

## THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

A sermon preached by Rev. Lansing Burrows, D.D., before the Southern Baptist Convention in the city of Baltimore, May 7, 1884.

"That I may know him" -- Phil. 3:10.

I may stand without, upon the common pathway, and contemplate an imposing mansion, delighting myself with the harmonious blendings of art and nature and the joyous confusion of terrace and arcade and piazza and tower, and by a simple mental process know much of its master. I know his name for that is blazoned upon the gateway. The profuseness of luxury speaks of his great wealth. Decorated walls and groupings of shrubbery with nestling fountains and statuary, describe his culture. He is of kindly nature for happy children play unchecked upon the shaven lawn. I know of his benevolence because I see distressed poverty return from meeting him with the gleam of gratitude distilling away the tear of suffering. But though I know much about him, I do not know him. <sup>his</sup> His enemy may know as much.

And so when I trace the handiwork of God in smiling landscapes, or in the scintillating heavens, or regard his power in the fury of tempests or in the silent marshalling of worlds; or contemplate his gentleness in his care for wounded sparrows; or reflect upon his ~~in~~limitable resources in the luxurious purvey of his providence, I may know much about him, and yet be a stranger to him and forbidden his presence.

Such a knowledge as this, it is evident, could not meet the earnest aspiration of the Apostle. "The excellency of the knowledge of Christ" was not mere understanding of the doctrines concerning

Him. He desired a knowledge that was a life within him, and not a knowledge that was only information---a knowledge that resulted more in purity of heart rather than a clearness of intellect,---a knowledge that is the true test of the new life. The new birth is not a new notion---it is a new life. We are born of God and are not born of something about God. The distinction between the old life and the new is, that in the former state there is an unsatisfactory knowledge about God, while in the renewed condition there is the experiencing of a sequence of facts working out, as by a stern, unbending logic, the fullness of righteousness---the revelation of a personality that is comprehended and trusted. That it is possible for such a knowledge to exist, is the very burden of the Scripture, and what is more this true Gnosticism, this knowledge of God in the revelation of Jesus Christ, makes a man ipso facto full, so that he wants no more.

I. I submit that to know Christ is to comprehend God, and that apart from Christ, God is altogether mysterious and unknowable. In that chapter, peculiarly cherished by the most devout---I mean the 14th of John's Gospel---it is plainly affirmed by the Saviour, that the knowing and seeing of Him is identical with the seeing and knowing of the Father. (John 14:7-10).

The manifestation of Jesus Christ was the full answer to the heart-cravings that from the very flame-guarded portals of Eden has been sighing "that I may know him!" Saintly ambition had searched anxiously for "the seed of the woman," then for Abraham's seed, then for David's seed, then for Messiah, that "should come;" It saw that day afar off, and was glad; it sought for the knowledge by which the "Righteous Servant" should justify many; and when

"in the fullness of time," the flash of angelic wings and the splendor of guiding stars led Simplicity and Wisdom to the incarnation, they saw not the beauty of innocent infancy, but "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6). As the light of the world developed from the hidden glow in the carpenter's home, astonished men recognized it as a revelation; they became convinced that when they heard Him speak, they heard God's gracious words; when they saw Him act, they beheld the very power of God; when they beheld His spirit, they understood the love of God. "No man had seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he declared him." (John 1:18).

The revelation of God was declared to be a specific purpose in the incarnation of Christ. No man knoweth the Father "save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him." (Matt. 11:27). This office-work of divine unfolding continues as a perpetual mission. And how does he reveal God? Not by frigid declaration and abstractions; but by "the development of divine sympathies." There is a vast difference between the intellectual apprehensions of a fact and the getting at the essence of the fact. How do you understand the spirit? Not by any physical outline do you apprehend a great spiritual fact, as the affection for mother, or wife, or child. "Unless something beside the mere scientific intellect grasps a fact as present, unless there is faith to apprehend and take hold of the spiritual reality, we get nothing but the dead, atheistical form of things." The "undevout astronomer" may trace a starbeam until it is chilled to darkness in the illimitable void, and find no God. The skeptical anatomist may peer within the scarlet hinges of the

mortal tabernacle and find no lodgment for an immortal soul. Is there, therefore, no guiding hand directing Arcrurus and his suns and is there no handwriting in the flesh? The sun makes but a sorry reflection of itself in a discolored pool; neither can God be revealed in the depths of a foul and earthly mind. It has been well said to understand a philosopher requires a philosopher, to understand a patriot, requires a patriot, to understand purity, one that is pure. So, to understand God, requires a Godlike spirit.

