

Knowing God

By David Sheats

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"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). These words from the prayer of our Lord give us direction for our relationship with God. To say it in another way, eternity is to be taken up with knowing and experiencing God Himself. Of that there will be no end. God has opened the door to us, removing all barriers to fellowship with Himself.

The saints of the Old Testament, under the Old Covenant, were limited in their fellowship with God. Most truths were illustrated by types, and all were in anticipation of the day when the door would be opened and *"all would know Him"* (Heb. 8:11). This true knowing of God does not begin in heaven, however, as some might think. It began on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given because Jesus had been glorified. God came in the person of the Holy Spirit to dwell in His church. In so doing, He brought the presence of the Father and the Son within the believer (John 14:23).

A fundamental error that is made today is to substitute knowing *about* God for *knowing God*. A person may know many true facts about God and believe these facts, and still not know God. Knowing God means experiencing God. In human relationships, you cannot know someone unless you experience involvement with that person. It is the same with God, but experiencing God is much deeper than experiencing another person. God is spirit, God is pure and holy, and God is God. Thus we cannot approach God on a casual basis as we would another person. We come on our knees, with deep reverence in our hearts, but we must come desiring to know God. *"Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need"* (Heb. 4:16). If we will come, He is there to meet us.

Another mistake that many have made is to separate salvation from knowing God. Since knowing God seems so difficult and demanding, salvation seems to be often defined as just believing certain true facts. Along with this there may be some repentance. But neither believing facts (James 2:19) nor repentance alone is knowing God. It is true that we must repent of sin and turn to God, but only the faith that is imparted by God to the one who is looking to Him will allow us to receive God into our lives. True faith is born of God, by the word of God spoken to our hearts.

When that word of faith is imparted to us, there must be a response in our hearts of acceptance and belief. Our response of love will be obedience to the word spoken (John 14:23). This in turn will bring "fruit," or evidence. It is impossible to hide faith. In a response of faith, we know and experience God. It is only then that the word of God becomes ours, and Christ is formed in us (Gal. 4:19). This is the only word that can save us (James 1:21).

The New Covenant

The Old Covenant was based on what man could do to find favor with God. The children of Israel said, "Tell us what God requires of us, and we will do it." They never considered that they could not do it. Man had to be brought to the point of seeing his own inability to meet the demands of a holy God. Romans 7 is Paul's commentary on all he could do under the Old Covenant. What he wanted to do, he did not find the ability to do.

The Law could control to some extent the outer expressions of a man. It could judge and condemn a murderer. But it could not control the intent of the heart. When Jesus came, He proclaimed the standard of a holy God. Apart from the provision of the New Covenant, that standard cannot be met. If a law could have been given that could bring us into a true knowledge and union with God, then there would have been no reason for Christ to die (Gal. 3:21). But since man is spiritually and totally dead in sin, nothing that he can do pleases God. Man does not need just a new idea, or lists of things to do. He needs an entirely new disposition, or *nature*. He needs to be born again--start all over.

The New Covenant is God's answer to man's dilemma. The New Covenant is based upon what God can do in man. It does not consider man and his capabilities; it considers only God and His ability. Man does have a part, but it is not to "help" God. It is not in strength of body or mind or will. It is rather a heart of belief when the word of God comes to create faith within. Some asked, "*What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?*" Jesus answered, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent*" (John 6:28,29).

The word of God is not separate from God. In fact, Jesus Himself was called the Word of God (John 1:1). When God speaks His word into our heart, He is in that word to fulfill it in our lives. Our place is to believe. When we do, it opens the door for God to accomplish the work in our hearts.

In believing, there is a choice to make. Either we choose God and abandon all of our own efforts, or we still feel that there is some good in us or something that we can do. To choose the latter direction will leave us powerless, and we must be brought lower still, to where we can see our need of God. Our faith must rest not on the wisdom of man but in the power of God.

The basis of all that God does in the New Covenant is the work of the Cross. When Christ atoned for our sin, He opened the way for the Holy Spirit to come and indwell us. Salvation is not a gift we receive that stands alone apart from God. It is God Himself coming to abide within. We are saved by His life (Romans 5:10). The only way man can be right with God is to receive a new life, and this happens when we are born of the Spirit. We are born of the Spirit when the Holy Spirit comes to abide within us and we are baptized into the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:13). This is the single work of grace by which we receive a new (divine) nature (II Peter 1:4). The nature which is born within us is the very nature of God; therefore it easily responds to the leading of the Spirit. Obedience is not difficult. Our "inner man" delights in the righteousness of God, and now by the indwelling power of God finds the ability to do the will of God.

