

THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord
(2 Pt 1:2)

This is so important that I am shocked at how few people see the connection. Everyone wants grace (God's unmerited favour and life giving support) in their life; everyone also wants a peaceful life, or rather, God's peace overwhelming their crises. People try method after method to achieve this. Some seek miraculous ministries: physical healing, emotional healing, mental healing, exorcisms, and wonder-working. Some seek the aid of counselling ministries: psychotherapies of multitudinous sorts, spiritual counselling of all kinds, group therapies or 12 step programmes. Some end up blaming their lack of peace or bad health¹ upon demons, their past, their physiology, their parents, the stress of working, the state of the world; and so on. None of these methods or problem-fixings ever seems to bring lasting peace and people move from one therapy to the next in frustration, because none are God's method as stated here.

God's answer is quite clear and simple: **GRACE AND PEACE IS MULTIPLIED IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD AND JESUS**. Only by knowing God closer and closer do we experience grace and peace. In an age when the methods of counselling are numbered in the thousands, when more and more folk than ever before are requiring counselling and 'inner-healing', it is unsurprising that we have a dearth of real Bible study or interest in theology. In fact, often the same people offering various counselling or healing methods, are the same people who state that studying the Bible is a dry, or even, a dead work and that theology is only for crusty professors of academic seminaries.

Our wiser forbears, like the Puritans and the Reformers, knew better because they knew their Bibles. Even those who suffered persecution and martyrdom had a grace and peace from God which kept them secure until the end. Many preached the Gospel from the flames, or prayed for their persecutors, as they were tortured. **WHAT THE CHURCH NEEDS TODAY ABOVE ALL ELSE IS TO KNOW GOD.**

The word 'knowledge' here is different from the normal word and appears when apostles want to emphasise the need for a proper knowledge of God. The ordinary word for 'knowledge' is *gnosis* (**gnwsij**), but here the word is *epignosis* (**epignwsei**). This means 'full' or 'additional' knowledge. Peter uses both words in this letter.² One reason is to counter the claim of the Gnostic heretics who taught the need of receiving a mystical *gnosis* in order to communicate with the divine being. We do not need a special knowledge that results from a passive, mystical experience mediated by angels or special ministers. What is required is a full knowledge, a deep knowledge of God that comes through the normal means of discipline: Bible reading, prayer, study, hearing sound ministry, mediation on God's truth, fellowship etc.

We need to grow in our knowledge of God in order to be full of grace and peace.

¹ Illness is literally 'dis-ease', being robbed of peace through various means.

² *Epignosis* in 1:2, 3, 8, 2:20 but only *gnosis* in 1:5, 6, 3:18. The word *epignosis* appears in the NT in these places: Rm 1:28, 3:20; 10:2; Eph 1:17, 4:13; Phil 1:9; Col 1:9, 1:10, 2:2, 3:10; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25, 3:7; Tit 1:1; Philem 1:6; Heb 10:26; 2 Pet 1:2, 1:3, 1:8, 2:20.

All we need for life

Peter then emphasises this point in v3:

His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue,

Everything we need for living a good life comes through the knowledge of God. The power of the Trinity has secured for us all that we need to live well and in peace. Do we need something: perhaps grace to persevere, strength to carry on, or peace to relieve stress? Then we will find this through our union with God. We do not need special ministries or psychotherapy counselling that is based upon the notions of unchristian men,³ no – we need to understand more about our Father who is the almighty power of the universe. Why go to the daft ideas of sinners when almighty God is our Father?

People go to great lengths to even see divine power let alone receive it. They attend special meetings or large conventions hoping to see a display of power. Others send money to leaders who claim to possess this power, hoping to be prayed for and feel the effect in their lives. Here Peter says that God's divine power (*dunamis*) is received through knowledge, not by contacting a special ministry. It is through knowledge of God in Christ that we gain power.

How is this power usually expressed?

In wisdom, understanding, longsuffering and patience

... since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge [epignosis] of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge [epignosis] of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. (Col 1:9-12)

Paul's concern for the recently converted Colossians was that they should grow in knowledge. This was Paul's hope above all else – he didn't cease to pray for this. He wanted them filled with knowledge. A little knowledge was not good enough, he wanted them to be theologians. Indeed, all believers are called to be theologians – students of God.