Just that is the aim of faith in Jesus Christ. We look upon a personality. His character and His nature so unselfish and consequently so unearthly, so yearningly affectionate and therefore so unusual—affect us so that we give up to a simple impression of goodness. We accept and believe His word, because He says it. He with such a spirit, with such love, with such proof of self-abnegation. We have an evidence of Christianity that is not argument but apprehension, not a balancing of affirmatives and negatives, but a direct sightseeing. The words that He speaks "they are spirit and they are life." (John 6:63).

Let it be true that our knowledge of God is limited because our facilities are limited, and therefore at the best we have only partial views of Him. I would not care for it to be otherwise. I need a higher, a nobler, a more far reaching God than I can imagine. I cannot worship an Analysis. The voice of the spirit is like the moaning of the seashell, repeating the hollow murmur of the sinuous ocean, whence it came, and whither it would go; and not unlike the shell, I am powerless in myself to satisfy my yearnings. But Jesus Christ comes to me, with a yearning infinitely greater, and with an affection illimitable, and the cry of the spirit is answered. I may not understand Him whose habitation

of righteousness and judgment is amid clouds and darkness, but the One who touches my eyes so that I can see, and heals the paralysis of my guilty heart, and whose whisperings of peace kindle my dull ear into acutest hearing—I can understand Him. I may not know Him whose voice is in the thunders and whose path is in the sea, but I can apprehend the voice that tenderly invites, "Come unto Me," and the way is clear when he counsels "Follow Me." I may not understand how terrible is the consuming fire of wrath against sin; but I can comprehend Him who sits down to weep over my sin. I may have feeble conception of the everlasting life of God,—I who am so finite, the creature of such a winter's day,—but I can understand Him who gives himself up to death for me. And when He who does all that for me, assures me that that is the spirit and the grace and the character of God, I say, "Yes, Lord, thou art the truth—that is God! Thou art God! My Lord and my God!"

II. I further submit that to know Christ is to apprehend Truth. For it is not sufficient to have simply a revelation of the character of God. He has a purpose of grace to us. Not like a king who conceives it to be gracious to allow his subjects to gaze upon his countenance is he; but like a king who has devised a great prosperity for his people, and who would have them give ear to Him.

The best education is that which gives a man the right use of his own powers. It would make men not simply do the right, but enjoy ~~doing~~ right things; to be industrious and pure and just because of a love for these things. That is the aim of Christ's teaching—to quicken right sentiment and desire. Therefore it is not an outward communication of notions, precepts, commands, so much as it is a real communication of himself. The theme of the Teaching is the Teacher. It is the very reverse of egotism and the only communication

of certainty. Confucius and Plato--yea, the whole college of ancient learning had been content with saying, "Accept our doctrine, believe these truths which we utter." The word of real wisdom is "I am the Truth, believe in me!" That is the calm insistence of the Gospel, drowned sometimes by the hoarse bellowing of wild Shemitic prophecies into the ears of them that search not but vainly dispute. Over against the philosophers' negation of things and his "Everlasting No," stand the "promises of God" which "in him are yea and in him Amen." (2 Cor. 1:20)

The foundation of doubt is the world's ignorance of Christ. The philosophers do not know him. The very favorite shandes of religious thought do not know him. I he was the Christ of the "New Theology" I think I should be a skeptic. If he was the Christ of the priestcraft, I know I should turn away sorrowing if not rebellious. A yearning world, in the twilight of uncertainty, like Mary in the garden, may well cry out, "They have taken away my Lord, and I know not where I may find him." The revolt of the ~~painted~~ mind is not against religion; it is against the painted pretence that is called religion; it is against the religion of mummery and hollow platitudes, and perversions of truth, and bowings down to Caesar, and interferences with conscience and no Christ. It is only the refusal to take the stone instead of the bread, the loathing of the serpent that is offered for the egg. It is a revolution against Rome, and the Romish tendency outside of Rome--Papist and Apeist; and I honor the man that peers through the flimsy veil and concludes that there is nothing in it. Right! there is nothing in it. Being Christless, it is like a painted skull, with the fire of intelligence simulated by a lighted candle placed within it. Who shall be ~~xxx~~ awed by it? and who shall be won by it? Is he

