

The Deep Riches of the Knowledge of God

***“O the depth of the
riches both of the
wisdom and
knowledge of God!
how unsearchable
are his judgments,
and his ways past
finding out!”
—Romans 11:33***

A FEW HOURS BEFORE

Jesus was crucified, he said to his Heavenly Father, “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” (John 17:3) This makes a proper understanding of God

and Jesus essential to those who are striving to gain life eternal through the provision of the Father in the gift of his beloved Son. Since we cannot actually see God, our knowledge of him depends upon the revelation he has made of himself through his Word. Thus a diligent study of the Scriptures is fundamentally important to all who want to know the true God and desire to be in harmony with him.

Many claim that it is the responsibility of their minister, pastor, or priest to gain Scriptural

understanding, and then to impart what they deem necessary to the people. This, however, is not in harmony with the many declarations of the Bible, which encourage every Christian to “study” and to “search” the Word in order that he might acquire the knowledge of God which is essential in order to be pleasing to him. (II Tim. 2:15; John 5:39; Prov. 2:3-5) There is a tendency also to emphasize merely the blessings which await sinners at the foot of the cross, without encouraging consecrated believers to acquire a deeper knowledge of God which results from a more comprehensive understanding of his plan of salvation.

It is also important to avoid the viewpoint of those who might seek to gain much knowledge, but whose efforts result in merely increased intellectual understanding. If we think of knowledge in its proper light, as the means through which God reveals himself and inspires our devotion to him, it is not possible to give it too important a position in our hearts and lives. Yet, if we do not view knowledge in this way, the search for it could lead us to feel spiritually superior to others. This would make knowledge a matter of the head, rather than of the heart.

The New Testament speaks of the “deep things of God,” “milk,” “strong meat,” and the “mysteries” of God with reference to certain aspects of our knowledge of him. (I Cor. 2:10; Heb. 5:13,14; I Pet. 2:2; Col. 1:26-28; 2:2) These phrases have at times been misinterpreted, even though those who have done so have probably been sincere in their viewpoints. It is important, then, that we examine their meaning in greater detail.

THE SIMPLICITY OF THE GOSPEL

There is no suggestion in the Bible that only those with great intellectual understanding can comprehend the essential truths of God's plan of salvation, nor do the Scriptures say that special spiritual qualities are possessed by some which are beyond the reach of the "rank and file" of the Lord's people. Paul counsels us to maintain "the simplicity that is in Christ," and warns against being "removed . . . unto another gospel." (II Cor. 11:3; Gal. 1:6,7) The fundamental truths of God's plan, as well as the standards of righteousness and spiritual growth associated with them, are the same for all consecrated believers. These are the "deep things of God," and are understandable by all who have been called to run "toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."—Phil. 3:14

We should not discount the importance of any truth which is contained in the Word of God. The great truths of divine love, and of the privilege of our development into the character likeness of God and of Christ, are vitally essential. The types and pictures of the Old Testament, when used to increase the brilliance of God's plan, are exceedingly valuable to our growth in knowledge. Many prophecies also have been put in the Bible for our spiritual edification, as have also various time features related to the plan of salvation. We are to use all these for the strengthening of our faith, and to grow in grace and knowledge. Let none of us become discouraged, however, by the erroneous supposition that there are certain "deep things" of the Word which are beyond our comprehension, and that God intends

these to be understood only by a very few among his people.

In our fellowship with one another we may discover that certain viewpoints and details of truth we present do not seem to be generally grasped and appreciated. In such a case, it would perhaps be wise that we question the propriety of rehearsing all these things to our brethren, since a general lack of understanding of what we say would demonstrate that such points of detail are not essential to being faithful as a child of God. Certainly, we should never conclude that the Lord has favored us with a special understanding of some portion of his Word which is beyond the ability of our brethren to grasp. The great truths mentioned in the Bible as being the “deep things of God”—which in the Greek text means “profound”—are, as a rule, the most straightforward features of God’s plan. This is what we should expect, since God is the author of the wonderful plan of salvation through which he has revealed his love. Such is the “simplicity that is in Christ.”

SHADOW OF THINGS TO COME

Writing about the Tabernacle in the wilderness and the services associated with it, Paul speaks of them as a “shadow” of “heavenly things” and of “good things to come.” (Heb. 8:5; 10:1) In these “shadows,” certain truths of God’s plan are pre-figured, and are clearly marked out as such in the New Testament. When these are understood, they help us to appreciate the beauty and simplicity of the Truth even more than we did before. It is possible, however, to become so absorbed in trying

to ascertain the meaning of all the intricacies of the shadows that one could lose sight of the intended purpose of the “realities” which they picture. Here again, let us not conclude that we must be able to explain the meaning of every detail given concerning the Tabernacle or other Old Testament shadows in order to understand the “deep things of God.”

