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The Supreme Importance of Knowing Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: John 17:3; Philippians 3:8,10; John 15:15; 14:21.

"That they should know thee... and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ..." "That I may know him..." "I... will manifest myself unto him..."

The knowledge of Christ is *THE* basis of the whole of the life of the child of God, and underlies every phase and aspect of that life. That is, it underlies our very relationship with God; it underlies all our growth in grace; it underlies every fragment of our service. There is nothing which comes within the compass of the life of the Christian which does not depend upon the knowledge of Christ. But that knowledge is a thing which will never be exhausted here, however long we live, and however rapidly we grow. We shall never overtake the finality of that knowledge. That is why an apostle, at the end of his life, still more than at any other time in all his history, gave expression to the deepest desire and longing of his heart as being to 'know Christ' (Phil. 3:10). We may say that for every increase in spiritual life, spiritual strength, spiritual effectiveness, spiritual usefulness to the Lord, some further measure of the knowledge of Christ is essential. We increase by this knowledge; we progress by this knowledge; we are more for the Lord in accordance with the living knowledge of the Lord Jesus which is coming to us.

This knowledge is essentially a spiritual thing. It is a knowledge which is altogether closed to any capacity or ability or faculty, save that of the spirit. The measure in which we represent the Divine

thought and fulfil the Divine purpose, will be the measure in which we are learning Christ after the Spirit.

That may represent one of two things for different people. It may represent limitation for those who have learned Christ other than after the Spirit; who, therefore, have to unlearn a good deal more than others, before they can learn. On the other hand, it may mean everything to those whose knowledge of the Lord is by way of an absolutely new beginning.

This kind of knowledge marks a difference between Paul and the other apostles. They had had a considerable knowledge of Christ which was historical, which was earthly. Paul came from the beginning into his practical knowledge of Christ on a heavenly level. Right at the very commencement of his Christian life, his was a spiritual knowledge of Christ. Every fragment from that point onward was a spiritual knowledge of Christ, and he jealously saw to it that it remained so. He positively refused to go to Jerusalem to get his knowledge of Christ from those who were apostles before him. He maintained stolidly his position that Christ, having revealed himself to him, *could* and *would* reveal Himself in the same way. Of course, the other apostles came into that spiritual knowledge later, but Paul had no other in experience.

There is all the difference between a very large knowledge *about* Christ, and the smallest measure of the knowledge of Christ. One may be immense in its range; the other may be very small in its measure. And yet the small thing may count for infinitely more than the immensity of the other.

The knowledge of Christ in a spiritual way is basic to everything in our lives as the Lord's children. As we go on, and the Holy Spirit begins to unveil Christ in our hearts, then we know how true this is. We know that it is that which gives reality to the spiritual life, makes it a very real thing. It is that which establishes us, so that, while the adversities might turn us away from a creed, a doctrine, an accepted position, a profession of relationship, nothing can turn us away from a spiritual knowledge. Spiritual knowledge is a part of our being, and we can never separate ourselves from that. That is reality! And that reality is capable of carrying us through anything and everything. Nothing less than that could have accounted for Paul's going through to the end, when he saw his life's work going to pieces about him. The very assemblies for which he had so to speak poured out his lifeblood, forsook him at last, when all they in Asia turned away from him. There is nothing to account for his remaining, not only loyal to the Lord, but triumphant to the last, save the fact that he knew the Lord in a spiritual way. Reality is found there. And every other virtue and value lies in the same direction. It is what Christ is, being progressively disclosed to our hearts.

The day will come when most of us will be tested on this very thing, and under given tests the one thing that will become clear will be that a very great deal of our knowledge of the Lord was not knowledge after the Spirit, but knowledge which we had obtained by reason perhaps of having been born and brought up in Christian families, instructed from infancy; knowledge which we had obtained by reading good books, devotional literature; knowledge perhaps by all the 'providences', as we call them. They carried us through to a right place - the providences of birth and upbringing and association. And yet, unless they go further than that, the time will come when it will be proved that they lack the essential element in our relationship to the Lord. And from time to time the Lord does allow His winds of adversity to blow, He does take His winnowing fan and throw everything up into the air, and cause the wind to pass through, just to find how much there is of solid grain that will fall and remain uninfluenced by the wind, and just how much of the chaff will be carried away.