wrong who, beholding the genuflections and theatricals--the millinery and music--the banners and processions--the thirst for rule--the consorting with political elections--the pomp and gaudy parade of that which calls itself Christianity--is he wrong who declares religion to be fit only for women and children? No; he is not wrong. Better the worship of humanity than the adoration of paint and tableaux. Humanity at least is real and solemn. The cry of mind is for light. Why should it not turn away from the chill and gloom of a church where Christ is outside the door knocking and beseeching ears that are deaf, save to compliments and adulation. There is no doubt where there is a free gospel and an honored Christ; but why should there not be doubt and fear too when men are like the disciples upon Gennesaret, toiling in the jaws of death upon a tempestuous sea, amid howling winds, dark, and Jesus not come to them?

When Christ is known there is at least some certainty. The complaint of doubt is that the beyond is unknowable. Without the torch of Christ's teaching it is misty and rayless. With Him, however, we see something "as through a glass darkly." The legitimate and logical conclusion of a dim sight is faith, and not skepticism; for if we see dimly, yet we see. Are there shadows? There is no shadow without a substance. Have we only reflections? There must be brightness to cast reflection. That is why Christ stands urging "Learn of me;" as if he should say, "I only can tell you; I only know the Father; the future is in my hand; you are disturbed and distressed because you cannot solve the problem of human destiny; for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the Truth; I will teach you if you will be patient and learn." It is not irrational to believe the word of a higher and nobler nature. Man sneers, "Seeing

is believing, "yet sees and believes not. God's doctrine is "Believing is seeing," and believing the man does see. He is no longer like a "clever archaeologist" on his knees, in a churchyard, spelling out defaced inscriptions on the marbles and increasing in a knowledge ever pursued by a mark of interrogation. He has a really not a ~~notional~~ notional knowledge. Being able to say "I know whom I have believed," he can also say "I know that all things work together for good to me."

Is there a royal road to learning? The wise say they have not discovered it, but that truth comes slowly as a succession of sustained verities. Yes, that is it. The royal road to spiritual truth is a close following of the pathway of the Great Teacher, and certainty springs from the succession of corroborated confidences and sustained truths we make in him.

III. I further submit that to know Christ is to understand Self. It is not enough to comprehend the character of God, or to apprehend the vital truths concerning him; it is needful that we derive a lasting benefit from this knowledge. This is impossible, for the knowledge of Christ possesses a renovating, regenerating power upon the human soul. It is a great thing to say "I am a believer;" for that is saying, "I am born of God--I am of a Divine Original--I am governed by his spirit."

It is from the natural deductions of the personal knowing of Christ, that men dazed by the blindness of self, so persistently shrink. They complain that it is a receding from the proper dignity of manhood. They urge that the becoming a little child is a reversal of the true order of things. They complain that men ought to develop into bravery and independence and that being meek and humble and patient is a belittling of self. They turn away from this diminishing



in petulance, like a child playing truant because the school is a check and a discipline upon the sunny nature of childhood. They commit fatal error, as does the child who casts away the golden hour of opportunity. To know Christ is to awaken to the conception of growth, and development into a greater, higher, nobler, stronger life, wherein weaknesses are conquered, infirmities are rehabilitated, passions are curbed and the soul let out, like an imprisoned bird from her cage, into the liberty and power of greatness. "What is weaker than pride, self-will, revenge, the puffing of conceit and rationality, the constringing littleness of all selfish passion? An in just these things it is that human souls are so fatally shrunk in all their conceptions of themselves; so that Christ encounters in all men the first and most insurmountable difficulty--to make them apprized of their real value to themselves." But when they know Him, and they are awakened to the sense of the dignity of character as it shines in His face, nothing can restrain them; it is a new inspiration; it is a turning away from the mean and base and grovelling subserviance of self; it is a recognition of the higher and nobler qualities of patience, forbearance, sacrifice; it is a discovery of wondrous energies of which the soul is capable, it is a sense of the "element of all greatness."

