

A Time of Preparation for the Work of L'Abri

Father, we want to thank You for the way every day Your Word comes to us with power, and it comes to our situations, whatever they may be, and You meet us where we are, with our different kinds of struggles and needs, our joys and sorrows. You can come and be alongside us and help us through Your Word and by Your Spirit. We pray now that as we look through this next part of the Schaeffers' life that You will teach us as we learn from their experience. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

We are going to cover the three or four years between early 1952 until 1955. At the beginning of this time, Schaeffer had just come through the crisis that we considered in the previous lesson. He has come out on the other side of that crisis with a powerfully increased conviction of the truth of God's Word and a new understanding of what it means to live as a Christian in dependence on the power of God. He has come to a new awareness of what obedience in the Christian life means practically day by day in terms of a commitment to love God and other people. They were still living in the village of Champéry in Chalet Bijou.

I will divide what I am going to say under various headings. The first is "Open Doors and New Births." As 1952 progressed, ever more people were coming to the Schaeffers' home for one reason or another. There were ever more opportunities to begin to communicate with people. There were various different groups of teenagers from the schools of the surrounding area who were coming to their home on three different evenings each week. People were beginning to ask serious questions. These were teenagers from all over the world who came to ask the Schaeffers their questions. Edith recounts in *The Tapestry* how many of these girls became Christians, coming from completely non-Christian backgrounds. They were coming with questions such as whether or not God existed or whether they could believe the Bible is true. They were asking all sorts of questions, and one after another became Christians. Edith recounts the joy that was for their whole family. They prayed for these people who came. They saw them gradually open up and respond to what the Schaeffers were saying. I know some of those people who became Christians in 1952. I have known several of them for many years, and they have gone on to minister to all sorts of people ever since that time. So there was this work going on every week, three evenings per week, among young people from different countries who were in school in that area in Switzerland.

Edith also recounts a wonderful opportunity they were given when King George VI died, on February 6, 1952. At very short notice, they prepared a chapel service and more than 60 people came. They were not just English people, but all sorts of people came. Schaeffer was given an opportunity to preach a sermon on how God is the true King of all the earth. Kings and presidents here may come and go, for there is one God whose power and existence is always the same, who calls us into His kingdom. Priscilla, their eldest daughter, was running a children's class in French. Children in that class were beginning to respond to the Gospel as well. Edith gave the example of a Scottish family who came. They were a couple with two teenage sons, and all four were converted one by one as they all came together to talk to Francis and Edith, and they came individually to discuss with them. There were all sorts of local people as well whom they were beginning to reach out to.

In a way, this period was characterized by contacts with ever more individuals, but also by a tremendous response to what they were saying. Their work was experiencing a new fruitfulness, as many of these individuals became Christians. The owner of their own chalet came to them one day, just before they left for their furlough, and said, "I want to know the God you know. I want to go to the place you are going when you die. I want to be with you." The organist who played for their chapel services, another local person, became a Christian. A Czech couple was converted at this time. They also mention in particular a Mr. X, whose name they do not give, and perhaps I will explain later why Edith does not give his name. Mr. X was a man I knew as well many years later. This was a man from the village who had been an atheist up to that point, in a strongly

Roman Catholic community. He was converted to the Gospel and was later baptized and took his first communion with them. In the middle of all these new births of individuals coming to know Jesus Christ, coming into God's kingdom, their fourth child, Frankie, was born after a difficult pregnancy.

So the first heading was "Open Doors." There were all sorts of open doors to individuals' lives, and the pattern of their work was becoming clearer. We can say it was a time of preparation, because the pattern of their work was becoming clearer as they had more and more to do for the people whom God brought to their place. Without going out seeking people, ever more people were coming to them with their questions and needs. It was a pattern that L'Abri set as its way of operation in the years to come.

