

The Fundamental Importance of an Adequate Apprehension of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The knowledge of Christ is the foundation and beginning of the Christian life, and Christians are meant to be increasing all the time in the knowledge and apprehension of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 16:13

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Knowledge of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the fundamental importance of understanding who Christ is, asserting that our spiritual life is directly linked to our knowledge of Him. He explains that the foundation of the Christian life is rooted in the knowledge of Christ, which must grow continuously for spiritual maturity. Sparks highlights that the entire Bible reveals God's purpose centered on Christ, and that our understanding of Him shapes our destiny and spiritual fruitfulness. He urges believers to seek a deeper realization of Christ's significance in the divine plan, as this knowledge is essential for a fulfilling Christian life.

Transcript

Reading: Matthew 16:13-15.

'Who do you say that I am?'

The answer that each one of us is able to give to that question will reveal the measure of our own spiritual life. Let me say, however, at the outset that, although our Lord was undoubtedly seeking the answer that Peter gave Him - a testimony to, an affirmation of, His Deity, as the Son of God - we are not here concerned with any argument for, or discussion of, the Deity of Christ, although that will, we trust, be the natural and logical conclusion of all that we say. Our aim is to help toward a fuller realisation of the place and the significance of Christ in the whole Divine scheme.

The Knowledge of Christ Basic to Human Destiny

We begin by making one basic statement of fact. It is that everything related to human destiny is bound up with the knowledge of Christ. And for the Christian, in a peculiar way, the knowledge of Christ governs everything. The Scriptures make two things very clear in that connection.

(a) Christ the Foundation of the Christian Life

First of all, the knowledge of Christ is the foundation and the beginning of the Christian life. "This is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). Although that is recognised and accepted, as a simple and elementary truth, let it be said at once that the Divine record in the New Testament makes it evident that the Christian life may have either a good or a poor beginning. And much may depend, perhaps for some time to come, upon which of these has been the case. We know that to be true in natural human life. If a baby has a poor beginning, it may cause anxiety and require much care for some time to come. If it has a good beginning, it usually goes ahead without much trouble to itself or anyone else.

So it is with the Christian life: the beginning can be a good one, or it can be a poor one, and the effect of the beginning may be evident for a long time in the life itself. The strength or the weakness, the progress retarded or accelerated, the fruitfulness or the poverty of the life will greatly depend upon the initial apprehension of Christ. This is something that we need to bear in mind. The apostles were well aware of it, and were very much alive to it, and they always sought to lay the foundations of a good beginning in an adequate knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

(b) Growth in the Knowledge of Christ

A second thing that the Scriptures make clear is that Christians, after their beginning, are meant to be increasing all the time in the knowledge and apprehension of Christ. This is indicated in several ways.

Firstly, the very fact of the existence of the whole body of teaching found in the New Testament, addressed to believers, surely in itself carries this implication.

Then again, a progressive change can be noticed in the course of the teaching. For the beginning of the Christian life, the simple word 'know', or 'knowledge', is used, as in the passage we have already quoted: "This is life eternal, that they should know..." But that growth and progress toward maturity is expressed by a fuller word. It is not apparent in our English translations, but it is there all the same. The fuller word, in its substantive form (epignosis), is used at least thirteen times in relation to the believer's progress in the Christian life. It may be translated 'full knowledge', 'recognition', 'realisation', and you would be advised and helped to take account of the occurrences of that word, with the aid of a good concordance. It is very impressive that, after the mention of the knowledge of the Lord in the beginning of salvation, the apostles then speak so much about going on to full knowledge of Him.

Further, this is indicated by the specific teaching of the Word. We cite just one instance of this in the familiar words of Ephesians 1:17: "The God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, grant unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of him". Now these words were addressed to the people who had already received what the apostle called "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). It was to the Ephesian elders, you remember, that the apostle said that, during the long period in which he had been with them, he had not shunned to declare to them the whole counsel of God. And yet we find him, some time afterward, praying for them, that they may have a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Christ. That is significant and impressive.

We have, therefore, very much behind our statement that Christians are supposed and meant to be progressive all the time in their knowledge and apprehension of Christ. The Word of God makes this abundantly clear; and although perhaps it hardly needs to be emphasized, it must be established, as part of any foundational consideration of a matter of this kind, that the knowledge of Christ is basic to the attainment of the fulness of Christ by believers.

Behind the Scenes with the Bible

Now, let us take up our Bibles and allow them to lead us to this whole matter of the knowledge of Christ.