We know greatness only by example. We are good as we imitate the illustrations of goodness. We only understand our capacities as we are constrained to attain to what others have accomplished. When we behold greatness and goodness we say, "Oh to be like that!" and examining into the springs of conduct which produce that

admirable character, we strive to set them in motion within ourselves. If we are content to drive on, insensible to the influences around us, as some are content to buy and sell and get gain and live only unto self and for self, the fatal mistake ere long is realized. Nothing sadder than the hardness and coldness of a soul that has misapprehended its own purpose and destiny, congealing like the white winter of the far north, where the bay of famished wolves blend with the sad cries of the wild swans dying of hunger and thirst upon the rivers whose waves are changed to stone and the reeds of whose margin are grown hard upon spears of iron.

The Son of Righteousness arising upon the rime and deadness of a wintry soul, quickens it to new conceptions of self, of duty, of living. As the picture of Christ spreads out before the astonished eye, there is no need of exhortation to be like minded. That sublime spectacle is powerful enough. The face marred by sorrow, yet illumined by the spirit of sacrifice; the soul, grieving for sin, yet patient and meek; the body, wearied with labor, yet unselfish and ministering; the whole life a benediction upon the hearts and homes of men, and the end of life an expiation and a forgiveness—that is the dignity and greatness of human nature. "The boast of heraldry and the pomp of power"—the genius of invention and the cunning of art—the glory of statecraft and the mad ambition that climbs to fame upon slopes of trampled dead—how they fade away when the Light of the World reveals the true uses and mission of living! To know him quickens the desire for imitation; the increase of the knowledge of him engenders the power of imitation. To discover the possibility of attaining to

His likeness and thus of throwing off the coercing fetters of sordidness and baseness is the joy of living. To grow in that likeness even unto the fullness of stature, becomes the ambition of living. The disappointments and tribulations of the way of pilgrimage are recompensed in the heart's song of anticipation, "I shall be satisfied when I awake in thy likeness;" and trial and warfare and contact with earth's debasedness, in no wise undermines the patience that waits for the manifestation of redemption when "we shall be like him."

IV. I finally submit that to know Christ is Eternal Life.

The result of the powers of the soul is described in the Gospel as far different from the conceptions of the sensual philosophers. Heaven is not a Nirvana; the thrill of eternal being is not carnal. Sweet fields there may be, but not for dreamy languor; pavements of gold and vases of crystal there may be, but not for gaudy display; mansions there may be but not for the extravagance and ease of luxury. Not rest in idle baskings beneath the breezes of a perpetual summer—not sweet companionship in reunited bonds of earth—not these alone denote the privilege of the blest. Yes, there is rest, and there is sweet and holy occupancy of things revealed to us in types of material things and there is ecstatic reunion and recognition of faces that made life's weariness a blessing, but they are only accessories. Something better than that. And is there aught better? Aye, indeed, for "this life eternal, to know the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom he has sent." (John 17:3.)

To know God—to know Jesus Christ—the hiding veil, through which the lights has been coming sparsely, torn away—the fleshly tabernacle with its windows all begrimed with sin, demolished, and the new house built upon its ruins with every window open to the blessed sunlight of the Divine Glory—the night shadows, whose long cloakings held our vision in thrall and dampened the fine colorings into half distinguishable greys, now chased away by the dawning of the eternal morning—the little limit of view which we caught in the valley of humiliation, widened because of our uplifting upon the mountain peak of God's exaltation—to know!—yes, that is life.

