

Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 21

TO KNOW GOD

Our most high calling

Nico van der Walt

NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT for the individual believer, the church, or theology, than true knowledge of the Triune God.

On the one hand it is true that unworthy and inferior opinions about God lie at the root of most failings and errors in the church. On the other hand it is equally true that there has never been a real revival in the church in which the fear of God – and therefore high and holy convictions about God – did not play a central role.

It is therefore true that nothing gives a deeper insight into a church, a person or a preacher, than the inner beliefs concerning God. And, let us remember, these beliefs inevitably come to expression – either in words and deeds, or in silence and omissions.

A VITALLY IMPORTANT MATTER

It is common to hear Christians talk about a personal relationship with God. Does such a thing exist? And what does it mean in practical terms?

The Bible does not speak in so many words of a personal relationship with God. Yet the Word is full of it as an experiential reality known by all believers. In fact, it lies at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian. New life in Christ means to stand in a new relationship to God. The expression most frequently used by Scripture for this, is *to know God*.

☐ Time and time again, and consistently, the Bible emphasizes the vital importance of knowing God. We quote from the NASB.¹

1. Unfortunately the NIV does not translate consistently. Sometimes the expression "to know God" is translated "to acknowledge God".

- Jer 9:23-24: "Thus says the LORD, 'Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,' declares the LORD."

- Hosea often speaks about the knowledge of God:

In 2:18-20 the Lord promises: "In that day I will also make a covenant for them ... And I will betroth you to Me forever; yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in lovingkindness and in compassion, and I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. Then you will know the LORD." In chapter 4:6 the prophet mourns because his people are destroyed by a lack of knowledge. What is this knowledge he is referring to? Only a few verses earlier the answer is given: "For the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land" (4:1). Finally Hosea puts an urgent appeal before his people: "So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; and He will come to us like the rain, like the spring rain watering the earth" (6:3). And he supports his summons with a wonderful promise of the Lord: "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

- It should therefore not surprise us when the Lord Jesus prays in His high-priestly prayer: "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent" (John 17:3).

☐ A study of the many pronouncements in the Bible about the worth and necessity of the knowledge of God, reveals among other things the following:

- It is the essence of eternal life (John 17:3).
- It is man's highest calling (Hos 6:3; Mic 6:8; Phl 3:8-10).
- It lies at the heart of life in the New Covenant (Hos 2:18-20).
- It pleases God (Jer 9:23-24; Hos 4:1, 6; 6:6; Mal 3:16-18).
- It is our highest boast and privilege (Jer 9:23-24).
- It is true learning and the cornerstone of real theology (Prov 9:10).
- It goes hand in hand with true wisdom and discernment (Ex 33:13).
- It is a channel through which grace, peace and godliness flow into our lives (2Pet 1:2-3).
- It is a key to Christian obedience and love (1John 2:3-4; 4:7-8).

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW GOD?

☐ First of all it is important to put two truths squarely in place:

- Firstly, both the Hebrew and the Greek words for "knowledge" are rich and meaningful concepts: *to know through observation, contemplation and experience*. It refers to both *objective knowledge* and *subjective knowledge*.

~ The Biblical concept "to know" often points to a very intimate relationship and communion between persons. In Gen 4:1 *et al*, for example, the word is used for sexual intercourse between Adam and Eve.

- Secondly, if one endeavours to describe the knowledge of God biblically, it soon strikes you *how often it is associated with the understanding and experience of God's attributes – the excellencies of His character* (see for example Jer 9:24 and Hos 2:19-20, quoted above).

☐ The knowledge of God has three distinguishable but inseparable elements. The extent to which these things 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 concerns *an understanding of God's self-revelation* in His Word. It has to do with study, and the intellectual or cognitive insight it brings.

In 1John 5:20 the apostle writes: "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding, in order that we might know Him who is true".

- Because the knowledge of God is more than being conversant with facts about Him, some think that they can get away without it. Because intellectual

understanding is not enough, they consider it to be unnecessary. This is a fatal mistake! How can we ever know something or a person without a clear understanding of basic relevant facts about it or him? For that matter, as insight grows, knowledge grows.