A second factor that was also quite important was that their little church began to grow. They called it the International Presbyterian Church. They believed it was important to have a congregation that was able to baptize people who were coming to faith and to have the Lord's Supper for those new Christians. There was no other evangelical church there in that entire community or in any of the villages nearby. They were having regular services for these people. There was a growing number of people from the villages and towns around who had become Christians through their ministry, Swiss people living in that area who started to come to the services Sunday by Sunday. Other people, such as the English girls from school up the road, also came to the services when they were there.

Edith describes in *The Tapestry* the official formation of the church a short time later. It was already going even though it was not yet formally established in 1952. The official formation of the church took place on Thanksgiving Day. That was when Mr. X, from the village of Champéry, came down to help in the founding of the church. The Czechoslovakian couple was also there for the service. It happened at Madam Tourion's Pauncion. That was where they had stayed when they first came to Switzerland to live. Some of the old ladies who were there also attended the service because some of them had responded to the Gospel as well. Edith also wrote about the various different services that were going to be held at that time.

The official formation of the church was one of the things that caused them tremendous problems with the local Catholic hierarchy. I will talk about that later in the lesson. They were not content to simply have a ministry. They thought it was important in obedience to Scripture to establish a church. That was the second point, the forming of the International Presbyterian Church, which caused them problems. There were regular services, and the church began to grow. Mr. X, in fact, became one of the first elders of the church when it was formed.

The third point I want to make is a growing sense of the urgency of clearly communicating God's Word to people. Edith wrote that this particularly came to them on their trips to Portugal and Spain. In Spain at that time there was tremendous persecution of evangelical Christians. It was hard to imagine this was only a few decades ago. In *The Tapestry*, Edith describes some of the kinds of troubles that people faced. For instance, if a man in the Spanish army was an evangelical Christian and married, because he was not married in the Catholic Church, he was only given the allowance of a single person. He was regarded as if he was not married at all. He would have to raise his family on pay that was only for a single man rather than for a family man. The Schaeffers were not allowed to have open children's work. If adults became evangelical Christians, they were not allowed to bring their children from the Catholic Church. Their children were still required to go to the Catholic Church. Edith wrote, "They were not permitted by law to bring their children with them. So you might have a Protestant church with 200 adults and only 30 children." When Edith was doing the children's presentations, she had to describe what they did in other countries. She was not allowed to directly communicate the Gospel to children in that situation. So she would describe what they did in Finland, Norway, or Switzerland. In all the services there would be military police and armed guards in the back of the building to make sure everything was done in accordance with the law. It is difficult to imagine this happening just a few decades ago. She wrote, "There were tall men in uniform with their guns at their sides standing at the back, members of the civil guard, making

sure that nothing was said or done which the fascist regime of that time did not allow. The building was not even allowed to be marked with a sign outside saying it was a Protestant church. Bibles could not be sold in Spain at that time. I remember when I was at university when I first became a Christian, some of my friends from there took backpacks full of Bibles into Spain in the summers because that was still true in the 1960s. You could not sell Spanish Bibles in Spain, nor could they be sent to the country in quantities. Converts were not allowed to be made. Men in military service were required to take Mass, and they were beaten if they refused for conscience's sake. The same went for everybody who was a patient in a hospital. They were required to attend Mass. There were problems with burials, because if people were Protestant evangelical Christians the cemeteries would refuse to bury them. Thus there were all kinds of problems for evangelical Christians in Spain and Portugal at that time.

Both Schaeffers had a tremendous amount of awareness as they went on this trip through Spain and Portugal and spoke in many churches there, encouraging the start of children's works there, of the tremendous urgency and preciousness of the Gospel. Edith described Francis going to the pilgrimage at Fatima and the way thousands of people walked many miles on bare feet because they were supposedly accruing merit before God by walking on bare feet. These people were completely lacking in any kind of joy. Their religion was a tremendous bondage, a tremendous burden. Edith spoke of the tremendous urgency they both felt for communicating the Gospel in that situation. Thus the third point of their preparation in this time was a growing sense of the preciousness of the message that they had to share with people and of the urgency of speaking it. Edith recorded one of Francis' prayers at this time, which she prayed repeatedly. It went, "Lord, help me to make it clear, what I have to say to these people." They wanted to be clear whether it was speaking against liberalism or the ideas of the age or against this kind of superstition that they were facing in Spain and Portugal.

