

**“For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while 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 of revelation in the full knowledge of Him.” —Ephesians 1:15–17 (Legacy Standard Bible)**

A vital component is often missing in books about the Christian mind. Writers emphasize the requirement of conversion to Christ, the uniqueness of the Christian view of truth and authority, the importance of disciplined thinking, the necessity of worldview discernment, and the value of life-long learning. **But often treated as an afterthought is the role the Holy Spirit plays in the development and exercise of the kind of thinking that is truly Christian.** As with many other aspects of life in the church, Christians are tempted to believe that “thinking” and “the intellect” are predominantly a reflection of the efforts of man—even the regenerate man.

This neglect of the Spirit’s role in the development of the Christian mind can be traced to numerous causes. There is a fear of fanaticism for some. The Charismatic movement has so warped the doctrine of the Holy Spirit that many would rather avoid the topic altogether. For others, the Holy Spirit is seen as the energizer of moral living and not of the mind. Still others have never been challenged to search the Scriptures to see what they really teach about the Spirit and His ministries to the believer. They assume that the Bible is largely silent on this issue, or that God’s will is that believers do not dwell upon it. In any case, the neglect of this doctrine not only leaves the believer ignorant of Scripture’s teaching and unappreciative of the Spirit’s ministry, but this neglect also leads to an unhealthy state of the mind itself.

If Christians are to think Christianly, they must consider the Holy Spirit’s role in this duty. After all, the Scriptures distinctly teach that the Holy Spirit is the agent of truth and of knowing. So important is this reality that Jesus refers to the Holy Spirit as **“the Spirit of truth”** three times in His Upper Room discourse (John 13–16) to encourage His disciples as He prepared them for His departure and their future ministries:

- **John 14:15–17 (esp. v. 17)**
- **John 15:26–27 (esp. v. 26)**
- **John 16:12–15** – “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose *it* to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose *it* to you.”

Years after Jesus’s ascension, the Apostle Paul described how Jesus’ promise to the apostles about the Holy Spirit was being fulfilled. The “Spirit of truth” was active in the apostles and New Testament writers, revealing to them the mysterious “depths of God” that no one could otherwise ever know, and aiding them in the communication of that knowledge to others:

- **1 Corinthians 2:10–13** – “For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the *thoughts* of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the *thoughts* of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual *thoughts* with spiritual *words*.”

The unique truth-revealing work of the Holy Spirit described by these texts is summarized by two important terms: **revelation** and **inspiration**. Revelation refers to the disclosure of divine knowledge to the apostles; inspiration refers to the correct articulation of that knowledge in the form of human language by the apostles. But there remains a third term that relates to the Spirit’s work as “the Spirit of truth”: **illumination**.

## I. The Definition of Illumination

To understand the doctrine of illumination, we must begin with the basics. The verb **“illuminate”** means either (1) “to supply (something) with light; to shine light on (something),” or (2) “to make (something) clear and easier to understand” (Merriam-Webster).

The noun form of this term—**“illumination”**—is used by theologians to describe the action God takes to help man understand the knowledge He reveals about Himself. In a very basic sense, “Illumination is the term that refers to the need for the human mind to be enlightened by God in order to understand the things of God” (Trueman, “Illumination,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 316).

To be even more specific, the biblical doctrine of illumination can be defined as **“a work of the Holy Spirit, whereby the hearer or reader of the Word of God . . . is given understanding of the information contained in it and brought to appropriate its meaning”** (Kevin Zuber, *What Is Illumination?*). This doctrine includes three essential ingredients: (1) it is a work done *by* the Holy Spirit; (2) it is a work done *through* the Scripture; and (3) it is a work done *to* a hearer or reader.

## II. The Need for Illumination

The *prayers of Scripture*—particularly those of Psalm 119 (in the Old Testament) and of the Apostle Paul (in the New Testament)—are the places in Scripture where man’s need for illumination is most vividly described.

**A. The Prayers of Psalm 119.** Describing the contents of Psalm 119, Spurgeon stated, “It is a Psalm in which every verse speaks of God’s revelation of himself to man.” Yet it is a psalm that not only extols the beauties of God’s word; it is a psalm that also articulates man’s desperate need for divine assistance in the understanding of that word. A few representative statements reflect this profound awareness:

- **119:17–18** – “Deal bountifully with Your servant, that I may live and keep Your word. Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Your law.”
- **119:27–29** – “Make me understand the way of Your precepts, so I will meditate on Your wonders. . . . Remove the false way from me, and graciously grant me Your law.”
- **119:73** – “Your hands made me and fashioned me; give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments.”
- **119:33** – “Teach me, O Lord, the way of Your statutes, and I shall observe it to the end.”
- **119:135** – “Make Your face shine upon Your servant, and teach me Your statutes.”
- **119:33–40, 66, 68, 102, 108, 124, 171, etc.**

The psalmist recognized that the true understanding and application of God’s word does not come *naturally*. It must be *divinely granted*—or it is not attained at all. He reached this conclusion not because he saw the Scripture as deficient in any sense, but because he recognized his own insufficiency and propensity to err:

- **119:37** – “Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity, and revive me in Your ways.”
- **119:135** – “Remove the false way from me, and graciously grant me Your law.”

**B. The Prayers of Paul.** The Apostle Paul’s prayers in his letters to the churches have long been recognized as models to be imitated. Do you want to pray biblically? Then pattern your praying after Paul’s praying. But more than providing a pattern for imitation, these prayers also express Paul’s understanding of the need for Spirit-wrought illumination in the lives of believers:

- **Ephesians 1:16–19a** – “[I] do not cease giving thanks for you while making mention of you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of Him. *I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened*, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” (The Legacy Standard Bible translates “a spirit of wisdom and revelation” [v. 17] as “the Spirit of wisdom and revelation.”)