These things are constantly happening in the spiritual experience of the Lord's children. Such things will intensify as we go on, and the Lord will see to it that we do not remain under any illusions that we have a 'spiritual life', when it is not really a spiritual life, but is one largely in our minds. Thus He tests, He tries, He proves, to make manifest to us how much of what we possess is the genuine, the real, knowledge of the Lord in our hearts, and how much is a knowledge which is not that kind of knowledge. Nothing whatever can be a substitute for that.

"This is Life Eternal..."

Having made these general observations, let us get closer to the matter so far as the Word is concerned, and notice the importance which the Word gives to this knowledge of the Lord. The Lord Jesus put it in the front rank by saying: "*This is life eternal*, that they might know thee... and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ."

Eternal life is not, in the Scriptural meaning, merely an extension of life beyond time. There is nothing known amongst men which corresponds to eternal life. To say that it is but an extension of life is something which the human mind can understand as being timeless, but that is not the Scriptural meaning, and there is nothing in human language to define the Scriptural meaning of eternal life. It is not only extension; it is a quality - it is the nature of the life. It is something which does not belong to man; it is God's life, Divine life. And the Lord Jesus says that the knowledge of the Father and of Jesus Christ is *that*. It is that which is called "eternal life". It is the possession and activity of something which is of God Himself, something which conveys God to us, something which is the gift of God to us, something which is the energy of Divine qualities, which are timeless, and could not be subject to anything of corruption.

The knowledge of Christ is that. We can see how different such a knowledge is from a merely mental, or historical, or professional knowledge. You know, if you have any experience of this, that, when the Holy Spirit imparts some little further fragment of spiritual apprehension of Christ, you have become conscious of a new Divine energy at work in you, which lifts you on to another level, takes you off the merely human and earth level. You know that by that knowledge you have come on to higher ground spiritually. You have been taken out of the trivialities of earth and given a sense of vastness, greatness, eternity, wonder, glory. Every fresh apprehension of Christ spiritually has an effect upon us. It is not just a stimulus, but it has the power of a Divine energy to lift us away from one order of things into another, and we can only say we have touched God, and come into another realm.

The knowledge of the Father and the Son is "life eternal". There is nothing whatever that can stand alongside of that life, nothing that can compare with it, nothing that is a substitute for it. It is the one superlative, pre-eminent necessity for all our knowledge of and fellowship with God from the very first step to the last. When, from the moment of our being born anew, we have been carried through this life, through into the glory, and stand complete - then we shall have to attribute everything to the fact that there was a moment when life eternal was imparted to us, entered into us, and became the basis and means by which God caused all the Divine activities to proceed. God Himself can do nothing in us and through us except on that basis. There is nothing which takes the place of life eternal. And so the knowledge of 'Jesus Christ whom God did send', occupies this position of supreme importance. It is life eternal!

It is important for us to recognize that life eternal is not just some abstract element in the universe, which creates in us, or causes in us, some sense of, shall we say, energy. Life eternal is related to spiritual energy, and life is intended to mean to us a growing knowledge of the Lord Jesus. The two work together. Life means increase in knowledge, and increase in knowledge means the increase in life. *"This is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ."*

The Central Element in Knowledge: Friendship

The central element in this is suggested to us in the fragment in John 15:15:

"No longer do I call you servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known unto you."