What is living without knowledge—living, I mean, here and now, with intellects thrown out of balance, for want of the perpetual guidance of the Holy Spirit, like a watch with an untempered mainspring, working and yet lacking reliability? What is living without knowledge, even when the fleshly and temporal has prevailed over the finer spiritual value? The pain of sin, the distress of the warped nature is the stretching out after something unattainable. The cravings of the spirit are like the voice of a prisoner crying out of his deep cell for the light he has forgotten and calling for comrades that have forgotten him. Its moaning is "I should like to know." With all the disadvantages growing out of the mastery of the flesh, to know is better than to eat, to sleep, to gain. The widening of the mental horizon, the solving of the wonderful problems in the material universe around us—the understanding of the hidden springs that lie coiled up within ourselves—the timid touching of the borders of the great unknown—this is living. Knowledge is power and power is life. The man who moves amid the scenes of today, calm, majestic,

self-contained, is that man that knows. I do not say that he knows everything; he may know but little; but I mean that his content and success and lofty enjoyment spring out of the fact that he knows that there are some things, the most important things to him, that are open to his view and contained within the limit of his understanding. What have been the great victory shouts of the earthborn? Like watchmen calling from their towers through a darkness that veils their vision, I hear the afflicted Job cry out, "I know that my Redeemer liveth," and through the mist of the centuries I hear the answer sounding back from the imprisoned Paul, "I know whom I have believed."

Now strip away the flesh, cast off the garments of the spirit that have been fouled by earth, retune the harp that has become harsh and jangled—free the soul from its fetters, and let it stand disenthralled and reburnished with all its faculties playing in harmonious oneness, itself unveiled, before the univers, and what shall be the ground of joy, of strength, of excellence? What, indeed, but the gloomy shadows have been dissolved, and that without the presence of a chilling doubt or intervention of a single uncertainty—it knows; knows the purpose of its being; knows the reason for its discipline of tears; knows the meaning of the strange Providences that have chequered the life; knows why the burden-bearing and the journeys, in the night—knows the deep mysteries of God—knows God himself; that is heaven—that is life; to know, and knowing to acquiesce and endorse; looking back upon the sad days of earth and forward to the "peaceable fruits of righteousness" and with wonder and amazement to sing "just and true are thy ways thou King of Saints."

The day of resurrection will be a reproduction of the day of the nativity. There will be a converging together of them who desire to look upon the King. The company of the wise men will be increased to the numberless multitude of them that are wise indeed and who shine forth as the sun for beauty. Not the stable of the Godman will be the object of their quest, but the throne of the Man-God. He will be again "the desire of all nations." Every eye will be strained to catch a glimpse of Him that was pierced. They come up from their graves, rising out of the sea, gathering from the four corners of the earth—diverse in nation, diverse in culture, diverse in language, diverse in ages of development—yet unified by one common desire, one common hope. They re-echo the question of the enquiring Greeks: "We would see Jesus!" In a myriad tongues breaks that one heart-born query: "Where is he?"—the fathers and the martyrs—the missionaries and their redeemed flocks—European, Asiatic, American, African and the dwellers in the sea isles—streaming toward the one common centre of Hope and Life—with the last lingering look of earth depicted in their anxiety of gaze—searching for the Babe of the Manger, the Teacher of the hillside, the sacrifice of Calvary. And they draw nearer; the splendor of the Throne flashes upon their countenances; the strains of the welcoming chorus rise to a mighty climax: "There He is! that is He! that is the Brow that was crowned with thorns! that is the side that was pierced through and through! those are feet that grew weary with searching for me! that is the smile that kissed my dull heart unto life—I see him—I knew him—there He is! there He is!

Nor is that all; to know Him is to be known by Him;  
 I see him greet them as they crowd around Him. That is His  
 mother, that is the woman that washed His feet, there are  
 Joanna and Susanna that prepared bread for Him, there is the  
 woman who wore the seamless garment, the fishermen who followed  
 him, the man that gave him a sepulchre, the child that crept  
 up to Him to kiss Him, they who toiled for Him, who suffered for  
 Him, who preached and taught for Him. His hands stretch forth  
 in welcome. "Oh I know you! I know you, true yokefellow, I have  
 been with you many an hour when you have preached my Gospel  
 to unwilling ears. I know you feeder of my lambs, I have been  
 beside you many a time when you were teaching my name to infant  
 lips, I know you, brave conquerer; I have been with you in many  
 a battle with temptation. I know you, child of suffering; I have  
 been beside your bed of pain and heard your songs in the night.  
 Yes, I know you—and you too—and you. Come ye blessed of my Father,  
 come home." And they follow Him wheresoever he goeth!

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