- Ephesians 3:14–19
- Philippians 1:9–11
- Colossians 1:9–12 – “For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” (The phrase “spiritual wisdom and understanding” is best understood as “Spirit-given wisdom and understanding.”)

As Paul prayed for these believers, he recognized that their greatest need was not financial prosperity or good health but knowledge, understanding, and discernment. These things come from the Spirit.

### III. The Purpose of Illumination

What does Spirit-wrought illumination accomplish? The answer to this question is found in the many “so that” and “in order that” statements included in these prayers. They can be arranged according to three categories:

A. **Illumination is essential for intellectual understanding (the mind).** This is the most frequent result associated with illumination according to the prayers of Psalm 119 and the Apostle Paul. The Spirit works on the mind of the believer to enable and improve his understanding of the meaning of God’s word. For example:

- Psalm 119:73 – “Give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments.”
- Ephesians 1:18–19 – “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened so that you will know what is the hope of His calling . . . the riches of the glory . . . and the surpassing greatness of His power . . .”

This achievement of the Spirit does not imply that the Scriptures are deficient either in their content matter or in how they express it. The deficiency is with the mind of the hearer or reader of the Scriptures; he is influenced by sin, ignorance, error, and limitation. The Spirit helps the hearer or reader overcome this.

B. **Illumination is essential for willful obedience (the will).** The Spirit’s work of illumination also focuses on the reader’s application of divine knowledge to practical life. Obedience is not automatic. When a believer understands God’s word, he still needs “light” to know how that knowledge is to be translated into actions that truly please God. The Spirit helps the hearer or reader pursue this appropriation.

- Psalm 119:88 – “Revive me according to Your lovingkindness, so that I may keep the testimony of Your mouth.”
- Philippians 1:9–11 – “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ; having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which *comes* through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.”

C. **Illumination is essential for fervent desire (the affections).** The Spirit’s work of illumination not only grants apprehension and appropriation, it also increases the believer’s appetite for God’s word. The Spirit leads the believer to see more and more of the divine excellency and glory of Scripture.

- Psalm 119:127–128 – “Therefore I love Your commandments above gold, yes, above fine gold. Therefore I esteem right all Your precepts concerning everything, I hate every false way.”

It is also important to consider what Spirit-wrought is *not* intended to accomplish:

- It is not a channel for *new revelation* (Rev 22:18–19).
- It is not a work of the Spirit *apart from the God’s word* (John 17:17; 2 Tim 3:15–17).
- It is not a guarantee of *perfect understanding* (2 Pet 3:15–18).
- It is not a privilege of *elite Christians* (1 John 2:20).

- It is not a justification for *abandoning study* (2 Tim 2:15).
- It is not a disregard for *pastors and teachers* (Eph 4:11–13).

### How must we respond?

1. **Lean not on your own adequacy.** The goal of Bible study is not a mere formal intellectual acquaintance with chapters and verses. The goal is an apprehension of the words of the biblical texts as the very words of Almighty God, spoken once-and-for all and yet to you personally. To handle these words rightly is not a natural ability. As Martin Luther stated, “The Bible cannot be understood simply by study or talent; you must count on the influence of the Holy Spirit.” Cf. 1 Cor 2:14.
2. **Seek the Spirit’s enablement.** The atrocities committed against the Holy Spirit by some should not cause you to ignore or downplay His ministry. Do not be ignorant regarding your need for Him to enliven your mind, will, and affections in your study of Scripture. Pursue conscious dependency upon Him every time you think about truth general, and about specific texts in particular. Make the prayers of Psalm 119 your prayers.

“No Christian should ever look down at the Word without first looking up at the very Source of the Word and asking for guidance. To engage in Bible study without prayer is presumption, if not sacrilege.”

—John MacArthur, *How to Get the Most from God’s Word*, 155

3. **Abandon any expectation for new revelations.** Many today talk of waiting on the Spirit to “speak to them.” This is often just false piety—an excuse to refuse to study, trust, and obey exactly that which He has already said. The Spirit’s work will always be in the word, with the word, and through the word.
4. **Be content to study Scripture.** Since the Spirit’s chosen means of disclosing God to us is the word that He has inspired, we must joyously submit to the careful and disciplined study of that word. Refuse to pit the *illumination* of Scripture against the *interpretation* of Scripture. Instead, as 2 Timothy 2:15 commands, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.”
5. **Recognize where your right thinking comes from.** The doctrine of illumination is a humbling doctrine in that it proclaims that we do not arrive at truth on our own. Second Timothy 2:24–25 illustrates this: “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth.” All of us once were among “those who are in opposition.” That we hold to truth today is not a result of our intellectual prowess, but of God’s grace. Paul summarizes it best: “Therefore I make known to you that . . . no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3).

### For Further Study

1. Memorize Psalm 119:18 and 135.
2. Take time this week to read through Psalm 119 several times. Each time you read, make observations according to these categories: (a) What *terms* does the Psalmist use to describe God’s word? (b) What *qualities* does the Psalmist recognize about God’s word? (c) What *requests* does the Psalmist make regarding God’s word? (d) What *results* does God’s word have in the life of the Psalmist when God grants these prayers?
3. In your own words define the doctrine of illumination.
4. How does the doctrine of illumination humble you? In what ways does a better understanding of illumination motivate you to study Scripture?
5. Take several opportunities this week to sing through “Holy Spirit, Living Breath of God” (*Hymns of Grace* #318). Commit to memory as much of it as possible so that it can regularly guide your thoughts heavenward.



Submit a question  
through this QR code

**Audio, video, and handouts for this session:** [gracechurch.org/motw](http://gracechurch.org/motw)

**Next meeting:** January 19, 7pm, “The Renewing of the Mind”