The Christian, with his Bible in his hand, is led behind the whole scene of history. On the stage of the world, a wonderful drama is being worked out, set in all the branches of science: the earth - geology; the heavens - astronomy; life - biology; the human body - physiology; and the human mind - psychology. All these things - the world and man and history - are in the foreground. But with Bible in hand the Christian is led behind them all - behind the stage, so to speak, behind the scenes - into the background of these things. He is led into the very presence of God - to God behind it all. Moreover, with Bible in hand the Christian is brought to see that God is a God of purpose, a God of design, a God of plan; a God who has conceived and projected this wonderful design which is being worked out. And, as a third step, the Christian is led, through the Bible, to see that that great design, that great purpose, that great plan, with all the Divine resources for its accomplishment, is all centred and summed up in one Person, God's Son. The whole design, the whole scene, the whole intention, and all the Divine resources, are focused upon one Person; the Son of God. It all concerns Him.

Seven Sections of the Bible

Next, the Christian discovers that, in relation to that God of purpose, and to His great purpose concerning His Son, the Bible falls into seven distinct sections. The first - the Creation - is comprehended in quite a small compass of the record. The Bible has much to say about the creation in relation to the Son of God. In Him, through Him, and unto Him were all things created (Col. 1:16). That is comprehensive!

The second, which we will call the patriarchal section, runs from the fourth chapter of Genesis almost to the close of the book in chapter fifty. We shall look at this more closely in a moment.

A third section, beginning with the book of Exodus, is what we call the Israelitish section. This runs from the beginning of the book of Exodus right to the end of the Old Testament. But it has some sub-sections. There is the priestly sub-section, running from the twelfth chapter of the book of Exodus to the first book of Samuel; the kingly or monarchical sub-section, from the first book of Samuel to the end of the books of Kings and Chronicles, where the kingship is set aside and the people go into captivity; and the prophetic sub-section, which occupies the last quarter of the Old Testament.

The fourth of the main sections of the Bible comprises the Incarnation, the Life, Death and Resurrection, of God's Son.

The fifth, a short but very important section, embraces the forty days after His Resurrection.

The sixth section is the heavenly session of the ascended Lord, with its two aspects - the advent of the Holy Spirit, and the birth, vocation and completion of the Church.

The seventh and final section - the Son coming in His Kingdom - has various aspects and implications and effects, in three particular connections: firstly, in relation to the Church; secondly, in relation to the nations; and thirdly, in relation to Satan and his kingdom.

That comprehends the whole Bible in seven sections. For the present I am going to confine myself to the second and the third, the patriarchal and the Israelitish sections, keeping in mind our object, which is to discover the place and significance of the Lord Jesus in the Divine scheme of things, so that we may come

to that adequate knowledge of Him which is essential to spiritual fulness in the Church and in the believer.

The Patriarchal Section

In the patriarchal section of the Old Testament, we find seven outstanding personages, who dominate the scene. Seven, as we know, is the biblical number for spiritual fulness or completeness; and, if we rightly understood the significance of these seven men, who were Divinely and sovereignly chosen for this very purpose, we should see that in them God has outlined seven features of His Son, which give a complete spiritual portrait of Him. It is not my intention to follow that out in detail, but I take it up in a general way in relation to our present specific purpose. Here are the seven dominating characters of that period: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. Every one of these represents a distinct feature in the drawing of the portrait of Christ.

Abel: the door of Heaven had been closed to Adam, but reopens to a man who was prepared to let go everything in this life in order to serve the thought of God. Cain tried in his own way to get through the door of the garden, but found it closed and barred to man - there was no access. To Abel the closed door of Heaven re-opened: Abel got through because he was prepared to let go everything in this life, and even life itself, in order to correspond to the thought of God. Here we can see an outstanding feature of the Lord Jesus.

Enoch: the man who alone walked with God on this earth when everyone else walked away from or far from God. The Lord Jesus did that, and He was probably the only man who did that in His day. He walked with the Father, as no one else did. And so, when everyone else was walking apart from God, or away from God, Enoch walked with God.

Noah: the man who lived in the light of a coming day of judgment and renewal, and worked in relation to that day. That is a brief and very comprehensive statement. The whole life of Noah was a long-drawn-out business. Tested by time; tested by all appearances which seemed to contradict and deny the line that he had taken; tested perhaps supremely by his utter loneliness, yet he lived and worked through a long life in the light of a day to come - a day of judgment, and a day beyond judgment in renewal. Is not that a picture of the Lord Jesus?