As consecrated believers, we may be especially drawn to appreciate the time features of God’s plan, or the details of the many prophecies found throughout the Word of God. We may spend much time and exert great effort to understand and explain the significance of the intricate details of these prophecies. While such study of the Word of God is to be commended, there could be an inclination to feel that any who do not fully agree with our findings, or do not share our enthusiasm for prophetic details, lack appreciation of the “strong meat” of the Bible.

MORE THAN JUST LOVE AND DEVOTION

On the other side of the spectrum, some may claim that devotional truths are the “deep things of God” and “strong meat” of the Word. Indeed, “God is love,” and the wonderful provision he has made through Christ inspires us to love him and to devote our lives to his service. (I John 4:8-10) Faith in God and his promises is essential in order to live such a life of devotion, and the Scriptures encourage us to add to our faith various other qualities of character. (II Pet. 1:5-7) These truths of the Bible are indispensable, but not necessarily “deep” if considered only by themselves. An understanding of the fundamental doctrines of God’s plan—creation,

the fall, ransom, resurrection, and restitution, to name a few—is, in fact, what gives us the ability to know the depth of God’s love and devote ourselves fully to him.

Without an understanding of the doctrinal basis of God’s love, and our relationship to him based on these foundation truths, we would find ourselves much like the majority of professed Christians. Most claim belief in Jesus and love for God, but know little or nothing about what Jesus truly accomplished, nor of the basis of God’s love. We might employ many beautiful words in discussing the subject of divine love, yet these would have less Scriptural depth than Jesus’ declaration: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16) Similarly, no words could convey any deeper sense of our appreciation of God’s love than that expressed by the simple statement, “We love him, because he first loved us.”—I John 4:19

“WHICH PASSETH KNOWLEDGE”

In a beautiful, earnest request invoked on behalf of the brethren at Ephesus, Paul prayed, “That he [God] would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.”—Eph. 3:16-19

There is perhaps no passage in the Bible that gives a more definite suggestion of profound understanding than this one. Paul is not, however, writing about some special truth which is so "deep" that he knew only a few would be able to grasp it, for he speaks of being able to "comprehend" it "with all saints." In other words, that great truth "which passeth knowledge" was, in his opinion, within the mental reach of all God's consecrated people.

The Greek word translated "passeth" in this text has the thought, "beyond the usual." Thus, the point of truth which Paul is writing about is not incomprehensible, but simply beyond usual knowledge, or that which is not generally understood. What is this unusual knowledge Paul had in mind, and which, he says, enables us to appreciate the "breadth, and length, and depth, and height" of the love of Christ? The answer to this comes to light as we consider some of the earlier verses of this chapter.

Beginning with Ephesians 3:3, let us notice the manner in which Paul emphasizes the great depth of understanding with which the Lord had favored him, "that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery." He then indicates his desire that the brethren at Ephesus might "understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ." (vs. 4) Paul explains that this profound understanding of a certain part of God's plan as centered in Christ had not previously been made known, but "is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit," so that it could then be imparted to others.—vs. 5

This vital truth, so profound and deep that a special revelation from the Lord was necessary to

enable Paul and the other apostles to understand it, is stated in the next verse—“That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel.” (vs. 6) To us, this seems to be a simple truth of God’s plan, yet it was treated by Paul as if it were a great mystery, which it surely was in the days of the Early Church.

Throughout the centuries during which God was dealing with his typical people, Israel, his prophets made promises concerning the coming Messiah—Christ—and his kingdom. The entire nation of Israel was given the opportunity to be the Messianic nation, associated with Christ in fulfilling the wonderful promises of worldwide blessings. “You only have I known of all the families of the earth,” the Lord told Israel through the Prophet Amos.—Amos 3:2

With this background of understanding, it must have been very difficult, especially for Jewish believers in the Early Church, to grasp the idea that Gentiles could be “fellowheirs” with them, and members “of the same body” of Christ. To those who became aware of this great mystery, it served as a marvelous revelation of divine love. It showed that the love of God was broad and deep enough to take in even those of the Gentiles—nations who had for centuries been out of favor with God—and make them heirs of the Messianic promises.

