transforms a life and makes available to an individual all the mighty transforming power of God to make him what he ought to be. This is what happened to Martin Luther, and it is happening to men and women all over the world today – by this same simple process of resting on what God has done.

I am amazed at the way we Christians continually seek something more before we are ready to do anything for God:

- We want God to give us some kind of an experience,
- We think we have to have a special call,
- We need a special kind of a feeling about a work before we will undertake it (no matter how obvious it is, and how much it needs to be done).

I have had people say, “Well, I'll pray about it, and if God calls me to do it, then I'll do it.” No, this isn't what the word of faith is.

I know that there are people who are looking for a special additional experience that will give them power. They think, “If I could only speak in tongues, then I would be able to do, and be, for God what I ought to be.” So they begin to seek this experience some way. All of this is simply a means by which we are trying to escape the force of what God has to say to us – that Jesus Christ is instantly available to us or to any heart that is willing to acknowledge his Lordship, his right to be sovereign, and who will obey him on that basis.

This is what Paul says, “The word is near you ... because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised

him from the dead, you will be saved.” This doesn’t mean just the initial experience of the Christian life, it means anything in the Christian experience from which we need to be saved. In other words, let’s believe him and move out to meet any demand that comes, because he says that Christ is here – he is available since he has taken up residence in our life by that initial act of faith.

- He saved you: *Now believe it* and you are saved.
- He is your strength: *Now believe it* and do whatever needs to be done. You don’t have to wait for a feeling. You don’t have to wait for a call. Whatever is before you that needs to be done, do it in the name of the Lord because he is with you.
- He is your peace: *Now believe it* and count it a sin to worry any longer because he is there to be all that you need.

This is what he is saying in this passage: *Now believe it!*

Now, if Christ is available to all without distinction or reserve, then there is only one thing left: That is **the necessity of proclaiming it**, or preaching it. This is what we have in this last section, Chapter 10, Verses 14-21:

But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!” But they have not all heeded the gospel; for Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us?” So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.

But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for

**“Their voice has gone out to all the earth,
and their words to the ends of the world.”**

Again I ask, did Israel not understand?

First Moses says,

**“I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation;
with a foolish nation I will make you angry.”**

Then Isaiah is so bold as to say,

“I have been found by those who did not seek me;

I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.”

But of Israel he says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.” {Rom 10:14-21 RSV}

Paul is simply proving that Israel had no ground of complaint for not having heard what God had to say: They had heard! Not only through men sent of God, but through the silent witness of nature and of their own hearts, they had heard! In other words, no man lives untouched by God and unaware of his existence in all the world.

Dr. Richard Halverson spoke to a small group of men in Germany and described something of the work of International Christian Leadership. After speaking, he had a question time, and one of them asked this question:

“You have been talking to men who are members of a church, encouraging them to work, but what do you say to a man who is a Communist, who doesn’t believe in God, who has no interest in the church, who thinks this is all tommy-rot? What do you say to him?”

In thought Dr. Halverson’s reply was very wise. He said:

“There is no place in all the world, whether it is behind the Iron Curtain or anywhere else, where a man doesn’t have an empty heart if he doesn’t know God. So, begin with the empty heart, the life that is unfulfilled, and the unsatisfied yearnings and longings of a heart that knows no rest.”

This is what Paul says, too. In all the world, men are waiting to hear, and they are convinced by the silent witness of their own hearts that they need something. The full power of the Christian gospel is only known by the process that we call “incarnation.” That is, it is better *caught* than *taught* – it isn’t the preaching of the words so much as it is the witness of the life. When the Spirit of

Christ dwells in a human heart, that man or woman becomes a witness, sent by God, to be an influence wherever he or she is. This is a tremendous truth if we really grasp what we have here and in other parts of Scripture.