The fourth point I want to make is about their time of furlough in the United States. They left for the United States for a period of 17 months. They were back living there, and Francis taught pastoral theology at Faith Seminary. They were living in a tiny row house that was much too small for their family. Yet they both believed it was provided as a direct answer to their prayers. Edith recorded how Francis, who was not a person who heard voices, was praying about where they would live when they left Switzerland for the United States. He heard an audible voice saying, "Uncle Harrison's house." They had no idea whether the house was going to be empty, so they wrote him a letter. He responded saying that he was not going to be living there for the next year and a half, so they were welcome to stay there. He had recently been made a widower, and he was going to be off visiting relatives.

Even though this was a direct answer to prayer, and they were quite sure it was, it was not easy. Edith said so, and what she said is tremendously helpful. She said that we may pray to God for particular needs we have, and He may answer them, but that does not mean the answer is going to make our life easy. Their life was extremely difficult during that time. They were provided with a place to stay, but it was too small. None of the drawers had anything taken out, so they had to keep all their belongings in a trunk in the cellar for the whole year and a half they were living there. The house was packed full of furniture, so they had no room for anything of their own. Frankie had just been born, so they had a tiny baby. They also had three girls attending a local school. Francis was coming and going all the time as well as teaching at the seminary. He spoke 346 times during the 515 days that they were there. That is basically speaking two times every three days that they were there, and that was in addition to his teaching at the seminary. Edith described this time as "boot training," by which I think she means to compare it to the initial training in the army in which life is really tough to make sure you learn the lessons you need to learn. It was a tremendously difficult time for them during the year and a half they were there.

Edith gave another example of the difficulty they had. They went on a 10-week trip together to the Southwest and West. She went to speak also, and they took Debbie with them, who was very small, and also Frankie, who

was a baby. There were tremendous difficulties in that. She said that sometimes people who desired to be helpful actually did the exact opposite of what you needed in that situation. She said, “There we were, traveling around for 10 weeks, and we would often arrive in a place to be met by totally unimaginative people who thought the best treat they could offer would be a steak dinner in a restaurant. Then we will go straight to the church where Mr. Schaeffer will preach first and Mrs. Schaeffer will speak after the choir sings.” She points out that the last thing a baby needs who has been cooped up in a train all day is to be taken to a restaurant for a steak dinner.” They need a little bit of space, maybe a bath, just a little bit of time. People with the best will can do things that do not make your life much easier.

What was Schaeffer speaking about during this time, on all these 346 times that he spoke? Some of the sermons, which appeared later in the book *No Little People*, were prepared during this time. He preached “The Lord’s Work in the Lord’s Way” and “Living in the Supernatural Now.” He also repeatedly preached the sermons that became the book *True Spirituality*. They were sermons on the Christian life. They were sermons that were searching after reality in the Christian life. They were asking, what is Christian reality? What is genuine Christian obedience? He was more developing his thinking on walking more in dependence on God day by day, living faithfully, praying seriously, and being earnest about not living in one’s own strength but waiting for God’s help and looking to Him. During this time he also preached a sermon at the graduation at the seminary called “Tongues of Fire.” He spoke about not only standing for the truth, but also standing for the truth in God’s way and with God’s power, rather than simply with human and sinful power.