Abraham: the man whose portion alone was the Lord. "Fear not, Abram: I am thy... reward" (Gen. 15:1). That is all. A man deprived of his country and deprived of all foothold in the land of his sojourn, he went up and down that land as "a stranger and a sojourner" (Gen. 23:4), but his portion was the Lord. We are told that he was looking for "a better country... a heavenly"; for "the city... whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:16,10). Abraham's alone portion was the Lord. There is very much more in it than that, but that sums it up. And such was the Lord Jesus. What a lonely life was His, and, so far as things here were concerned, what a life of forgoing, of deprivation! But the Father was His portion, and that was enough for Him.

Isaac: the living embodiment of the fact that there is a life which cheats death of its prey, renders death null and void and leaves it behind, and goes on. Again, that is the Lord Jesus: a life which all the time declares that death is vanquished; and death is cheated; life that goes on and ever on, triumphant over death.

Jacob: a difficult character, Jacob. Yet, when you come to sum up his story, here was a man who came to know the thing which the Lord Jesus knew, and which characterized Him perhaps more than anything

else: that it is only the life in the Spirit that is ascendent life. Jacob made a very thorough and exhaustive trial of gaining ascendancy in the flesh. The day came when his flesh was smitten, and he was weakened and broken. He discovered in that moment that ascendancy is not by the wit and cunning and strength of the flesh, but wholly by the Spirit. The Lord Jesus lived on that principle. God brought Jacob through to the ground of His own Son - the ground of ascendancy in the Spirit.

Joseph: he sums up all the others and embodies the great truths of Christ: suffering and glory.

Here, then, in outline, we have God's portrait of His Son. Now remember: it is said that it was by the Son that all things were created (John 1:3; Col. 1:16). The end of the first section, the creation, therefore, is arrived at by the Son. What is He doing after that? It is true that God has entered into His rest - but what is the Son doing? Has the Son sat down and said, 'That is the end of everything'? For the whole of that long period afterward, what is the Son doing? The Son is active in the inculcation of Himself in the lives of those seven men. He is building Himself into their spiritual experience. He is bringing out the lines of His own character in this sevenfold way. The only profitable and right way to study the Patriarchs is to study them in the light of Jesus Christ. They are interesting as human studies, but that will not get you anywhere. If you can see that what God is after, what He has committed Himself to, and what the Son is engaged upon, is to reproduce Himself in the spiritual life of men, then you have something to bring you into a knowledge of Christ that is helpful knowledge, building knowledge, constructive knowledge, knowledge that is power and life.

The Israelitish Section

The next section, the Israelitish period, from Exodus to Malachi, is divided subsectionally into, firstly, the priestly aspect, from Exodus 12 to the first book of Samuel; secondly, the monarchical aspect, from 1 Samuel to 2 Chronicles 36:21; thirdly, the prophetic aspect, from Isaiah to Malachi.

(a) The Priestly Aspect

In order to appreciate the significance of the priestly aspect of the Israelitish section, it is necessary to recognise the Divine meaning in choosing Israel; that is, to recognise Israel's place and nature and vocation. Very much has been said and written regarding the Jewish people, and what a wonderful people they are. They have been called the most wonderful people in history. Comment has been made on what is termed 'the Jewish genius for religion'. I do not so read the Bible! Anything at all wonderful about these people was not due to themselves at all, but wholly to the grace of God.

What the Bible reveals as to the children of Israel is not their 'genius for religion', but the fact that they were a people no better than, if as good as, many others. Their outstanding characteristic was rather a genius for covetousness and selfishness and hard-heartedness and stiffneckedness and murder, if their interests were threatened or their ambitions frustrated. Stephen rightly summed up their history when he said to their leaders in his own time: "Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? and they killed them which shewed before of the coming of the Righteous One" (Acts 7:52). "Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute?" There is a challenge. In that marvellous discourse of Stephen, the whole history of Israel was taken up and presented in very dark lines. Not a genius for religion - very much to the contrary! God's own categorical statement about Israel was: 'I did not choose you because you were better or greater than other peoples' (Deut. 7:7).

