

Sermon 12, The Christian's Greatest Need, Eph. 1:17c-18a

"Our supreme need is to know God." Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *God's Ultimate Purpose*, 342.

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Proposition: The Christian's greatest need is to know God better through His Word and Spirit; such knowledge is possible only because God has given us hearts to know Him and intellectual light to see Him.

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we saw last Sunday Paul's example of prayer. We saw that his prayers were explicitly directed toward the Triune God, and we saw further the truth that we can approach God only through His tri-personal life and through His Incarnate Son Jesus. Last week's sermon, in effect, was an expansion of the truth that we can only truly have a relationship with God when we recognize Him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are going to see that same truth again this week as we look at the next two phrases of Paul's prayer for the Ephesians. But rather than setting the truth of God's Trinity against the backdrop of prayer, this week we will set it against the backdrop of the knowledge of God more generally. What I hope to show you this morning is that to know God at all, you need to know Him as the Christian God. There is no such thing as a generalized theistic knowledge of God. To know God, you must know Him as *this God*, the Triune God of the Scriptures and of the Christian faith. Further, Paul teaches in our text this morning that you can only know God if your heart is in working order and receiving the intellectual light that emanates from God Himself.

Brothers and sisters, our greatest need is to know God. We must know Him by His Spirit as Triune and we must know Him with our hearts. That is what I hope to get across to you this morning. Let me take just a moment and remind you that theology is practical. Where do we find this teaching about knowing God? We find it in the midst of a prayer — one of the most practical things you and I can do. We find that Paul's zeal for the spiritual growth of these Ephesian

believers resulted in his prayer, not that they would be good, or that they would have physical health, etc., but that they would *know God*. In Paul's mind, this was the most important component of spiritual growth. This was what he wanted for a church that already had faith and love. He wanted *knowledge*. He wanted them to know God. Why? Because Christianity isn't a religion, but a relationship. The most important thing that could happen in their lives was that they come to know God better.

I. How We Can Know God Better, v. 17c

So that's the first thing Paul addresses in our text this morning. Last week we saw that He was praying to the Triune God. This week we see what he was praying for. In a word, he was praying for the Ephesians to receive the Holy Spirit.

A. The Father's Gift of the Holy Spirit

That's what these believers needed. That was priority number one for the apostle when he heard how well they were doing. He got right down and begged for the Holy Spirit for this flock.

I asked you this last week, and I'll ask it again. What dominates your prayers? If I could listen to you pray for a week, what would I hear? "God, please give me a warm house and good food and good health and a cushy job with a nice retirement package?" Is that what I would hear? "God, please bless and keep my consumer lifestyle. Help me to be the best, most refined consumer ever. Give me the wisdom to seek quality products and the insight to find bargains and save money." Is that what I would hear? Would I hear, "God, please send me a boyfriend or spouse. Please send me someone to fill the loneliness in my life and make it exciting!"? What dominates your prayers? The thing that dominated the apostle's prayer here was a request for the Holy Spirit. None of the requests I just mentioned is necessarily wrong. But all are decidedly unspiritual. If you look at the other prayer in this letter, in chapter 3, you'll see that the Holy Spirit is a big part of that one too!

Brothers and sisters, we need the Holy Spirit in order to know God better. No Spirit, no knowledge of God. It's that simple. You can't get to know God even from the Bible, never mind from other good books, unless the Holy Spirit is right there with you. As the English theologian John Owen said, if you're going to live without the Holy Spirit you might as well burn your Bible.

Sometimes Pentecostals and others have alleged that Reformed theology neglects the Holy Spirit. I don't think that's true, though obviously opinions can vary. But may it never be that the saints at Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church neglect the Holy Spirit! Any Pentecostal should be able to recognize that we frozen chosen love and need and seek the Holy Spirit just as passionately as any happy-clappy congregation in any physically expressive culture. If I listen to you pray, I should hear words saturated with the Spirit. He should be all over your prayers as He is all over Paul's prayers. You should be longing for and requesting His presence and help in every area of your life, and especially in the area of sanctification. Pentecostals no more have a monopoly on the Spirit than Anglicans have a monopoly on reverence and Catholics have a monopoly on architecture. Yes, the Lord's prayer does not directly ask for the Holy Spirit, but

without Him we cannot do God's will and God's kingdom will not come. Jesus Himself taught that our Father will no more withhold His Spirit from those who ask than an earthly father will withhold bread from his hungry child. Brothers and sisters, you and I need to be desperate for the Holy Spirit!

Notice the sphere in which Paul's request is particularly relevant. He asks for the Spirit in relation to the knowledge of God. Those are the very words of our text. That's why this whole sermon is organized around the theme of knowing God. The Spirit is Holy, and thus particularly relevant to sanctification. But He is also the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, and thus He is particularly relevant to knowing God. You can learn science through observation. You can learn history through journals, diaries, and letters. You can learn literature from books. But you can only learn theology, or to know God, from God Himself. It is the Spirit who searches all things, even the deep things of God. It is the Spirit who takes what belongs to Jesus and communicates it to us. And so if you want to know God, you need the Holy Spirit!

1. Spiritual Wisdom

In particular, Paul prayed for the Spirit to grant spiritual wisdom to the Ephesians. What is this? Well, if worldly wisdom is the knowledge of how to succeed in the ungodly world system, spiritual wisdom is the knowledge of how to flourish in relationship with God. Do you want to know how to walk with God? I can show you what it looks like. Scripture can tell you what it looks like. Books can give you a list of disciplines or practices that people walking with God engage in. But only the Holy Spirit can really and truly get into your thick head how to flourish in relationship with God.

