

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH Part III 7. COMING TO CHRIST WITH OUR UNDERSTANDING

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Transcript

STUDIES ON SAVING FAITH

Part III

7. COMING TO CHRIST WITH OUR UNDERSTANDING

1. A knowledge of Christ is essential. There can be no movement towards an unknown object. No man can obey a command until he is acquainted with its terms. A prop must be seen before it will be rested upon. We must have some acquaintance with a person before he will either be trusted or loved. This principle is so obvious it needs arguing no further. Apply it unto the case in hand, the subject before us: the knowledge of Christ must of necessity precede our believing on Him or our coming to Him. "How shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Rom. 10:14). "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). None can come to Christ while they are ignorant about Him. As it was in the old creation, so it is in the new: God first says, "Let there be light." 2. This knowledge of Christ comes to the mind from the Holy Scriptures. Nothing can be known of Him save that which God has been pleased to reveal concerning Him in the Word of Truth. It is there alone that the true "doctrine of Christ" (2 John 9) is to be found. Therefore did our Lord give commandment, "Search the Scriptures... they are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). When He berated the two disciples for their slowness of heart to believe, we are told that "beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). The Divine Oracles are designed "the word of Christ" (Col. 3:16) because He is the substance of them. Where the Scriptures have not gone, Christ is unknown: clear proof is this that an acquaintance with Him cannot be gained apart from their inspired testimony. 3. A theoretical knowledge of Christ is not sufficient. Upon this point we must dilate at greater length, for much ignorance concerning it prevails today. A head-knowledge about Christ is very frequently mistaken for a heart-acquaintance with Him. But orthodoxy is not salvation. A carnal judgment about Christ, a mere intellectual knowledge of Him, will never bring a dead sinner to His feet: there must be a living experience—God's word and work meeting together in the soul, renewing and understanding. As 1 Corinthians 13:2 so plainly and solemnly warns us, I may have the gift of prophecy, understand all mysteries, and all knowledge, yet if I have not love, then I am nothing. Just as a blind man may, through labor and diligence, acquire an accurate theoretical or notional conception of many subjects and objects which he never saw, so the natural man may, by religious education and personal effort, obtain a sound doctrinal knowledge of the person and work of

