

Knowledge That Edifies

*“Knowledge
puffeth up, but
charity [love]
edifieth.”*

—*I Corinthians 8:1*

THE STATEMENT OF OUR

opening text has been misunderstood by some to mean that knowledge of God’s plan has an adverse effect on the Christian life, and that therefore the important goal for which to strive is to be filled and controlled by love. However, such an interpretation of Paul’s words is far from what he had in mind, as a brief study of the context quickly reveals.

In this chapter, Paul discusses the subject of eating meat which has been offered to idols. This custom was widely practiced in Paul’s time. Part of the worship of idols involved offering them sacrifices of meat. The idols could make no use of this meat, so in due course the offering was removed and sold in the open market—otherwise it would soon spoil and be wasted. Under these circumstances, evidently this meat could be purchased at a lower price than meat which had not been offered to idols.

It would seem from Paul’s discussion of the subject that there were Christians at that time who considered it a sin to eat this meat which had been

offered to idols. This is understandable, for when the apostolic conference was held in Jerusalem concerning Gentile converts who were coming into the Early Church, and what regulations should be placed upon them, a message was sent out, which read, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things; That ye abstain from meats offered to idols, and from blood, and from things strangled, and from fornication: from which if ye keep yourselves, ye shall do well."—Acts 15:28,29

There was good reason at the time for this admonition. It was addressed, as we have seen, to Gentiles who were accepting Christ and associating themselves with his followers, which at that early date was made up mostly of Jewish Christians. The Gentiles were chiefly worshipers of idols, and were in the habit of eating meat which had been offered to them. Every point mentioned in the admonition sent to these new converts was essentially a part of their pagan form of worship. To bring these customs into a group having a Jewish background would have been very disruptive indeed.

They were not asked, however, to keep the Mosaic Law. Peter and Paul were properly opposed to this, but these new converts were asked to abstain from their former habits. Fornication had always been forbidden by God's law, and is still contrary to the will of God. Eating meat offered to idols fell into a different category, as indicated by Paul's treatise of the subject in his letter to the brethren at Corinth.

Paul and Barnabas were among those sent out from the Jerusalem conference to distribute copies of this letter to the Gentile converts, and to explain

its purpose, and now we find him writing to the Corinthian brethren, “Meat [offered to idols] commendeth us not to God: for neither, if we eat, are we the better; neither, if we eat not, are we the worse. But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak.”—I Cor. 8:8,9

KNOWLEDGE HAD PROGRESSED

Here we have the Apostle Paul explaining to the Corinthian brethren that they had the liberty not to obey the instructions concerning meat offered to idols, which he himself had helped to circulate. In verses 7, 10, and 11 of the chapter, Paul refers to the “knowledge” involved in the viewpoint he was expressing. Paul knew that God’s law had said nothing one way or the other about eating meat offered to idols. He knew, as expressed, that this meat was not defiled, and that if it was to the economic advantage of the Christian to eat it, he would be doing no wrong.

At the same time, however, the situation which the letter from Jerusalem sought to avert was still a possibility. There were brethren with a more limited knowledge of God and of his requirements who might well be stumbled by seeing one like Paul eating meat which had been offered to idols. They might well be tempted, against their conscience, to eat such meat themselves, not because of a better understanding as was enjoyed by Paul, but simply on the grounds that if Paul could do it they could also, thus going contrary to what they believed to be right.

Because of this, while Paul knew that there was nothing intrinsically wrong with eating meat which

had been offered to idols, yet if it should injure his brother to do so, he would eat no such meat as long as the world stood. (vs. 13) Paul indicates that his “knowledge” on this point exceeded that of his weaker brethren. However, if he allowed this knowledge to guide him in his relationship with them, being proud that he understood the situation better than they, it would mean that his knowledge had puffed him up, made him proud. Thus he would take the other course. He would be guided by love, the love that builds up and edifies.

KNOWLEDGE OF PLAN ESSENTIAL

Knowledge of the plan of God for the redemption and recovery of the world from sin and death is essential to build us up as New Creatures and to make us ready for joint-heirship with Jesus in his kingdom. For this reason, we are admonished by the Apostle Peter to grow both in grace and in knowledge. He wrote, “Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness. But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.”—II Pet. 3:17,18

Peter also wrote, “According as his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature.” (II Pet. 1:3,4) Here the apostle is explaining that God’s divine power has provided all things for us which are necessary to life and godliness, and that

these provisions reach us through “the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.”

Much of this “knowledge of him” comes to us through his “exceeding great and precious promises.” It is the inspiration provided by these promises that prepares us to receive the divine nature. These promises are contained in the Word of God, hence the more we study his Word and thereby increase our knowledge of God’s promises, the richer our lives will be as New Creatures in Christ Jesus. Indeed, without this knowledge we would die as New Creatures.