Knowledge is vital to make someone skilful. Without knowledge, people are vulnerable and weak, unable to fix things for themselves and always needing to be spoon-fed (Heb 5:11-14). In the Christian life, knowledge is vital for a person to gain wisdom and understanding. This knowledge is initially about God above all, but also about God's will: how to deal with sin, temptation, the wiles of the enemy and the snares of the world; how to pray effectively; how to overcome personal weakness and so on.

People without knowledge always need someone to run to, always need a counsellor or a help of some kind. This is abnormal in folk who have been Christians for some time. Christians are meant to grow in knowledge so that they can fend for themselves and help other young believers. If a believer does not understand how the enemy traps folk, they will always fall into his snares. Knowledge helps believers avoid falling. They learn this through fellowship with wiser believers, but also through reading of the experiences of God's saints in the Bible.

³ Often very anti-God or occult ridden men like Freud, Jung and many others.

Paul says that without knowledge, these Colossians (and all of us) will be unable to walk worthy of the Lord, unable to please him. We must gain full knowledge.

Paul also says that we cannot be fruitful in good works without having understanding, the fruit of full knowledge of God. Peter agrees with him on this (2 Pt 1:8).

Wisdom is the ability to apply knowledge and that is why folk need to understand the truth about God. It is not mere head knowledge of doctrine that Paul has in mind, it is the deep understanding of God's personality and how he works salvation in and through us. Doctrine is helpful in understanding this, but doctrine must lead to wisdom – the ability to make good use of knowledge and to help others live well.

See what superlatives Paul then goes on to explain. As Christians increase in full knowledge, they are *strengthened with all might* (dunamis), *according to His glorious power*. So many folk rush to see dubious acts of power in famous ministry conventions. Some travel across oceans to do this; yet Paul states that believers who press on increasing in knowledge are themselves sure to experience God's glorious power. *Strengthened with all might* literally means 'empowered with all power'. This power (*kratos*) means 'perfect strength' and is only applied to God in the NT. Can there be a greater statement of power available to the Christian?

But how is this power expressed and revealed? It is seen in the trials of believers. Christians have this great power from God *for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light*. The power of God is seen today more clearly in this than anything else. The ability of saints to remain under trials and suffering without complaint, and being longsuffering in patience that does not retaliate.

God's power is granted to believers through knowledge and applied understanding in order for them to maintain a godly testimony through patience endurance. This is the clear word of God here. The vain hopes of many for wonder-working miracles becoming everyday experiences hoping that this will pave the way for revival is not the teaching of the apostle Paul, either in the first century or now.

So, knowledge of God is absolutely vital in maintaining a godly life, and this will lead to a deeper awareness of God's power and an ability to overcome our circumstances. This is real Christianity. Over and over again this has been seen in church history where humble believers have shocked their tormentors by the godly acceptance of persecution and their ability to have peace in suffering. I am tempted here to talk about the martyrdom of wonderful saints like Perpetua, Polycarp, Jan Hus, Ignatius and many others, but I will leave that to your own research.⁴

What was Paul's goal for the church?

... till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge (epignosis) of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.
(Eph 4:13)

[I] do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the exceeding

⁴ A good place to start is Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* or Thomson's *A Cloud of Witnesses*.

greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. (Eph 1:16-19)

Paul was continually anxious that believers grew in full knowledge. In Ephesians he begins by praying for this (Eph 1:17, *epignosis* here again); he wants us to know, to be enlightened, to have the eyes of our understanding opened up and to have a spirit of wisdom and revelation about God. Again, he links this immediately with experiencing God's power (Eph 1:19) – knowledge of God leads to power. But then later in Ephesians we see Paul's ministry (and all ministries) is directed to everyone becoming full in knowledge, a knowledge that leads to unity. Unity of faith is linked with fulness of knowledge.

All the ministries in the church are designed by God to lead believers into a greater and greater knowledge of Christ and their place in union with him. Only when the body is perfect in knowledge is their job done (never in this life).