The response after that particular sermon from one of the faculty wives was “Some people do not like what you are saying about dependence on the Holy Spirit. There is a split coming in this denomination and in this seminary.” He also went to the Synod in May 1954, which was not long before they went back to Switzerland. He spoke at the Synod, and it became apparent that there was a tremendous disagreement from one section of the Synod on the emphasis in his teaching on spirituality. Some people, sadly, saw what he was saying as an attempt to take over the leadership of the denomination, simply because he was a person who spoke with tremendous authority and power. He had been the founder and developer of the Children for Christ work. He had been a respected pastor in Saint Louis. He was beginning to write more articles that were being widely read. He had been asked to return to teach at the seminary. He was regarded as someone whom people respected and whom people looked to. Many people responded with tremendous pleasure and favor to the things that he was teaching about spirituality, like Dr. Rayburn and Donald MacNair. They were in complete agreement with what he was saying, and they were excited about these emphases that were coming out. That was the response from everywhere. The book *True Spirituality*, long before it became a book, was used in many people’s lives. I recently met a pastor who said that he was a pastor in one of the churches where Schaeffer gave one of those sermons, and it changed his life and ministry completely. There was a tremendously positive response to what he was saying from many people. So some people did regard him as a leader in that sense, although he certainly never sought leadership.

Edith considers that question in *The Tapestry*. She says, “The evidence of disagreement with his emphasis became clear on the part of leaders both in the church and on the mission board. His pleading for balance [that is, the balance between holiness and love from that article we considered in an earlier lesson, including the need to speak with love and not be committed to separating from everything] and greater reality was taken for an attempt to take over leadership. The disagreement of these things brought a line of division, although the church did not divide for another year.” One year later, the Synod split, and out of that came Covenant College and Covenant Seminary, with Robert Rayburn as its president, and what was called then the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. Later it was the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod, and it is part of the Presbyterian Church in America now.

Then Edith considers the questions of whether Francis really was seeking leadership. She says, "Where was he one year later? Was he there seeking for leadership when the denomination split? No, he was buried as a grain of wheat, buried on the side of a mountain in a little old chalet in a village not on most maps. He was buried, as far as he knew, so completely that he would never have any leadership again. Far from rushing back to try to lead, he had come to a step of reality in asking that his life and work be a demonstration of the existence of God. This step seemed very foolish to any friends looking on. It was a step into what seemed total disappearance. Who would ever hear of him or from him again? He and his family were going to pray for the people of God's choice to come to them. What an idea. Whose idea?" That was where he was a year later. He certainly was not looking for leadership, although there were probably people who would have wanted him to have it if he had been here, simply because he was an articulate spokesman of a particular position.

Yet there were many people who, when they went back to Switzerland to start the work of L'Abri a year later, really thought they were burying themselves. They said, "We want you to teach at our seminary or pastor our church. What are you going to do? You are talking to handfuls of people who are going to come talk to you on this remote mountaintop where nobody will ever hear of you and where God will not be able to use you. You are burying yourself." That was a difficult thing, to have many of their friends, even those who agreed with his emphases and teaching, think that they were making a foolish choice. They thought they were stepping outside what God was doing and what God had given him to do. So they took much criticism at that point.

What was Schaeffer seeking for if it was not leadership? What he was seeking for was a greater reality as a Christian. He sought a greater reality of fruitfulness, of knowing God, of obedience, dependence on God, and prayer. That brings me to the fifth point. This period was a time in which they were learning ever more of the need to pray. They were longing for a greater reality in their prayer life. They were praying together regularly. They were praying about what God would have them do. They were praying for God to work in their lives.

Edith made some interesting comments about that. She said, "If you really pray seriously to God, 'Use me. I want You to work in my life. I want You to give me the work that You want me to do.' If you really lay yourself before God like that and seek a reality of doing what He wants rather than what you want and what you have planned, the way He answers is to overwhelm you with things to do." That is what happened to them. The period in the United States was a tremendously challenging, exhausting, and difficult time. Yet they were being taught, as they said to God, "We want a greater reality in relationship with You," what dependence on Him meant.

They wanted to go back to Switzerland and believed they ought to go back to Switzerland after this time of furlough. Yet they did not have money for their tickets to go back on the boat. It was a great amount of money. Edith described how their eldest daughter, Priscilla, prepared a thermometer that she set up in the house of where their funds were in terms of being able to pay for the tickets to return to Switzerland. Edith said, "Priscilla took the initiative of making a chart, a huge thermometer, to sit upon the refrigerator. There were lines showing amounts of money and at the top was the amount it would take to purchase boat tickets for the family, with some added for trunks and crates to take us back across the Atlantic. We contemplated sending out a letter to friends to make this need known. Then we decided against it. We said, 'If the Lord wants us to go, He will send it in. We really want to do what He wants, and this will be a good way to find out whether He wants us to go back, whether the money comes or not. So let us keep praying.'"

