
JOHN 17:3 : THE ESSENCE OF ETERNAL LIFE [1]

No. EE31

In the process of becoming a mature Christian I must master many Biblical truths. What is more, my priorities must undergo many adjustments. But the calling above all others, is the unspeakable privilege of growing in the knowledge of God. As the Lord Jesus says here in His high priestly prayer, it is the essence of eternal life. More than anything else it will dominate for all eternity the life of everyone who is savingly united to Christ.

Over and over again the Bible emphasises the importance of the knowledge of God.

In Jer 9:23-24 the Lord says, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight."

Hosea often deals with this subject. In Hos 2:19-20 (ESV) the Lord promises, "And I will betroth you to me for ever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord." The prophet then goes on to mourn the fact that his people are "destroyed for lack of knowledge" (4:6). What is the knowledge he is talking about? He provides the answer a few verses earlier in 4:1: "Hear the word of the Lord, O children of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land ..." Finally Hosea makes a passionate appeal to

his countrymen in 6:3: "Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord." He then backs the call with an assurance from the Lord: "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

There are several similar pronouncements elsewhere in the Bible, e.g. Prov 9:10; Ex 33:13 et seq; 2Pt 1:2-3; 1Jn 2:3-4; 4:7-8.

What is this knowledge of God?

❑ To start off, two qualifications.

Firstly, in both Hebrew and Greek the word "to know" carries the idea of knowledge resulting from observation, contemplation and experience. It therefore implies both objective insight and subjective experience. It often carries the meaning of an intimate relationship and intimacy between people. We read, for instance in Gn 4:1 that Adam "knew his wife and she conceived..." (ASV, ESV).

Secondly, if we look at the way knowledge of God is described in the Bible, it is noticeable how often it is tied to an understanding and experience of His attributes and the excellence of His character (comp. Jer 9:24 and Hos 2:18-19, already quoted).

❑ The knowledge of God has three distinguishable but inseparable elements. The extent to which these components are a reality in my life, is the extent to which I know God.

The knowledge of God is
an understanding of that which the Triune God has revealed about Himself,
which hangs together with
an ongoing, conscious and personal walk with Him,
which brings about
an insight into His will and ways.

❑ *The first element has to do with understanding that which God has revealed about Himself in*

Scripture. It is concerned with thought and study. The apostle writes: "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know Him ..." (1Jn 5:20, ESV).

Because knowledge of God involves much more than mere knowledge of various facts about Him, some think that they can get by without it - a fatal mistake! Why, after all, has God revealed so much about Himself to us?

Without disciplined, thoughtful and prayerful study of what God has revealed about Himself in Scripture one can easily lapse into a quagmire of subjective and one-sided arbitrariness. And the outcome is inevitable: you are misled into creating a god after your own image - leading in effect to idolatry, and all the twisted outcomes in one's life.

He who serves an imaginary God will have to accept imaginary salvation one day!

J.I. Packer has this to say about the study of God's character: "No topic is greater, grander, or more important, and by the same token none is more demanding. It is the theological Mount Everest, and no one ever masters it or does it full justice."

❑ *The second element of the knowledge of God is our personal relationship or fellowship with God.* "Enoch walked with God" - like all godly men and women through the ages (Gen 5:22, 24).

My personal relationship with God finds expression in two ways:
on the one hand in my believing identification, my grateful experience, and my reverent recognition of His attributes operating in my life,
and
on the other hand in my believing trust in His promises, my loving commitment to His glory, and my grateful obedience to His commands.

We may never concern ourselves with the theological aspects only. God did not reveal Himself to man merely for the sake of the intellectual and the

speculative. No, He revealed Himself to us so that we may worship, love and serve Him accordingly. That is why the Bible, when speaking of God, does not limit itself to abstract statements about Him, but time and again boils it down to experiencing His attributes in personal and ordinary human terms.

The Bible never regards a truth as truly known until it controls the life of the learner. And nowhere is this more apparent than in its teaching about the knowledge of God.

This emphasis helps us to steer clear of lapsing into a mere cerebral and scholastic view about God - a view which may be doctrinally sound but emotionally and spiritually dead.

But then it is also equally important to note that fellowship with God does not consist of having a mere subjective and mystical dialogue with Him.

On the one hand I live in fellowship with God when in faith I view my entire life through the spectacles of the Word and so come to recognise His intimate involvement in all my circumstances and the whole course of my life.

On the other hand I live in fellowship with the Lord when in faith I apply in my life the practical implications of what He has revealed about Himself and his will. In other words, it is my response to His saving initiatives, His ongoing loving faithfulness and His sovereign rule over my life.

In this way the covenant of grace, namely that the Lord shall be a Father to me and that I shall be His child, becomes an everyday experimental reality.

The life of David serves as a beautiful illustration. Take for instance Psalm 139, where he speaks of God's lofty attributes - His omniscience, omnipotence and omnipresence. He however does not do so in abstract terms, but as he himself has experienced them. He mentions the name of the Lord six times in the Psalm, and uses personal pronouns that refer to Him approximately thirty times. He also refers to himself about fifty times. Therefore, in David's innermost experience of his faith there are only two persons involved, the Lord and he himself. That is why he does not talk of "He",

but of "you", and not of "people" or "man", but of "I".

□ *The third element has to do with insight into God's will and His ways.*

In Ex 33:13 (NIV) Moses pleads with the Lord, "If you are pleased with me, teach me your ways so I may know you and continue to find favour with you"; and in Ps 103:7 we find the statement, "He made known His ways to Moses, His deeds to the people of Israel."

This is about wisdom and ongoing renewal in my way of thinking, which help me to discern clearly my own role in effecting God's will for my life. Nowhere is this principle put more clearly than in Rm 12:2: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is - his good, pleasing and perfect will."

However, we are concerned here with more than our personal obedience. What is also involved is insight into how God normally deals with this world, His church and His people. It involves an understanding of His precepts, and how His universal principles are to be applied; what are His preferences and dislikes; what pleases Him or raises His anger.

What do we learn from all this?

This is as far as we go with our theme for the present. Actually we have only put a few foundation stones into place. I propose to talk about the practical guidelines for our pursuit of the knowledge of God next time.

In conclusion I would like to make a single appeal to you: Take time to reflect in all honesty and in detail on everything we have been considering.

Ask yourself whether you are really walking with the Lord in a balanced and Scriptural manner. Are all three elements required for a genuine knowledge of God present in your life? Do you really have a personal relationship with the Lord? Are His fingerprints to be seen in your daily existence? Is He

really involved with you personally? Can you recognise it? Is your lifestyle marked by trust in God, by loving dedication to Him, by principled and uncompromising obedience to Him?

Why are these questions so important? I think I have a Scriptural mandate to tell you that if you are a stranger to them, you probably have not received eternal life yet.

Do not simply argue that you have always been a good churchgoer and a believer. Many of us come from backgrounds where lopsided thinking about these matters have been the norm rather than the exception. Often there is either a one-sided emphasis on the purely intellectual, or an over-reaction manifesting itself in emotionalism.

No! No! Examine yourself to ensure that your faith is true and authentic (2Cor 13:5). This is vitally important, because the Bible frequently warns us against false doctrine, self-deception and an expectation about eternal salvation that may prove to be in vain.

And if you fail the test? Then you go to the Lord in humility and plead for His mercy. And persevere until He answers you. He has promised his grace in Christ to people who approach Him like this.

May the Lord in His mercy and through His Spirit grant us the ability to carry out this self-evaluation in a sober, honest and mature way!

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