Why, then, did God choose such a people? How could such a people come to full acceptance with God and have access to God, stand in His love, draw out all His favour, stir Him to fierce jealousy on their behalf - how could that be with such a people? Let it then at once be recognised that their whole life was based upon the mediatorial principle: a holy priesthood, a holy altar, holy sacrifices and offerings, blood sacrifices of creatures without spot or blemish, meal offerings of very fine-ground flour, meat offerings of that in which the closest inspection could detect no trace of corruption. Everything proclaimed with a loud voice that - not for a wonderful people at all, not for a people with a genius for religion and goodness - but for the chiefest of sinners, the most hopeless of men, the most disobedient, most provocative, most reprobate, most unfaithful people on earth - for such, God has provided a basis for the closest intimacy with Himself! Let anyone who despairs of themselves read Psalm 105, and then, having read it, turn to the Psalms immediately preceding and following it. In Psalm 105 you have the long-drawn-out, monotonous story of the unfaithfulness and unreliableness of that nation. And yet all the way along He forgave, and He forgave, and He forgave. Why?

The history of Israel can only be read in the light of Jesus Christ. He is the only explanation. Why did God choose Israel? What is their place, their nature, their vocation? Israel is God's great object-lesson of grace: grace providing all that which is lacking in man, but which is essential to fellowship with God. God provides it Himself. Out of the womb of Israel Jesus Christ was born, but He was implicit in the whole priestly order of her history, declaring all the way along: 'It is not your merit or your goodness - it is My perfection.' Israel shows forth - not her own greatness, not her own goodness, not her own genius, but just the greatness of Christ, who, for such as they and such as we, is "made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). For what purpose? "That no flesh should glory before God" (vs. 29). All the glory comes to Christ. God thought it worth while to take that long section of human history and constitute it in such a way as to set forth, in a people and through a people, to the nations, to the world, to sinful and worthless men, His wonderful grace - His 'grace which is in Christ Jesus' (cf. 1 Tim. 1:14).

(b) The Monarchical Aspect

The monarchy runs from the first book of Samuel to the end of the second book of Chronicles. The supreme factor in the monarchy was that of glory: God's glory manifested, enjoyed and displayed in the people of His grace, - for, as we have seen, they are indeed that. Now, because they are such, they are to be the people of His glory. The throne is the symbol of ascendancy, of power, authority, dominion. It was intended to be the expression of a 'glorious high throne' set in the heavens (Jer. 17:12).

Now, as we considered Israel in themselves, so in this connection we have to consider the father and the son in whom the monarchy came to its peak of glory and power - David and Solomon. What shall we say about them?

Consider David. Who is David? What does he think and say about himself, about his past, his present? We are told that David went in and sat before the Lord and said: "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house...?" (1 Chron. 17:16). The Lord said to David: "I took thee... from following the sheep" (vs. 7). David - a man of humble and despised beginning, of little account in the eyes of his own brothers, and of less account in his own eyes. David - a man whose faults and weaknesses are written in large letters and not hidden by God. Things which we fain would cover, and which we wish were not in the Bible - acts of murder, treachery, passion - the Spirit of God has had written and preserved for all time. This is not the story of a man who is outstanding for his perfection and moral excellencies. Indeed, there are good things

about David, there are wonderful things about David; but God has given this other side. He is a man, and a man compassed by all the weaknesses and passions of humanity; falling into the deep, deep mire of sin - terrible sin; crying out of the mire for deliverance, and eventually praising God that he has been taken from the pit, the horrible pit. But he had been in it.

Then consider Solomon. Think of his beginning, the handicap of his birth, the sin in which he was born, the iniquity in which he was shapen. Have you never felt a shock reading the eleventh chapter of the first book of the Kings? Here is the man for whom God had done everything: the man whom God had endued and endowed with wisdom above all men, with riches and honour and power beyond all precedent; standing out, as he did in those days of his glory, head and shoulders above everyone else by Divine blessing: and yet, with all that God had done, his real nature was revealed, and in that terrible chapter - "Now king Solomon loved many strange women" there begins the story of decline and downfall, the awful tragedy of a man going down into the muck and the mire of human iniquity, leading directly to the division of the kingdom and the terrible line of tragedy in the monarchy, issuing eventually in the exile. That is Solomon. It seems almost unthinkable that such a man should have such a downfall.

And yet God knew all that about Solomon before ever He gave him a first blessing. God knew His man; God knew all that could happen and would happen. What are you dealing with in David and Solomon? Ah, you are dealing with men who were ordinary, common stuff, coming to the peak of power and glory - why? - because of the grace of God. And why did God do it? Why did He give Solomon, as the Scripture says, wisdom and riches and glory and power beyond any man that had ever been before him or should come after him (1 Kings 3:12)? Why did He make the glory of Solomon fabulous? He has become a proverb. If you want to speak of wisdom, riches and glory, you mention the name 'Solomon'. Even the Lord Himself did that: He spoke of "Solomon in all his glory" (Matt. 6:29). Why did God go out of His way to do all that with, and for, David and Solomon?