PROPHECY ALSO

Not only is it essential to have knowledge of God’s exceeding great and precious promises which assure us of the divine nature and joint-heirship with Christ in his kingdom, but it is also important to have at least a general understanding of the Bible’s prophecies which pertain to the times in which we are living. We need to know, for example, that the present age in God’s plan ends with a “time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation.” (Dan. 12:1) If we did not know this we would certainly be perplexed at what is happening throughout the world at the present time.

We may not know the exact meaning of each and every symbol which the Bible uses to picture this “great tribulation” which is now upon the earth. We may even have differences of thought as to the meaning of some of the details of these symbols. However, there is no mistaking the simple truth that the present world, or social order, does come to an end, and that it is in God’s new world, the Messianic

kingdom world, that God's promises to bless all the families of the earth are to be fulfilled.

This knowledge has an important bearing on our growth in grace. In Peter's second epistle, chapter three, he speaks of the ending of the present world, likening it in some respects to the ending of the "world that then was" at the time of the Flood. (vs. 6) He uses the symbols of fire and noise to describe the passing of the present social order. (vs. 10) Then he makes a practical application of this important prophetic truth. He says, "Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation [conduct] and godliness."—vs. 11

MORE THAN ACADEMIC

The prophecies of the Bible were not given to furnish us with knowledge which is merely academic. They are intended to be a source of guidance and strength in our lives as New Creatures. Peter's admonition concerning our position during the time in which we are now living is a good illustration of this point. His lesson is that since we know that the present world is passing away, we should do something about it—not something to save the world, but to prepare ourselves for a position in the Messianic kingdom which follows.

If we know the meaning of the times in which we live, we should not, as followers of Christ, be unmoved by that knowledge, but strive more earnestly than ever to have our lives conformed to the will of God. "What manner of persons ought ye to be," Peter says. We are not left in doubt as to the "manner of persons" the Lord would like us to be,

for Peter outlines this for us in the first chapter of this same epistle.

After explaining that it is through the exceeding great and precious promises of God that we are made partakers of the divine nature, Peter continues, “Beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity [love].” (vss. 5-7) If we give all diligence to root out all selfishness from our minds and hearts, and to be governed by the principles of righteousness Peter here sets forth, we will surely be giving heed to the admonition, “What manner of persons ought ye to be,” for here is the manner of person the Lord undoubtedly is seeking after.

WILL NEVER FALL

We should endeavor to be the “manner of person” indicated by Peter because it is right that we should be, and because it is the Lord’s will. There is yet a further result from such a course of faithfulness. We quote: “If these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall.”—II Pet. 1:8-10

When Peter says that “ye shall never fall,” he is not advocating the erroneous theory, “Once in grace,

always in grace.” His meaning is clear. If we make proper use of the knowledge the Lord has furnished us through his Word by conforming ourselves to the conditions attached to his promises, we will be guided and protected by him, and will not be permitted to fall away from our position of favor with him. If, however, we are not thus faithful to the Lord, there is no assurance in his Word that we will not fall.

“If these things be in you, and abound”—it is not enough that we make a half-hearted effort to live up to the conditions attached to the promises of God. We should “abound” in our efforts. If we do, we will not be “idle [*Marginal Translation*] nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The knowledge supplied by the Lord through his Word is designed to bear fruit in the lives of Christ’s footstep followers—fruits of righteousness; fruits of activity in the Lord’s service of proclaiming the glad tidings of the kingdom; fruits of concern for our brethren and a joy in laying down our lives for them.

“He that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off”—that is, he lacks spiritual vision. He does not discern clearly the will of the Lord, and the glorious things he has promised are no longer seen by the eye of faith. Hence they have lost their power to transform the life. Those thus afflicted, Peter further explains, have forgotten that they were purged from their old sins. In other words, they have lost touch with the truth concerning their relationship with God, provided through the purging of their Adamic sins through Christ. What is the cause? It is simply that they did not make proper and zealous use of the knowledge of

the Truth which the Heavenly Father so graciously gave to them.

DILIGENCE NEEDED

The safeguard against this unfortunate condition is to make diligent use of the Truth, and to be continually aware of our standing before God by grace. Peter continues, “So an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.” (II Pet. 1:11) “If these things be in you, and abound,” and if you “give diligence to make your calling and election sure,” wrote Peter, it assures an abundant entrance into the kingdom. If they do not abound, and if we do not give diligence, there will be no assurance of entrance into the heavenly kingdom.

Peter speaks of making our calling and election sure. Ours is a “high calling,” a “heavenly calling.” (Phil. 3:14; Heb. 3:1) It is a calling to joint-heirship with Jesus in his millennial kingdom, to live and reign with Christ for the blessing of all families of the earth by restoring them from death to life—ultimately to perfection of human life to live on the earth forever. What a joy it is to understand that we are called to all this! Our knowledge concerning these features of God’s plan is revealed in his Word. The same Word also reveals that if this calling, this invitation, is to become meaningful and valid with us as individuals, we must make it sure by our own faithfulness.