The conditions for partaking of the life of God are to repent--turn *from* the world and *to* God--and to receive the Holy Spirit by faith. The Holy Spirit is promised to those who ask (Luke 11:13). This asking is out of a desperate need, seeing that I am helpless without God, and with a "single eye" for God--one that cannot be distracted from its purpose. I have no other place to turn for help. When the Holy Spirit comes, He brings all that God is, to find expression in my life. He takes the things of Jesus and makes them mine (John 16:15).

We are no longer following or imitating an outward Jesus, but living the life of God. The faith to do this does not originate in us, but is authored by Him. Now God no longer considers us separate from what He is in us. He can put love demands upon us because He has given Himself as the resource to fulfill those demands. As long as we continue to look to Him as our supply, the provision is there. Struggles enter in only when we consider our own abilities, because this takes our eyes off the Lord and stops the flow of faith and grace in our lives.

The Normal Christian Life - Beginning in the Spirit

Many people begin to question what God has done in the New Covenant when their experience does not seem to match up with the truths we have just considered. There may be several reasons for the disparity.

It may be that a person has not actually begun in the Spirit. To begin with God is more than just "believing in Jesus." The devils also "*believe and tremble*," as stated in James 2:10, but the devils do not know fellowship with God. Many will say they believe in Jesus, but the belief they speak of is an intellectual belief. They find comfort in the fact that they believe the "right things." Some find great comfort in defending the Bible, being absolute about certain truths, and doing certain right things such as attending church meetings. Some even sacrifice their lives to do service for God.

Many beliefs are correct, and God does call men into His service, but doing any of these things does not mean we have begun in the Spirit or that we are alive to God. It may safely be said that the vast majority of people around the world who are "doing work for God" do not even know God. They will be among those of whom Jesus spoke in Matthew 7:21-23, who will say they have done great wonders in His name--but Christ will say, "*I never knew you, depart from Me.*" Lest these words be said to us, we must be diligent to know Him.

A beginning in the Spirit is not a simple belief in Jesus, but a divine transaction with God which is spoken of as being "born again." Read John 1:12,13 very carefully. We must first believe in Jesus or we will never come to Him. But when we truly come to Him, He will baptize us with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:16). Jesus said that the result of believing in Him would be "rivers of living water," and that this spoke of the Holy Spirit who would come when Jesus was glorified (John 7:37-39). The rivers began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) but the promise was not only to the first believers, but also to those of us who were "far off" (Acts 2:39). The believers in Jesus were baptized into His life on that day for the first time. It was a life-changing experience. They began in the Spirit--they were born again. The fruits that followed bore witness to this. Before that day, Peter ran from a slave girl; now he stood before all Jerusalem with great boldness and called its leaders murderers of the Christ.

Other accounts of men being born of the Spirit in the book of Acts record evidence of the divine presence. Encounters with God do not leave a man the same. Birth is cataclysmic. It takes us from one realm to another. To be taken from the natural to the spiritual is no small transaction. The question is, have we begun in the Spirit? If not, we cannot walk in the Spirit and we will not know the power of an endless life. Christianity to us will be a mere intellectual exercise of trying to believe the right things and "doing the best we can." The best we can do will never meet the requirements of a holy God. His requirement is perfection, and only God is perfect. Therefore, the only way we can measure up to God's requirements is to have the life of God within, being lived out in us. This is not a theoretical or positional hope, but an experiential reality to the one walking in faith.

Walking in the Spirit

Beginning in a relationship with God by the Spirit does not automatically assure that we will continue in that relationship. The Galatians began in the Spirit, but were trying to finish by the flesh (Gal. 3:3). To be born of the Spirit is a great and imperative step. Without that, there is no beginning. To be born again is the beginning of a new life. But it is just that--a beginning. If we live in the Spirit, we must also walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25).

God is looking for "finishers"--those who do not just run in the race, but who finish triumphant. Many have thought the beginning of salvation was also its completion; thus they did not continue on with God. Their experience of the life of God has not been normal, because they have thought (often because they have been told) that their whole purpose now is to get others born. It would be ridiculous to tell a newborn baby that his whole purpose now is to produce other babies, and it is almost the same in the spiritual realm.