- Without disciplined intellectual (and prayerful, it goes without saying) study of what God has revealed about Himself in Scripture, one lands up in a bog of subjective and biased arbitrariness. And deception becomes inevitable: we create a God after our own image. So it leads to effective idolatry, as well as all the distorted expressions of life which inevitably grows from it.

The man or woman who worships an imaginary god, will have to be satisfied with an imaginary salvation.

- About the study of God's character in Scripture, J.I. Packer says: "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* 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.

- It is very necessary to think about God in philosophical and objective terms. But we are never to stop at the mere theological. God has not revealed Himself to man simply for the sake of intellectual and speculative reflection. No, He has revealed Himself to us so that we can worship, love and serve Him in everyday life. This is why the Bible, when it speaks about God, very often does not limit itself to abstract truths about Him, but time and again describes His attributes in personal and practical terms.

The Bible considers a person to know a biblical truth only if and when the person has allowed that truth to govern his life. And never is this truer than when it concerns the knowledge of God.

- It is therefore necessary to emphasize this aspect of the knowledge of God in order not to fall into a mere cerebral and scholastic view of God – something which might be doctrinally very correct, yet emotionally and spiritually totally dead.

But it is equally important to remember – the above definition makes it very clear – that the richness and depth of my walk with God is dependent on my understanding of His self-revelation and promises in Christ.

- To walk with God is not a subjective, mystical dialogue with God – as many pretend to enjoy in an ongoing way.

It is on the one hand to look at my whole life through the polished spectacles of the Word so as to see God's intimate involvement in the circumstances and progress of my life; and on the other, to faithfully live out the implications of what God has revealed

about Himself – and, of course, of His explicit commands in the Word. It is in other words my response to His saving initiatives, His ongoing covenant love, and His sovereign rule in my life.

In this way the heart of the covenant of grace becomes a daily reality to me – that God will be a Father to me, and I a child to Him.

- Luther once said: "The Christian faith is a matter of personal pronouns." This is beautifully illustrated in David's life – especially as it comes to expression in the Psalms. Take for example Ps 139: he writes about God's exalted characteristics – His omniscience, His omnipresence, and His omnipotence. But he does not do so in abstract terms as one might have expected, but according to his personal experiences of God's attributes.

~ The Name of the Lord is mentioned 6 times; and personal pronouns referring to Him about 30 times. And to himself David refers approximately 50 times.

We can therefore clearly see that in David's deepest spiritual experiences only two persons are essentially involved – David himself, and the Lord his God. This is why he does not speak of "He", but of "You", not of "people", but of "I".

☐ The third element has to do with insight in God's will and ways.

In Exodus 33:13 we find Moses pleading with the Lord: "Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight."

Ps 103:7 tells us: "He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the sons of Israel."

- Understanding God's ways has

to do with a wisdom and growing insight into my role in the outworking of God's will in my life. This is accurately expressed in Rm 12:2: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect."

- This matter, however, concerns more than merely my personal obedience. It is also an insight into how God normally works in this world, in His church, and with people. It is an understanding of his universal principles. It is the comprehension of what He delights in and what He detests.

- This aspect of the knowledge of God increases to the extent that the first two elements become a reality in my life.

A FEW POINTERS ON THE HIGHWAY OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

☐ In the first instance I have to grasp that I have no higher calling than pursuing the knowledge of God.

- Micah 6:8: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Phl 3:8-10: "... I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order ... that I may know Him ...".

- The Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q & A 1: "What is the chief end of man? Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."

☐ Let us embrace it with both arms: God wants to reveal Himself to His children. And He wants to walk with them. Is this not at the heart of the Old Testament promises of the New Covenant? (Hos 2:19-20; Jer 31:31-34).

☐ Let our desire and aim always be God Himself – therefore the Giver and not merely His gifts. What greater insult can there be than to be interested in someone only for the sake of what you can get out of him?

☐ God can only be known in and through Jesus Christ.

- Firstly, the Word who became man is God's highest, perfect and final revelation to us (Jh 1:14; 14:8-9). No one can know God properly unless he or she looks intently, intensely, and again and again at the Lord Jesus Christ. Hb 1:3 puts it like this: "And He (Christ) is the radiance of His (God's) glory and the exact representation of His nature ...".

Let us never forget, Jesus Christ is the clearest window through whom we see who and what God is!

- Secondly, Christ is the only Mediator between God and man. Without Him no fellowship with God is possible (Jh 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1Tm 2:5).