There is much in the writings of the New Testament to indicate that this particular truth was considered by the Early Church as one of the very “deep things” of God. To many, it was difficult to understand, and Paul was particularly desirous

that the brethren in Ephesus comprehend it clearly and realize that it had been given as a special revelation to him by the power of the Holy Spirit. This was knowledge which went beyond the usual understanding of both Jews and Gentiles at that time, and yet today it is very simple to those in whose hearts there is no ethnic prejudice. There is no consecrated child of God now who is not able to grasp such a simple fact of God's plan, yet it is stated in the Scriptures as a truth which helps to reveal the "unsearchable riches of Christ."—Eph. 3:8

DEPTH OF RICHES

Closely associated with this doctrine which was so profound to the Early Church, was the further truth that even those natural descendants of Abraham who had rejected the Messiah, and consequently were broken off from the "olive tree" of promise, were ultimately to be restored to divine favor and have an opportunity to gain life. Paul discusses this in great detail in Romans 11:15-32, stating that God considered Israel as being "in unbelief," that he "might have mercy" upon them. He then adds the beautiful words found in our opening text, which speak of "the depth of the riches" of the knowledge of God, and his "unsearchable . . . judgments."—vs. 33

The Greek word translated "depth" in Paul's expression of joy is the same one he used in I Corinthians 2:10 when speaking of the "deep things of God." His reference to God's "unsearchable" judgments is a quotation from Psalm 36. That passage reads, "Thy mercy, O LORD, is in the

heavens; and thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds. Thy righteousness is like the great mountains; thy judgments are a great deep: . . . How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings.”—vss. 5-7

How wonderfully this language assures us of God’s loving-kindness, the abundance of his mercy, and the righteousness of his judgments. These glorious attributes of our God are quite “unsearchable” in so far as our ability to enter fully into their meaning is concerned. However, Paul cites a wonderful example of God’s mercy and righteous judgments, telling us that these loving qualities of our Heavenly Father will be manifested in the ultimate salvation of those who rejected Christ at his First Advent, and that he will exercise his mercy toward all of them.

This is a wonderfully plain truth to those who, at the present time, appreciate and accept God’s plan of the ages, but to many in the Early Church it was very “deep,” and not easy to assimilate. Even today there are many professed Christians who cannot take it, refusing to believe that God’s love is abundant enough to extend the opportunity of salvation to those who die in unbelief.

“HARD TO BE UTTERED”

One of the frequently quoted texts used to give the thought that some of the precious truths of the Bible are simple, while certain others are deeper and more spiritual, is Hebrews 5:12-14. In these verses Paul speaks of “milk” and “strong meat.” He tells the Hebrew brethren that they were not

prepared for “strong meat,” but were “such as have need of milk.”

What truth does Paul refer to here as “strong meat?” This is indicated in verses 10 and 11, where he speaks of the Melchisedec priesthood—that Jesus, as both king and priest, was typified by Melchisedec. “Of whom we have many things to say,” Paul writes, “and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing.” He then explains to the Hebrew brethren that they were not ready for what he wanted to say to them about the Melchisedec priesthood, and that they even needed to have the “first principles of the oracles of God” taught to them again.

The fact that Melchisedec was both a priest and a king, and was pictorial of this combined office as it is fulfilled by Christ, is to us a clearly set-forth truth. (Gen. 14:18-20; Heb. 7:1-17) To the minds of Jewish Christians in the Early Church, however, it presented difficulty—not because the idea was complex or hard to grasp, but because they had been so thoroughly imbued with the thought that everything pertaining to a priesthood began and ended with Aaron. In their religious training, Melchisedec had never been mentioned or considered. It was this that made it “strong meat,” and difficult for them to digest.

In Hebrews 6, Paul, by contrast, mentions what he describes as “principles of the doctrine of Christ.” (vs. 1) According to the meaning of the Greek word translated “principles,” it is the “beginning” or “first” doctrines of Christ. These, Paul explains, are repentance, faith, baptism, laying on of hands [Spirit begetting], the resurrection, and eternal judgment. (vs. 2) All of these, while vitally important in

the Christian life, presented no special difficulty of acceptance by the Jewish mind, because they were not beyond his usual trend of thinking. Actually, doctrines such as baptism, the resurrection, and judgment are no more easily understood than the Melchisedec picture of Christ as both king and priest. However, to the minds of those to whom Paul was writing, these were much easier to assimilate, even as milk is to a child.

A “HARD SAYING”

Speaking in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus declared that only those who “eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood,” could attain eternal life. He explained that he was the “bread which came down from heaven,” and said, “My flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed.” (John 6:53-59) When his disciples heard these things, they said, “This is an hard saying; who can hear it?” (vs. 60) If we understand God’s plan of redemption as it is centered in Christ, these expressions by the Master are easily understood. It was simply a way of saying that his humanity was to be sacrificed for the sin of the world. Eating his flesh and drinking his blood were merely symbolic of the need for believers—in order to have life—to accept his great sacrifice and humbly yield themselves in obedience to God’s will as revealed through him.