First of all, only God can save a man. That is not our job. Our place is to be witnesses unto Him (Acts 1:8). Our lives are to bear witness of His life. We are to "*be an example of the believer in word and deed*" (I Tim. 4:12). Our lives must show that God is alive in our lives. That is our place. If we are alive unto the Lord, He may send others our way to observe, be hungry, ask some questions, and receive some direction. If there is no evidence of life (that is, that we are alive unto God), the doors will never be opened.

After we have been given a new disposition, the effects of sin in the body are still present. For example, if we have been undisciplined, we are still undisciplined. If we have let our desires control us (and they do when we are under sin), the effects of that will still be in our bodies and minds. The deeds of the body must now be brought under control by active response to the direction of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:13). The deeds of the *old man* (the human race descended from Adam) are to be put off, and the deeds of the *new man* (the race descended from Christ which bears His nature) are to be put on (Eph. 4:22-24). This requires active obedience on our part. It is not a passive place. We are not *trying* to be saved, but obeying out of who we are--sons of God. We are submitting to the discipline of the Holy Spirit. This is the only way the effects of sin in the body can be dealt with. Remember that nothing is too difficult for God, and no matter what our past lives have been, if we have been born again, we are new creatures. In the body there is no hindrance to doing the will of God that the ability of God cannot overcome.

When unexpected trials begin to come into our lives, we should not be surprised. According to James 1:2, we should instead "*count it all joy.*" At this point, some begin to look for a new experience in God. If we have never been brought into life, then we do need a first experience with God. But if we have known the infusion of life so that we are made one with God, then we are not to seek another experience, such as "inner healing." We must rather begin to walk according to the power of an endless life. This is a daily walk of faith. It cannot be overemphasized that this is a continual abiding in the life of Jesus. Our will (our whole man active) is now submitted to His will. It is a place of inner rest but active obedience. It is not trying, but trusting. It is drawing upon His grace which is sufficient.

To walk in the Spirit is to find our whole life lived out of the ability of God, in the Spirit and for His glory. The Holy Spirit comes into our lives to control us for God's glory. He has been sent to lead us into all truth. He Himself will teach us in every circumstance of life. He will take the things of Jesus and make them ours. We are joined together with God by the Spirit (I Cor. 6:17).

We do not add God to our lives; He *becomes* our life (Gal. 2:20). We were bought with a price for His purposes, not for ours. If we do not settle this question in the very beginning, we will not experience the "normal Christian life." Our growth will be stunted, spiritual disease will set in, and in the end, if the issue is not dealt with, the result is spiritual death (James 1:15).

We are here only for God. Nothing else matters. To expect to experience the grace and ability of God while living for our own purposes is deception. Words cannot describe the miserable experience of one who knows the way but is not walking in what God has revealed. To the one who knows the way but does not obey, it is sin (James 4:17). Sin breaks our fellowship with God (I John 1:6), and apart from

fellowship with God we have no salvation, for He Himself is our salvation.

There may be many other reasons for our experience seeming not to match the normal, victorious Christian life presented in the New Testament. Bad teaching, sluggish obedience, divided loyalty, and trying to move by our own energy may be some of them. But in God, there are no excuses. His way is perfect, and He has made the way known. Our part is to be hungry and thirsty, and to ask. He will answer and feed us. We ourselves are the only hindrance.

That which is born of God *overcomes*--everything. This is a life of faith, one that brings us into and keeps us connected with the Source. Nothing else matters. When there is failure, it is never on God's side. He has dealt with the enemy and disarmed him (Col. 2:15). If we give the enemy any power, it is because we have come out of our abiding place in Christ. In Him we are more than conquerors. Our responsibility is to abide in Him--and this means to keep ourselves in the love of God (Jude 21).

Love is expressed in relationship, communion, union and oneness. God is one, and we have been brought into that oneness by the Spirit. "*Father, make them one as We are one,*" Jesus prayed (John 17:11). As we abide in Him we are nourished in His presence, and obedience in this love relationship is easy (John 14:21). Our relationship with God must be guarded at all costs. May the Lord strengthen each of us this day as we continue on *to know Him*.