Christ, without having any spiritual or vital acquaintance with Him. Not every kind of knowledge, even God's Truth and His Christ, is effectual and saving. There is a form of knowledge, as well as of godliness, which is destitute of power—"which hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law" (Rom. 2:20). The reference is to the Jews, who were instructed in the Scriptures, and considered themselves well qualified to teach others; yet the Truth had not been written on their hearts by the Holy Spirit. A "form of knowledge" signifies there was a model of it in their brains, so that they were able to discourse freely and fluently upon the things of God, yet were they without the life of God in their souls. O how many have a knowledge of salvation, yet not a knowledge unto salvation, as the apostle distinguishes it in 2 Timothy 3:15—such a knowledge as the latter must be imparted to the soul by the miracle-working operation of the Holy Spirit. "They proceed from evil to evil, and they know not me, saith the Lord" (Jer. 9:3). Of whom was this spoken—of the heathen who were without any written revelation from Him? No, of Israel, who had His law in their hands, His temple in their midst, His prophets speaking to them. They had been favored with many and wondrous manifestations of his majesty, holiness, power and mercy; yet though they had much intellectual knowledge of Him, they were strangers to Him spiritually. So it was when the Son of God became incarnate. How much natural light they had concerning Him: they witnessed His perfect life, saw His wondrous miracles, heard His matchless teaching, were frequently in His immediate presence; yet, though the Light shone in the darkness, "the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5). So it is today. Reader, you may be a diligent student of the N. T., be thoroughly acquainted with the O. T. types and prophecies, believe all that the Scriptures say concerning Christ, and earnestly teach them to others, and yet be yourself a stranger to Him spiritually. "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3), which means that the unregenerate are utterly incapable of discerning the things of God spiritually. True, they may "see" them in a natural way: they may investigate and even admire them theoretically, but to receive them in an experimental and vital way they cannot. As this distinction is of such great importance, and yet so little known today, let us endeavour to illustrate it. Suppose a man who had never heard any music: others tell him of its beauty and charm, and he decides to make a careful study of it. That man might thoroughly familiarize himself with the art of music, learn all the rules of that art, so that he understood the proportions and harmony of it; but what a different thing is that from listening to a grand oratorio—the ear now taking in what before the mind knew only the theory of! Still greater is the difference between a natural and a spiritual knowledge of Divine things. The apostle declared, "We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery" (1 Cor. 2:7). He did not only affirm that it is a mystery in itself, but that it is still spoken "in a mystery." And why is this? Because the unregenerate, even where it is spoken in their hearing, yea, when it is clearly apprehended by them in a notional way. yet they neither know nor apprehend the mystery that is still in it. Proverbs 9:10 declares, "the knowledge of the holy is understanding:" there is no true understanding of Divine things except the "knowledge of the Holy." Every real Christian has a knowledge of Divine things, a personal, experimental, vital knowledge of them, which no carnal man possesses, or can obtain, no matter how diligently he study them. If I have seen the picture of a man, I have an image in my mind of that man according to his picture; but if I see the man himself, how different is the image of him which is then formed in my mind! Far greater still is the difference between Christ made known in the Scriptures and Christ revealed "in me" (Gal. 1:16). 4. There must be a spiritual and supernatural knowledge of Christ imparted by the Holy Spirit. This is in view in 1 John 5:20, "we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true." The faculty must be suited to the object or subject known. The natural understanding is capable of taking in Christ and knowing Him in a natural way, but we must be "renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph. 4:23) before we can know Christ in a spiritual way. There must be a supernatural work of grace wrought upon the mind by the Holy Spirit before there can be any inward and spiritual apprehension of the

supernatural and spiritual person of Christ. That is the true and saving knowledge of Christ which fires the affections, sanctifies the will, and raises up the mind to a spiritual fixation on the Rock of ages. It is this knowledge of Him which is "life eternal" (John 17:3). It is this knowledge which produces faith in Christ, love for Him, submission to Him. It is this knowledge which causes the soul to truthfully and joyously exclaim, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee" (Ps. 73:25). "No man can come unto me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him" (John 6:44). It is by the secret and effectual operation of the Spirit that the Father brings each of His elect to a saving knowledge of Christ. These operations of the Spirit begin by His enlightening the understanding, renewing the mind. Observe carefully the order in Ezek. 37:14, "And shall put my Spirit in you, and ye shall live. . . then shall ye know that I the Lord have spoken it." No sinner ever comes to Christ until the Holy Spirit first comes to him! And no sinner will savingly believe on Christ until the Spirit has communicated faith to him (Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:12); and even then, faith is an eye to discern Christ before it is a foot to approach Him. There can be no act without an object, and there can be no exercising of faith upon Christ till Christ is seen in His excellency, sufficiency, and suitability to poor sinners. "They that know thy name will (not "ought to") put their trust in thee" (Ps. 9:10). But again, we say, that knowledge must be a spiritual and miraculous one imparted by the Spirit. The Spirit Himself, and not merely a preacher, must take of the things of Christ and show them unto the heart. It is only in God's "light" that we truly "see light" (Psa. 36:9). The opening of his eyes precedes the conversion of the sinner from Satan unto God (Acts 26:18). The light of the sun is seen breaking out at the dawn of day, before its heat is felt. It is those who "see" the Son with a supernaturally enlightened understanding that "believe" on Him with a spiritual and saving faith (John 6:40). We behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, before we are changed into His very image (2 Cor. 3:18). Note the order in Romans 3:11, "there is none that understandeth" goes before "there is none that seeketh after God." The Spirit must shed His light upon the understanding, which light conveys the actual image of spiritual things in a spiritual way to the mind, forming them on the soul; much as a sensitive photographic plate receives from the light the images to which it is exposed. This is the "demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). 5. How is this spiritual and vital knowledge to be known from a mere theoretical and notional one? By its effects. Unto the Thessalonians Paul wrote, "For our Gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance" (1 Thess. 1:5), which is partly explained in the next verse, "having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost." The Spirit had given that Word an efficacy which no logic, rhetoric, or persuasive power of men could. It had smitten the conscience, torn open the wounds which sin had made, exposed its festering sores. It had pierced them even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit. It had slain their good opinion of themselves. It had made them feel the wrath of God burning against them. It had caused them to seriously question if such wretches could possibly find mercy at the hands of a holy God. It had communicated faith to look upon the great physician of souls. It had given a joy such as this poor world knows nothing of. The light which the Spirit imparts to the understanding is full of efficacy, whereas that which men acquire through their study is not so. Ordinary and strong mineral water are alike in color, but differ much in their taste and virtue. A carnal man may acquire a theoretical knowledge of all that a spiritual man knows vitally, yet is he "barren and unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:8). The light that he has is ineffectual, for it neither purifies his heart, renews his will, nor transforms his life. The head-knowledge of Divine truth, which is all that multitudes of present-day professing Christians possess, has no more influence upon their walk unto practical godliness, than though it was stored up in some other man's brains. The light which the Spirit gives, humbles and abases its recipient; the knowledge which is acquired by education and personal efforts, puffs up and fills with conceit. A spiritual and saving knowledge of Christ always constrains the soul unto loving obedience. No sooner did