That was the decision they reached together. Priscilla was 16, Susan was 12, and Debbie was 8. They had to have a check in the mail by July 29. That was the last day they could send off their money for boat reservations. So they prayed that if God wanted them to keep those reservations that He would send in the money by that day. They went off to have a holiday for four weeks in a missionary furlough cottage near the beach. Francis was away speaking in various places. Edith began to feel that she was doing something crazy. She thought that they

had set up their children to be quite disappointed if the prayer was not answered. She wondered if she should carry on with it. She decided that she should. She also wrote about the way that as she worried about it she began to wonder if they were making a mistake in wanting to go back. Then she read about Gideon's fleece. Gideon asked for a fleece. She asked, "Please Lord, send me some word from Europe tomorrow that will reassure me in continuing to pray this way with the children." That was a fairly audacious prayer. The next morning a letter came from Italy that had been following them around asking them to speak at a conference in Italy on September 14. It said, "We have heard about your messages in America on the Holy Spirit and on the Christian life. We would like you to come do them here." That was the confirmation to her that they should continue praying that the money would arrive.

It did arrive. Two women who lived next door to each other had decided independently that they needed to set aside money for a need the Schaeffers had. They did not know what the need was, but they sent the money to them. They also got some money from C. Everett Koop, who believed he was supposed to send them some money for a special need that faced them. The money arrived in time to cover the cost of the tickets. That was a tremendous encouragement to them. There was a longing for a greater reality in prayer, and they were beginning to see God answering specific prayers in their lives. So they were prepared in the area of prayer.

The sixth area to consider briefly is the troubles they faced. People have all kinds of romantic ideas, which Edith frequently mentions, that if you are going to serve God faithfully, then everything is going to go well for you. There is much teaching like that in the church at the moment. If you have faith then you will have health, wealth, and prosperity of every kind. It is sometimes called the "health and wealth" gospel or the "prosperity" gospel or "positive confession." If we pray and are faithful to God, then He will provide for our needs. He will take care of us. We will get everything we need.

The Schaeffers experienced exactly the opposite. While they had many wonderful answers to prayer, like the finances for the trip to Europe and the house they lived in, they also began to experience some enormous troubles. The first was when they got back to Europe, while they were in Paris after just getting off the boat, Frankie, their little boy who was still a baby of a couple of years old, came down with polio. Polio in the 1950s was much more serious than it is now. There were tremendous problems with providing any cure for it or dealing with it in any kind of positive way. They were afraid that he was going to die. Children with polio did die at that time. Many of them were left lame. When I was in school in the 1960s, there were children who had polio who were debilitated for life quite seriously. So the Schaeffers' little boy came down with polio. Shortly after that, Susan, their middle child, came down with rheumatic fever. The cure for that was to stay in bed for many months and not do anything at all. She had to start having school at home.

Edith wrote about all of this and commented on the tremendous struggle that the Christian has in such a situation. She was learning about prayer, praying for God's help as the doctor was caring for Frankie. She was praying for God's wisdom for the doctor. She said that the real struggle for her, however, was a struggle to have a balance between continuing to love God when you face trouble and to have faith in His power no matter what might happen. That is a struggle, a tension, that every Christians faces when one is going through difficulty of one kind or another, particularly when it is this kind of suffering. When it happens to your children, you feel worse than you do when it happens to yourself. How will you deal with this? Will you continue to love God in this situation? Will you continue to pray? Will you continue to believe that He is able to take care of your needs and help you in this situation and give you the grace to cope with it? The struggle with that tension is common.