Here is a knowledge from the Father through the Son which is based upon this element which is called 'friendship'. "I have called you friends". Surely that means that we have to come into a relationship with the Lord Jesus of a very deep, inward character - of a very confidential nature, shall we say. There is something about that relationship which speaks of understanding born of the very closest communion. Someone may say to you about a friend of yours, that they said a certain thing or that they did a certain thing, and your rejoinder would be: 'No! I am quite sure that so-and-so never said that or did that. I know them too well. I know that they would not say or do a thing like that.' There you have touched the inner meaning of friendship. It is a knowledge which understands quite well what would be expected and not expected, what could come from that direction and what could not come from that direction. But that is a knowledge which is a deep, inside knowledge. You can never get that by observation; you can never come to that position by simply listening, studying; you have to know, and when you know by communion, by living in touch with that one, you know instinctively what to expect and what not to expect.

The Lord Jesus says that He takes the disciples into that relationship with Himself, and on that basis He opens His heart; that all things that He had heard from the Father He made known unto them, because of the relationship. "I have called you friends..."

What is the point of saying such things? You and I are not going to get the real knowledge of Christ by listening to addresses, by attending meetings. The value lies in the fact that we go away with what is said, into the presence of the Lord, having a background relationship with Him. Things may be true, and of the greatest value as things for our spiritual help, but we have to work those things out in the secret with the Lord. Otherwise we shall be 'meeting-mongers'; we shall simply be attending meetings and getting an accumulation of knowledge. The real value will lie in the time which we spend with the Lord on these things: it will be personal communion with the Lord in the secret place; it will be what is going on deep down in our hearts, between ourselves and the Lord. This knowledge is on the ground of what the Lord Jesus calls 'friendship'.

The Excelling Value, the Estimate and the Cost

Notice where Paul puts this matter, as he writes to the Philippians: "Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord" (the word "excellency" there is the 'super-eminence' of the knowledge of Christ Jesus): "for whom I suffered the loss of all things".

The estimate of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord was far above all other things. If you look back you will see that the things he counted loss were not small things, as man values things. They represented all his inheritance, which was no mean thing; all his attainments; all his position; all his prospects; all his ambitions. He tells us elsewhere that he had gained eminence above many of his own age. It means that Saul of Tarsus had been a very promising young man, who had gained a position far ahead of most other young men. He was distinguished as quite brilliant in his realm. And now he says: 'I count it all loss for the super-eminence...' Was he eminent? Well, there is a *super-eminence* about the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord. Was eminence his life ambition? He has come to see the *super-eminence* of the knowledge of Christ. That is his valuation of this knowledge.

There is another way of looking at it, if you want to change your angle. No doubt, although the knowledge was such a tremendous thing with the Apostle, there were times when he realized that it was costing. The cost was great, when all those amongst whom he had had recognition, place, reputation, had not only dropped off from him, or he had left them, but now they were all against him, and regarded him perhaps as a fool, and certainly as deluded. And that was not the only phase of the cost. The cost was all round; and not a small part of the cost was the fact that his own brethren in Christ did not wholly trust him, and very few understood him. For him, whatever there was to let go, and whatever there was of price to be paid, everything was regarded as refuse in comparison with the knowledge of Christ.

Here again we may not be able to enter altogether into the position of the Apostle, but these things are pointed out with a view to our seeing that there is something here in the knowledge of Christ, if Paul was not mistaken, which must go far, far beyond just being saved. If a man who has been saved all these years, and who has done all this amount of Christian work, and has been God's instrument to spread and establish the Gospel over such an immense area, can at the end still see in the knowledge of Christ something which draws out his whole being, so that what has been and what is is as nothing, compared with what he sees there is to attain unto in the knowledge of Christ, where are we?

That brings us to the point. I cannot tell you what that knowledge is, because I do not know it, but I can say that I see enough to make me perfectly certain that Paul was right, and to know that the one thing that we are here for is to learn Christ, and in learning Christ we have everything. It is not the kind of work we are going to do for the Lord. It is not the number of Christian activities, or the tremendous measure of energy which we put into Christian activity. That is not the measure of the value. The measure of the value is just how much we are getting out of our growing knowledge of the Lord.