☐ This revelation comes through the Spirit, who works through the Word.

- It is possible to see something of God's divine glory and eternal power in creation (Rm 1:20). But it is not nearly enough to lead us to a living relational knowledge of God. For that we are totally dependent on His special revelation in the Word – which, of course, has as central theme God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. In God's Word we have all

we need to know Him as we should.

- This does not mean that anyone can study the Bible like any ordinary book. God's truth – especially the mysteries of the New Covenant – remains hidden unless the Holy Spirit enlightens one's inner heart and mind. Yes, it is true that I must seek the knowledge of God, but it will only come to something if it happens in prayerful dependence. I can know God only to the extent that He reveals Himself to me through His Holy Spirit (Mt 11:27; 16:15-17; 1Cor 2:6-16).

☐ Without regular, disciplined and persevering prayer we do not progress one inch on this road of highest calling. In fact, while praying, we experience our personal relationship with God most intensely.

- Question and answer 116 of the Heidelberg Catechism: "Why is prayer necessary for Christians? Because it is the chief part of the thankfulness which God requires of us; and because God will give His grace and Holy Spirit only to such, as earnestly and without ceasing, beg them from Him, and render thanks unto Him for them."

Is growth in the knowledge of the Lord not grace from A to Z? And can there be any possibility of this growth without the Holy Spirit? And shall I know the fulness of the Spirit if I don't live a prayerful life?

☐ The knowledge of God – especially our walk with Him – without exception brings its quota of emotional experiences. Can we talk of a love-relationship without that? But the norm for all Christian experience also applies here: it is only real and authentic if it grows in the soil of Biblical truth.

God only reveals Himself to humble, childlike and totally dependent faith (Mt 11:25-30). Haughtiness does not progress; fastidiousness will end in failure.

The knowledge of God is not for casual and double-hearted seekers. It has to be coveted. This is an ongoing calling which has to be pursued with my entire being (Hos 6:3).

- Jer 29:13: "And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."

The knowledge of God is for those who serve the Lord in love, devotion and commitment.

- Jh 14:21, 23: "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him.... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him."

He or she who wishes to grow in the knowledge of God must be content to take out of the Lord's hand not only that which is pleasant, but also His moulding discipline and chastisement (Hb 12:4-12).

Last but not least, often one has to walk this mountain road on your own.

It is true that few things will better assist you in this ambitious endeavour than the fellowship of brothers and sisters in the Lord. True discipleship always has a corporate dimension. Without the means of grace that goes hand in hand with a Biblical church life, one very easily goes astray.

But in the final analysis each of us has to carry his own load. And large sections of the route – especially the higher you go – are along narrow ledges where it is possible to move in single file only.



The purpose of **Antipas Herald** is to make available, free of charge and as widely as possible, Scriptural teaching in the form of brief, intelligible studies, aimed at promoting understanding of and faith in the God-centred principles of the Bible. These vital truths are succinctly and excellently formulated in the great confessions of faith and trumpet calls of the 16th century Reformation:

Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Christ Alone, Faith Alone, Glory to God Alone.

Should you wish to receive future issues of the Herald free of charge, please forward your name and postal address to our distribution and editorial office:

Antipas Herald, P.O. Box 12371, Queenswood, 0121, South Africa

Tel & Fax: +27 (0)12 329 3012

All our literature, as well as other information, is available on our web site

<http://www.reformed.org.za>

PUBLISHERS

Antipas Literature

P.O. Box 263435, Three Rivers, 1935, South Africa

Tel: +27 (0)16 423 3639 or +27 (0)16 423 3391; Fax: +27 (0)16 429 3033

Nico van der Walt is a congregational pastor and teacher in Pretoria. He subscribes to the historically respected and internationally recognized 1689 Baptist Confession – like most Reformed Baptists worldwide.

Anyone is at liberty to use material from this Antipas Herald with or without recognition. In preparing it the author has himself received help from many sources. He believes its content to be a true statement of Scripture teaching, and his desire is to further, not to restrict, its use.

We would like to develop as wide a readership as possible for the Herald. If you have found the contents of benefit, you could help us by introducing the Herald to others and encouraging them to subscribe. Names are only added to our mailing list at the specific request of the individuals concerned.