the light of Christ shine into Paul's heart, than he at once asked, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Of the Colossians the apostle declared, "The Gospel which is come unto you.. .bringeth forth fruit... since the day ye heard.. .and knew the grace of God in truth" or "in reality" (1:6). But a mere intellectual knowledge of the truth is "held in unrighteousness" (Rom. 1:18). Its possessors are zealous to argue and cavil about it, and look down with contempt upon all who are not so wise as they: yet the lives of these frequently put them to shame. A saving knowledge of Christ so endears Him to the soul that all else is esteemed as dung in comparison with His excellency: the light of His glory has cast a complete eclipse over all that is in the world. But a mere doctrinal knowledge of Christ produces no such effects: while its possessors may loudly sing His praises, yet their hearts are still coveting and eagerly pursuing the things of time and sense. The natural man may know the truth of the things of God, but not the things themselves. He may thoroughly understand the Scriptures in the letter of them, but not in their spirit. He may discourse of them in a sound and orthodox manner, but in no other way than one can talk of honey and vinegar, who never tasted the sweetness of the one, nor the sourness of the other. There are hundreds of preachers who have accurate notions of spiritual things, but who see and taste not the things themselves which are wrapped in the words of Truth—"understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm" (1 Tim. 1:7). Just as an astronomer who makes a life-study of the stars, knows their names, positions, and varying magnitudes. yet receives no more personal and special influence from them than do other men; so it is with those who study the Scriptures, but are not supernaturally and savingly enlightened by the Spirit. O my reader, has the Day-star arisen in your heart (2 Pet. 1:19)? We trust that sufficient has been said in the previous articles to make clear unto every Christian reader that the saving "coming to Christ" of a poor sinner is neither a physical nor mental act, but is wholly spiritual and supernatural; that that act springs not from human reason or human-will power, but from the secret and efficacious operations of God the Spirit. We say clear unto "the Christian reader," for we must not expect the unregenerate to perceive that of which they have no personal experience. The distinction pointed out in the second half of the last article (the whole of which may well be carefully re-read) between a sound intellectual knowledge of Christ and a vital and transforming knowledge of Him, between knowing Christ as He is set forth in the Scriptures, and as He is Divinely revealed in us (Gal. 1:16), is not one which will appeal to the carnal mind; rather is it one which will be contemptuously rejected. But instead of being surprised at this, we should expect it. Were our last article sent to the average "Fundamentalist" preacher or "Bible teacher," and a request made for his honest opinion of it, in all probability he would say that the writer had lapsed into either "mysticism" or "fanaticism." Just as the religious leaders of Christ's day rejected His spiritual teachings, so the "champions of orthodoxy," those who boast so loudly that they are faithfully and earnestly contending for the faith, will not receive the humbling and searching messages of Christ's servants today. The substance of this article would be ridiculed by them. But their very ridicule only serves to demonstrate the solemn truth of 1 Corinthians 2:14, "But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him." These words have puzzled some who have thoughtfully pondered them, for they do not seem to square with the patent facts of observation. We have personally met the most conscienceless men—untruthful, dishonest, not scrupling to use tactics which many a non-professor would scorn—who, nevertheless, ardently proclaimed the Divine inspiration of the Scriptures, the Deity of Christ, salvation by grace alone. We have had personal dealings with men whose hearts were filled with covetousness, and whose ways were worldly almost to the last degree, yet who tiraded against "modernism" and "evolutionism" etc., and "faithfully preached" the Virgin-birth and the blood of Christ as the sinner's only hope. That these men are "natural" or "carnal," that is, unregenerate, is plain and unmistakable if we measure them by the infallible rule of Holy Writ: it would not only be a contradiction in terms, but blasphemy to say such had been made, by God, "new creatures in Christ."