The answer is found in the New Testament, quite clearly and definitely. Read the passages in the New Testament where David and Solomon are linked with the Lord Jesus. God always had His Son in view. In David and in Solomon God was as it were throwing upon the screen a symbolic presentation of the kingdom of His Son, with all the glory and the blessing that would come to His people through grace, by Jesus Christ. That is the explanation of the period of the monarchy. It has no meaning otherwise. By means of these people God is drawing upon the canvas of history the great truths concerning His Son. He portrays first, in the priesthood, the great truth of redeeming grace: everything is provided to bring a people into His presence in unclouded fellowship. Then, in the monarchy, He draws the picture of what grace will lead to: it leads to glory through Christ Jesus.

(c) The Prophetical Aspect

The third sub-section, the prophetical, falls into two periods: that before the captivity and that after the captivity. Now the prophetic ministry was intended to re-present the full mind of God as to His Son and His people, and through them to the nations. The prophets were the bulwark against the incorrigible downgrade tendency of the people of God. It is always there, this downgrade tendency, even in the Lord's people, and the prophets were the bulwark against that tendency. They either encouraged or combated priests and kings in relation to this matter, and in so doing they stood for the Divine meaning both in the priesthood and in kingship: that is, holiness, incorruptibility, righteousness, and truth. But they were oppressed by the hopelessness of their own immediate times, and so spoke much of a coming day, and a coming Person. The day of that Person was the strength, the hope, and the inspiration of the prophets.

For them salvation and glory were in the coming One.

When Jesus put this question to His disciples 'Who do you say that I am?' - they gave answers from public opinion which brought forward the prophetic hope; but to Him this was insufficient. He was the answer to that hope, and so He pressed them for their answer in order to see whether they had arrived at that point.

They had been with Him for some three very full years, in which time they had seen His works, heard His words, known Him in person, in the flesh. The time is finished, and there away up in the North, as He turns His face towards Jerusalem (to be the scene of the last moments of His life here on earth) He probes, He probes with this question: "Who do men say that I the Son of man am?" (Matt. 16:13). Getting a variety of answers as to what men were saying, He brings the question straight home: 'Who do you say that I am?' He is asking, 'What does it all amount to, for you? After all, what does it amount to? You have heard it all, you have seen it all, you have been in touch with it all: now, what does it amount to? What is your apprehension of Me? What is your conclusion? How much have you really seen, after all?'

Now, although Peter gave an answer which in itself satisfied the Lord Jesus, it was a transient, fleeting illumination, for so soon afterwards the man who said it denied his Lord. From the Gospels we are led to one sad conclusion: that, although they had companied with Him in close association, heard all that He had to say and seen all that He had to do, though they had listened to Him and watched Him, they had not really seen Him. Are you thinking, 'That is a terrible thing to say!?' Ah, but there is all the evidence and proof of it. This was not the only time that He exposed their failure to recognise. Just look what happens afterwards, after He has gone and He comes back and visits them here and there, and speaks to them. See their profound and utter ignorance. They had not seen. They knew their Bibles - they knew Moses, they knew the Psalms, they knew the prophets - but they had not seen Him. That is the thing that He makes perfectly clear. And - this is what I am coming to - because they had not really seen, disaster overtook their lives as disciples. That is why they all forsook Him and fled; that is why the leader amongst them denied Him thrice, passionately and vehemently; that is why they are found, after the Cross, scattered and disillusioned and hopeless. They had not really apprehended Him.

I come back then to our main question: the fundamental importance of an adequate apprehension and knowledge of Christ, as born in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We could sum up by saying that the Bible has but one object from beginning to end, and that is to reveal the mind of God concerning man, with a view to bringing glory to God in man's eternal good. But the one means of that revelation is God's Son. He not only brings God's mind to us - He is God's mind for us. He is not only the Word as an utterance - He is the Word as a Person. Therefore the whole Bible is comprehended and governed by Christ. He answers the one purpose of it all - past, present, future and eternally. Christ is central, Christ is supreme, Christ is universal, Christ is dominant in all. The Christian life will be greater or smaller according to our spiritual apprehension and knowledge of Christ, through what Paul calls 'having the eyes of our hearts enlightened' (Eph. 1:18). Christ is the sum of all things; and the kind of Christians we are and the measure of His fulness to which we shall attain will be determined exclusively by our knowledge of Him.

Source:

<https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/the-fundamental-importance-of-an-adequate-apprehension-of-christ/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net