There is no question at all concerning God’s faithfulness to us. He is a promise-keeping God in whom we can put our full trust. However, there is also our part of the arrangement, and that part is

faithfulness to God and to all the conditions which he has attached to his promises. There are all the “ifs”—“If ye do these things,” Peter said. Paul also wrote, “If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.”—Rom. 8:17

OUR COVENANT OF SACRIFICE

How wonderful it is to have a knowledge of God’s great covenants. In his covenant with Abraham, God promised to bless all the families of the earth. Here again this knowledge is given to us for a special purpose. Paul explained that when God made this promise to Abraham, the “seed” he referred to was Christ. (Gal. 3:16) To this, he added, “As many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:27,29

To have the assurance that, together with Jesus, we are heirs of the promise made to Abraham and that, even as Jesus, we are part of the “seed” of Abraham, is truly wonderful. We thank God for this knowledge and the assurance it gives us. However, the realization of the hope thus engendered depends upon our being “baptized into Christ,” and as Paul explains, those who are baptized into Jesus Christ are baptized into his death. He says, “Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”—Rom. 6:3,4

To be buried by baptism into Jesus' death means sacrifice. It means the giving up of self, and a daily burial of our will into his will and into the will of the Heavenly Father. This is not a light thing, for it involves the denial of self, and the taking up of our cross and following the Master into sacrificial death. This is the condition upon which we can share with Jesus the honor and the joy of being the seed of Abraham. It is this seed that will give health and lasting life to all who, during the millennial reign of Christ, accept the provision of divine grace through Christ, and obey the laws of the Messianic kingdom. Paul writes later in this same epistle concerning our sacrifice, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."—Rom. 12:1

SHARING IN THE SIN OFFERING

How blessed is the knowledge, revealed through God's Word, that the faithful followers of Christ have the privilege of sharing in the "better sacrifices" of this Gospel Age. These are the sin offering sacrifices. Jesus alone provided the ransom by which Adam and his entire progeny are redeemed from death. The sacrificial work of the antitypical priesthood, however, was not finished at Calvary, but requires the entire Gospel Age "Day of Atonement." As Paul explains, we are privileged to fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ—the Christ, head and body.—Col. 1:24

This aspect of God's plan is brought to our attention in the 13th chapter of Hebrews, verses 1-16, where the apostle takes an illustration from the

typical sacrifices of the Tabernacle. On the typical Day of Atonement (Lev. 16) two animals were offered as a sin offering—a bullock and a goat. The fat of these animals was burnt on the copper altar in the court surrounding the Tabernacle. (vs. 25) Burning coals were taken from the altar in the court and brought into the Tabernacle proper, where incense was sprinkled upon them. The sweet odors of the burning incense permeated the Most Holy—“within the vail.” (vss. 12,13) The blood of the animals was then taken into the Most Holy and sprinkled on and before the mercy seat. (vss. 14,15) Finally, the carcasses of the animals were taken outside of the camp of Israel and burned.—vs. 27

It is this typical service that Paul draws on for lessons in the 13th chapter of Hebrews. He tells us that, antitypically, Jesus offered in complete sacrifice his human life, as illustrated by the burning of the carcass of the bullock without the camp, and admonishes us to join him in this sacrifice, suffering and dying with him.—Heb. 13:10-13

All of this could seem complicated, and we might ask what value this knowledge possibly has for us. However, before Paul finishes his lesson he makes a practical and understandable application of it all—one which every child of God can understand. He writes, “Therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” (vss. 15,16) We may not grasp every detail of the symbolisms of burning animals and burning incense, but we can understand what it means to offer praise, to do good, and to communicate. This

is the practical lesson for us typified by these sacrifices of the Tabernacle.

In Galatians 6:7-10, Paul enlarges upon the thought of doing good. We quote, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not. As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.”

It is clear from this that doing good to all—especially the household of faith—is the true expression of what it means to sow to the Spirit. This, as we have seen, is what our sacrifice is all about. It may be academic simply to say that we share in the sufferings of Christ, unless voluntarily, and with resolution, we actively and daily put ourselves in the way of sacrifice, and continue in that way faithfully even unto death.

We trust these few illustrations will help us to appreciate the real value of a knowledge of God’s wonderful plan, and of our share in that plan. It is by this knowledge that we are guided in the way of righteousness, for his Word is a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path. (Ps. 119:105) Through faithfulness to the doctrines of the Word we will learn to know God and his Son more fully. As we know them, and yield ourselves to doing the divine will, we will become more like them. Truly then, knowledge is important, but it is valueless to those who do not properly use it. ■