Nevertheless, so far from the foundation truths of Scripture being "foolishness" unto these unregenerate characters, they warmly endorse and ardently propagate them. But what has been said above does not clash, to the slightest degree, with 1 Corinthians 2:14, when that verse be rightly read and understood. Let it be carefully noted that it does not say the "things of God are foolishness" unto the natural man. Had it done so, the writer had been at a complete loss to explain it. No, it declares that the "things of the Spirit of God" are foolishness: and what has been said above only serves to illustrate the minute accuracy of this verse. The "things of God" these men profess to believe; the "things of Christ," they appear to valiantly champion; but the "things of the Spirit of God they are personal strangers unto; and therefore when His secret and mysterious work upon the souls of God's elect is pressed upon them, they appear to be so much "foolishness" unto them—either "mysticism" or "fanaticism." But to the renewed it is far otherwise. The Spirit's supernatural operations in the implanting of faith in God's elect (Col. 2:12) produces a "new creation." Salvation by faith is wrought through the Spirit's working effectually with the Gospel. Then it is that He forms Christ in the soul (Gal. 4:19), and lets the Object of faith through the eye of faith, a real "image" of Christ being directly stamped upon the newly-quickenning soul, which quickening has given ability to discern Christ. Thus, Christ is "formed" in the heart, after the manner that an outward object is formed in the eye. When I say that I have a certain man or object in my eye, I do not mean that this man or object is in my eye locally—that is impossible; but they are in my eye objectively—I see them. So, when it is said that Christ is "formed in us," that Christ is in us "the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27), it is not to be understood that He who is now corporeally at the right hand of God, is locally and substantially formed in us. No, but that Christ at the right hand of God, the substance and Object of faith, is by the Spirit let in from above, so that the soul sees Him by the eye of faith, exactly as He is represented in the Word. So Christ is "formed" in us; and thus He "dwell(s) in your hearts by faith" (Eph. 3:17). What we have endeavoured to set forth above is beautifully adumbrated in the lower and visible world. It is indeed striking to discover how much of God's spiritual works are shadowed out in the material realm. If our minds were but more spiritual, and our eyes engaged in a keener lookout, we should find signs and symbols on every side of the invisible realities of God. On a sunshiny day, when a man looks into clear water, he sees there a face (his own), formed by representation, which directly answers to the face outside and above the water; there are not two faces, but one, original and yet represented. But only one face is seen, casting its own single image upon the water. So it is in the soul's history of God's elect; "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18). Oh that His image in us may be more evident to others!

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