Ministry, (speaking now of service) is not telling out truths. A good many people have thought that ministry is preaching sermons, giving addresses, or talking Christian doctrine. That is not ministry. If that were ministry this world ought to have been turned inside-out and upside-down a thousand times over. If that were ministry, then every weekend ought to see this world revolutionized with the amount of preaching that is going on. Ministry is not talking even the most orthodox doctrine. Service is not giving out by word of mouth things which may be perfectly true about Christ. Ministry is bringing Christ and imparting Christ. It is ministering Christ. It is communicating Christ. There is all the difference between giving addresses and preaching sermons, and communicating Christ. The measure of the success of our ministry is the measure in which other people come to realize that they have had Christ ministered to them, and that they are the richer spiritually. That is not just mental gratification, intellectual satisfaction, but something deep down in the innermost being,

which is Christ. The Apostle would put it this way: "As ye received Christ, so walk in him..." Not: 'As ye heard about Christ'; but: "As ye received Christ..."

A ministry like that is usually costly, and when we speak about ministry let no one think that that belongs to a certain class. We are all to minister. The business of every child of God is to communicate Christ to others; and, in so far as you can, by a simple word, communicate Christ, you are a minister of Christ. The effect of our being here on this earth as the Lord's should be that others should say: 'I received something of the Lord through that one; I came into possession of something more of Christ through such-and-such.'

The Threefold Accompaniment

Finally, note the threefold accompaniment of this knowledge: "That I may know him..."

(1) The Power of His Resurrection

You and I can only know Christ on that ground. All our knowledge of Christ will be upon the basis of the power of His resurrection. That means that the power of His resurrection will become a necessity, in our experience, and, as it becomes a necessity and then a reality, we shall know the Lord on that basis. Situations will arise for our spiritual increase, in which the power of His resurrection will alone suffice. Then faith will have to reach out for the power of His resurrection, and, faith being honoured, we shall come to know Him and the power of His resurrection through an experience in which that power alone could meet our need. The knowledge of Christ is a practical thing, not a theoretical thing. The knowledge of Christ in the Word is a matter of very life, and to fail to know Him at times means death. Thus it becomes a matter of the power of His resurrection.

(2) The Fellowship of His Sufferings

The place of Christ's sufferings in the life of His people, as a means by which He is known. That could occupy us for a long time, but it is simply stated as a related matter of great importance. The Lord makes Himself known to us by fellowship with Himself in His sufferings. What the sufferings of Christ are we do not stay now to mention, but we may take it that the sufferings of Christ as shared by us now are always, in their essence, spiritual. That is, the background may be that of circumstances, adversity, difficulty; it may be physical; it may be in many forms; but behind the foreground expression there is a spiritual element, a spiritual factor. The sufferings, of course, always represent a spiritual background. Sometimes in our case they become purely spiritual sufferings, sometimes they work themselves out in other ways, but ultimately it is a spiritual thing; that is, some spiritual factor is bound up with it. The sufferings of Christ (to put it the other way) are not now only circumstantial or physical sufferings. We may suffer in body and in circumstances through our own fault, and never can we claim that those are the sufferings of Christ. But when we come into an issue which relates to the purpose of God in Christ, the interests of the Lord, then very often the foreground is a physical one or a circumstantial one, but the background is a spiritual one, with an issue of more than temporal significance.

(3) Conformity to His Death

We are familiar with the meaning of the death of Christ. Not that aspect of it in which we are not called to share; not that atoning aspect, that vicarious aspect which is His death in a unique sense.

But that other aspect of the death into which we are baptized, the death where all that is of self, the "I", the flesh, is ruled out. Conformity to that death, where man by nature is set aside, and we have been crucified with Christ - that is a way of knowing the Lord.

May the Lord use these thoughts to bring clearly into view the supreme importance and value of knowing Christ in resurrection life.