Jesus said to his disciples one day, “Greater works than these shall ye do because I go unto my Father,” {cf, John 14:12 KJV}. Did you ever think of the implications of that word? What he is saying is that when he goes to the Father, the Spirit of truth {see John 14:17} will come into the world and the Spirit of God will take up his residence in human life – your life and mine. When the Spirit of God comes into a man or woman’s heart and life, that person becomes capable of doing the works that Jesus Christ did in Galilee and in Judea – not only the works that he did, but greater works than these shall be done. Now, in the world today, it has been estimated that there are some 81 million Christians. When our Lord was here on earth, he was only one man, living in one country, and he could never be anywhere else, but in the world today there are 81 million Christians. I realize that they are in various stages of knowledge and belief, but just suppose that in 81 million Christians there was carried out what God had in mind for them to do, and to be, so that in 81 million places in the world there was going on what was going on in Judea and Galilee 1900 years ago! You can see the possibilities for reaching a world for Christ – 81,000,000 places where the Spirit of God would be working through a man or a woman to transform, by his saving grace, the lives around them. That is what we have set forth here, and it is a matter of simply being *available to him* – of presenting ourselves to him – in order that he might use us in any way that he pleases.

In Isaiah 6, when Isaiah was in the temple, and he saw God, and he was overwhelmed by that presence, he said, “My lips are unclean, I can’t say anything,” {cf, Isa 6:5}. He felt his human weakness, and this is the proper attitude to have in a place like that, but that wasn’t the whole story. God sent an angel who took a coal from the altar, symbolic of the Holy Spirit, and put it on that man’s lips, and then said to him, “Who will go for us?” {Isa 6:8b RSV}. Now, it is interesting that God did not say to Isaiah, “Isaiah, will you come and go for me?” He put it on the basis of a volunteer; he said, “Who will go for us *now* into the world to be a witness, to be a proclaimer of what

Jesus Christ can be in human life today?” And, when Isaiah was touched and cleansed by the coal from the altar, he stood and said, “Lord, here am I; send me,” {cf, Isa 6:8c}.

That is what God is saying to us today, “Who will go back into the world, back into the place where you live, into the shop where you work, into the home where you are, into the neighborhood where you live? Who will go for me?” He is waiting for men and women who know Jesus Christ, who are walking in the obedience of faith, and who know that *everything that Christ is* is already theirs, and they need but to simply step out and to respond to it in faith. He is waiting for us to say, “Lord, here am I; send me!” Will *you* say that? This is the process by which God means to fulfill the words of the Lord Jesus, “Greater works than these shall you do because I go unto my Father and the Spirit has come unto you.”

This morning we are celebrating the table of the Lord together. I hadn’t meant to say this, but I am so impressed with the fact that Christians simply seem to wait for God to do *something more* before they are ready to respond in obedience to him. It is for this reason that there is such difficulty getting people to do things, because they are not ready to be his, they are not ready to say with Isaiah, “Lord, here am I; send me,” {cf, Isa 6:8c}.

“You are not your own, you are bought with a price” {1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV}

What does that mean? Well, if it means anything at all, it means that you no longer have the right to say, “No!” when God says there is something to be done. Do you know that we could find no one to prepare the Lord’s table this morning? It was asked at the women’s meeting for volunteers, for somebody to prepare the Lord’s supper, and no one was willing to do it. And, finally, somebody had to drive in from the country in order to get this done – a simple thing like that!

I have been *so* disturbed by the fact that Christians are *unavailable to God!*

- No wonder nothing is going on!
- No wonder neighborhoods aren’t transformed!
- No wonder doors are shut!

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- No wonder the saving grace of God is seemingly locked out!
- No wonder nothing happens in our country!

How do you make “Christians” *Christian*?

The only answer is by a new glimpse and a new contact and a new confrontation with Jesus Christ, in order that we might respond to his call with “Lord, here am I; send me.”

Prayer:

Our Father, we wonder how long it shall be before we begin to evidence the simplicity of faith. How this word, Lord, has rebuked us. What do we need more? What yet have we need of, Lord? You have said,

“The word is near us, even in our hearts, even on our lips” – we need nothing further. We have him who is all, if we know Jesus Christ as Lord. Now, Lord, may we, in the quietness of this moment, acknowledge before you that we are indeed men with unclean lips, but you have cleansed us with the coals from off the fire of the altar of God. And may our hearts say, in this moment, as we meet at this table this morning, “Lord, here am I. Forgive my deliberate withholding of myself from you. Forgive my subtle attempts to invent excuses to keep from doing what is before me that needs to be done in your name, and accept me, Lord, to be your instrument by which your mighty transforming, saving power may flow out to men and women today in my neighborhood, in my house, and in my office.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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