Paul continues this theme in Philippians 1:9-10

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ,

Love is a key aspect of the Christian life, and rightly so since God is love; but love must grow in knowledge. There is a very real danger of love being unwise and leading to dangers. Many believers have found themselves in problems when they focused upon love and tolerance in unwise circumstances. Love must abound, must characterise our attitudes, but it must be directed by godly knowledge.

For instance, it is wrong to tolerate heretics or evildoers in the church as a result of misplaced love. Those who unrepentantly commit public sin, or teach cardinal errors, must be disciplined; and if they refuse discipline, they must be thrown out of the church.⁵ To refuse to do this on the basis of love is actually a sin. This is why Paul immediately explains that full knowledge leads to discernment – the almost lost ability of Christians to decide what is right and what is wrong. We must approve what is excellent, but we cause offence to God if we tolerate evil. How can we please God if we do not know what he desires from us? How can we tolerate those God despises (see an example in Rev 2:2,6,14-15). We must grow in full knowledge.

Paul continues this same theme in Colossians:

... That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge (epignosis) of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (gnosis). Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. (Col 2:2-4)

Love must be complemented by knowledge, and this knowledge of God produces riches of understanding. This is because God is full of the riches of wisdom and knowledge, thus knowing him deeper enables us to share those riches. This then leads immediately on to being enabled by knowledge to avoid being deceived by persuasive but erroneous words.

This is the key problem in the church today – folk everywhere are being deceived by persuasive words and false promises. This is exactly what Jesus prophesied when he said that deception would flood the earth in the end times (Matt 24:5, 11). Believers are falling for lies because they have not disciplined themselves to learn the truth about God. They fall

⁵ As Paul insisted upon in Corinth, 1 Cor 5.

into Satan's snare because they are not progressing in the knowledge of God. The more they fail to learn about God, the more vulnerable they are to the enemy. What is needed today is not supposed power ministries, but knowledge.

Sanctification

But this is not merely a matter of the head, as I explained before, it is a matter of the spirit. In Colossians 3 Paul teaches us that knowledge is a spiritual discipline:

Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him. (Col 3:10)

The new man (or new nature) is renewed in knowledge according to God's image, i.e. Christ. The more we put on the new nature, the more we become like Christ in practice and the more we will grow in knowledge. If we are not growing in spiritual knowledge, knowledge derived from Christ, we are not putting on the new nature; we are not progressing in sanctification.

The failure to progress in divine understanding is most serious; it means that we are not growing into Christ at all. The issue of becoming theologians, of becoming students of God, is crucial to our spiritual well-being, and cannot be ignored.

Evangelism

(Praying) that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgement (epignopsis) of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. (Philem 1:6)

Here Paul prays that Philemon's faith may be effective. How is our evangelism to be effective? By knowledge! Only by knowing God more, by understanding about the good things which are ours in Christ, can we be effectual in witnessing. To be faithful witnesses we need the power of God in our message. To obtain this, we need to be growing daily in knowledge about God and our inheritance in Christ. The more we learn, the more effective we are in demonstrating God's power in our life. Knowledge of God is vital to witnessing.

Conclusion

I think we can now see, from this cursory survey, that knowledge is at the very centre of Christian development. Far from being spurned (as it commonly is) the knowledge of God is utterly crucial to spiritual growth.

When a person is converted, he becomes a child of God and knows the Lord personally as his Father. In this sense, no one needs to tell him to know the Lord (be introduced to him) since he is already part of God's family (hence Heb 8:11). However, the progress of knowing God does not stop at this point; the convert must spend his life growing daily in the knowledge of God. This is why daily Bible study is so important. The point of study is not to follow some manual of spiritual life, learning fact after fact, but to progress into a deeper knowledge of God. The Bible is God's word, a reflection of what he is, what he wills and what his purpose is. To learn about Biblical doctrines and Biblical history is to learn about God's will in precept and in practice.

If we want to know God's grace and peace in our lives, we need to grow in knowledge of God, then these things will be multiplied in us.

Let us know, Let us pursue the knowledge of the LORD. His going forth is established as the morning; He will come to us like the rain, Like the latter and former rain to the earth.
(Hosea 6:3)

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