Yet, for those who heard this for the first time, and with no background knowledge of God’s plan to help them understand what the Master meant, the idea of eating his flesh and drinking his blood was a “hard saying.” Jews were, in fact, forbidden to drink blood, and the suggestion that they needed

to do this in order to live was too much for them. (Lev. 3:17; 7:26,27; 17:10,14) Many of them became offended and “walked no more” with Jesus.—John 6:66

MYSTERIES OF THE KINGDOM

The disciples asked Jesus why he spoke to the public in parables. He replied, “Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given.” (Matt. 13:10,11) A mystery is only such as long as it is not understood. Jesus’ promise was that his followers would have the mysteries of the kingdom made clear to them. We believe that Jesus has fulfilled this promise to his consecrated people, as the due time has arrived for each of those mysteries to be revealed. He promised that when he returned at the end of the age he would “gird himself” and serve his household with “meat in due season.” (Luke 12:37; Matt. 24:45) Many and rich are the truths which have been thus placed upon the Lord’s table in fulfillment of this promise, yet they are still mysteries to those to whom it has not been given to understand.

At the beginning of the Gospel Age it was the due time to make known the “riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.” (Col. 1:27) At first, it was a “mystery” to Jewish believers that Jesus alone was not the complete Christ, but rather the “head” over a “body” of many members. (vs. 18) However, as aforementioned, a manifestation of divine love, surpassing human knowledge, was seen in the acceptance of Gentiles to be fellow-heirs with Jewish believers in this hope of glory.—Eph. 3:1-9,19

“EYE HATH NOT SEEN”

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things.” Paul then identifies these as “the deep things of God.” (I Cor. 2:9,10) Part of this passage is taken from Isaiah 64:4, which says that “since the beginning of the world,” man has not understood the things which God has prepared for him. Paul explains, however, these “deep things” pertaining to God’s plan for the blessing of man were now revealed to the followers of Jesus by the Holy Spirit.

While previously it had been true that “eye hath not seen, nor ear heard,” the wonderful truths concerning God’s plan of redemption and salvation through Christ—a plan embracing the use of both Jews and Gentiles as associates with him in the work of deliverance—now it was different. Jesus indicated this when he said, prospectively, to his disciples, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.” (Matt. 13:16) The psalmist wrote, “O LORD, how great are thy works! and thy thoughts are very deep.” (Ps. 92:5) How we rejoice today that these “deep” thoughts of God have been revealed to his people, and that we can understand the “works” of his plan, and by his grace participate therein.

“SINCERE MILK”

The Apostle Peter counseled the brethren of his day: “Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings,

As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious." (I Pet. 2:1-3) Paul had written earlier, "Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children." (I Cor. 14:20) This seems to be the thought that Peter expressed following his admonition to put away "all malice" and other fleshly propensities. "As newborn babes"—free of malice—"desire the sincere milk of the word."

There is much in the first epistle of Peter to indicate that those to whom he wrote were not mere "babes" in Christ, within the meaning usually attached to this expression. In addition to Paul's statement about malice, Peter perhaps recalled Jesus' illustration, when he said, concerning little children, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 19:14) Every disciple of Christ should endeavor to be childlike in simplicity and sincerity. All such will surely desire to feed upon the rich spiritual food of the Bible, which, in keeping with the "newborn babe" illustration, Peter describes as the "sincere milk of the word."

In this text, the Greek word which is translated "sincere" means "unmixed" or "unadulterated." Childlike humility of heart will manifest itself in a desire to feed only upon the unadulterated truth, and avoid the vain imaginations of human reasoning. Thus, it seems that in this text, Peter may well be referring to all the precious doctrines of God's plan as "sincere milk." This is not with the thought of minimizing the depth of the knowledge of God, but to show that those who in childlike humility feed upon "unmixed" truth, and properly assimilate it,

will thereby grow “strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.”—Eph. 6:10

How glad we are that all the Lord’s people to whom he has given “hearing ears” and “seeing eyes,” have the ability to grasp the glorious truths of God’s Word, and that through these truths our Heavenly Father has revealed himself to his people. There are, indeed, varying degrees of understanding and appreciation of the truth among his people, but this is not to be considered unnatural, nor of negative consequence to any. Not one of us will ever, on this side of the veil, acquire a full degree of knowledge. However, we each can, and must, study for the purpose of being “approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”—II Tim. 2:15

What a privilege it is, also, to share the joys of this wonderful knowledge with others of like precious faith. We can all help one another in our study of the Word. Regardless of how long we have been in the way, there are points that we can learn even from those new in the truth, if we maintain a childlike humility before God and among one another. Above all, let us always look to the Lord for his guidance, that we may continue to grow in an ever-increasing knowledge of him who has called us “out of darkness into his marvellous light.”—I Pet. 2:9 ■

*“God giveth to a man that is good in his sight
wisdom, and knowledge, and joy.”
—Ecclesiastes 2:26*