They also had a literal avalanche. They not only had an avalanche of problems, but there were avalanches in the village of Champery, where they were living. That gave them many wonderful relationships with the local people, but it was a difficult time to live through.

The Independent Missions Board, which came to be dominated by the side that did not like what Schaeffer was teaching, cut their allowance. They did not have enough to live on adequately anyway, but their allowance was cut quite dramatically by the Independent Missions Board at that time. So they were living on an inadequate income.

The final straw was that they were thrown out of Switzerland. They received a note from the commune saying that they had to be out of Switzerland by the night of March 31, and they would not be allowed to return to Switzerland for two years. They were going to lose their home. This note came only on February 14 in the year 1955. Why had this happened? The reason was really because of the conversion of Mr. X. He was an atheist, but he came from a Roman Catholic community. It was the bishop of that Catholic canton who engineered their eviction from the country. Some of Mr. X's relatives were angry. They preferred to have him as an atheist than an evangelical Christian. They did not mind at all when he was the village atheist who went down to the pub to get drunk every week, which he did regularly before he was converted. Yet they were quite angry when he became a Christian, an evangelical. It was because of his conversion and the formation of the church for the needs of people like him that led to their eviction from the country. They had no warning of this. They had applied for their permit to stay. It had been granted quite happily the previous time they were there. Yet they were told they had to go. Some of their friends were horrified by this. How could this happen in Switzerland? This is a country that is committed to freedom, particularly to religious freedom, as Switzerland had been for hundreds of years.

They were prepared for what lay ahead by these troubles of one kind and another. All of these troubles were driving them to a greater sense of their need to depend on God, their need to pray for His solution to the situation in which they found themselves. Edith wrote about receiving the letter. She said, "Francis called the family together and said, 'As I see it, we have two courses of action open to us. We could hurry and send telegrams to Christian organizations, to our senator, or to any influential person we can think of to try to get this decision reversed. Or rather than trying to get human help, we can simply ask God to help us. We have been saying that we want to have a greater reality of the supernatural power of God in our lives and in our work. It seems to me that we are being given an opportunity right now to demonstrate God's power. Do we believe our God is the same God as the God of Daniel? Do we believe that He is able to do something in government offices in this present situation as He has done in the past?'" So he laid that challenge before the family, and they all voted on it. The family voted, and all of them, down to two-year-old Frankie, voted that they would ask God and pray that He would find the answer.

By this time they were confident that they ought to stay in Switzerland. They had been beginning to discuss already the name of L'Abri. It was on the boat on the way back from the United States to Switzerland that the name L'Abri had come to them. They said, "Perhaps we could call our home 'The Shelter,'" which is what L'Abri means in French. They said, "All sorts of people are coming to it and have already found it as shelter. Perhaps that is what we ought to do, just carry on doing that. We will just take care of whoever God brings to us in one way or another and try to meet their needs. We will provide God's shelter to people."

The other thing that came to Edith during this period as they had begun thinking about this was the words from Isaiah 2:2-3, which God had used as a tremendous comfort to her that they were doing the right thing. Isaiah 2:2-3 says, "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains. It will be raised above the hills. All nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, 'Let us come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways so that we may walk in His paths.'" This was Edith's verse for the foundation of L'Abri, even though she recognized it was not written about L'Abri but about what God would do for Israel in Isaiah's future. The Messiah was coming to Israel, and through Him people from every nation would come to faith. And perhaps at the end of the age there would be a greater return of both Israel and the nations before the second coming of the

Messiah. Yet she thought that God gave these words to her as an encouragement to them that He would provide them with a place in the mountains to which people would come from all over the world to seek God and come and find Him there. They would come to know and love Him and walk in His ways. She believed God gave her that verse as an encouragement to her as they faced these tremendous needs of one kind and another.

So they were beginning to get a vision for what L'Abri was going to be. They already had a name for it. At the same time, they had nowhere to live. They were thrown out of the country. This brings us to the end of that time of preparation. In the next lesson we will look at the beginning of that work in a formal way.