In his sermon on this passage, Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells the story of how William Wilberforce loved a particular preacher in London. Wilberforce went all the time to hear this man, and was always inviting his political friend William Pitt the Younger to come along with him. Pitt, of course, was a brilliant man and longtime Prime Minister of England, but he was not a Christian. One day Wilberforce prevailed on him to attend church, and Wilberforce was blown away by how good the sermon was that day. It seemed to him be chock-full of rich spiritual food. At the end of the service, Pitt looked at him and said, "Wilberforce, I don't have the slightest idea what that man was talking about. I honestly tried to focus my attention on him to the best of my ability, but I truly could not figure out what he was trying to say." Brothers and sisters, Pitt had outstanding abilities and led Britain against Revolutionary France and then against Napoleon. But he completely lacked the spiritual wisdom to understand a word the preacher said. Unless you have the Holy Spirit, you will quite simply be unable to understand how to flourish in relationship with God. You can hear a superlative description of it, and walk away quite unchanged and unmoved. This is why, after his superlative description of the spiritual benefits they possessed in Christ, Paul immediately plunged into praying for the Holy Spirit's gift of wisdom so that the Ephesians could understand these things!

Some of you have told me that the early Ephesians sermons I preached a few weeks back seemed dry and tasteless, more theoretical than practical. Brothers and sisters, there's a good

chance that I was spiritually dry myself and preaching those rich truths in a dust-choked way. But another possibility is that you the listeners needed a bigger dose of the Spirit's wisdom in order to understand the truths being presented. Personally, I'm almost certain that it was a combination of both things. I probably wasn't full of the Holy Spirit, and you may not have been either! As I keep saying, if you find sermons dry — my sermons or anyone else's — the primary remedy is to entreat the Spirit's presence in my preparation and preaching and in your listening. If the messages aren't spiritual enough, it's probably because we (and that certainly includes yours truly) aren't in tune enough with the Spirit!

2. Spiritual Revelation

But in addition to spiritual wisdom that will enable them to understand how to flourish in relationship with God, Paul requests spiritual revelation for the Ephesians. What does this mean? When the Spirit comes as a Spirit of revelation, He reveals to us more about Himself, Jesus, and the Father. He shows us more of who they are. Now, does this mean that when the Spirit is among us we should expect “new revelations” — that is, additional information about God that's not contained in the Bible? No. The Ephesians did not have a complete Bible, and it is reasonable to suspect that they would in fact receive additional information about God — for instance, some of the material contained in the Gospels, etc. But in our day, should we expect new revelation? No. We should expect to understand the revelation we already have. We should expect that when the Spirit is present, chapters of the Bible that never quite made sense to us will start making sense. Doctrines we never understood will begin to be clear and spiritually nourishing to us. Verses that troubled us will start feeding us instead! The process of writing and delivering this sermon is a perfect example of the work of the Spirit as the Spirit of revelation. He is the one who originally revealed the truth contained in Ephesians, and He is the one who helps me understand it and explain it to you — and He in turn helps you to understand it. Thus, those of you who are theology buffs should understand the Spirit's work as the Spirit of revelation to be what theologians call “illumination.” God takes the dead letter and by His Spirit makes it living and active. He is not objectively revealing new truth; rather, He is subjectively bringing us to understand truth that in one sense has already been revealed. Just as the day of your death is your personal last day, so the moment you come to understand something you didn't previously understand is a moment of revelation for you. That's the sense in which the Spirit is and remains the Spirit of revelation throughout salvation history. Basically, the point is that every time you “get” a spiritual truth, you do so because of the Spirit's revelatory work in you.

Do you believe that you depend on the Holy Spirit to such a vast extent for knowledge of God? As human beings, we understand that our intellect is our special defining feature. And so we tend to be inordinately proud of our intellectual abilities. Paul's point in praying for the Spirit of wisdom and revelation is that you won't understand how to flourish in your spiritual life, and that you won't actually understand in their fullness any truths about God, unless and until the Holy Spirit sees fit to show them to you. No one knows the Father except the Son, and anyone to

whom the Son chooses to reveal Him. And how does the Son reveal the Father? Through the Spirit of revelation. Do you want to know God? Then you need the Son. You need Jesus in your life. But you also need the Holy Spirit. There are not two paths to God, the way of the Logos and the way of the Spirit. There is only one path to God, and it is through the Logos by the Spirit. That's what the larger context tells us. Paul spends a lot of time writing about God, Christ, and the Spirit. Clearly he is approaching the Ephesians through their rational faculties. But then he stops and prays for the Spirit to give them wisdom and revelation. For Paul, word and Spirit are equally necessary and important. And so they ought to be for us here at Harvest.

B. Context: An Understanding of God as Triune, vv. 17a-c

Well, Paul is praying with regard to knowing God. He wants the Ephesian believers to know the wisdom and revelation imparted by the Spirit. That is clearly an essential part of knowing God better. But another essential element of knowing God is that we must know Him as Triune. We talked about this last Sunday, in the context of prayer (as I mentioned). Prayer addresses God as Triune. But knowledge of God in general takes His Triunity into account. If you say to me, "I know God," and I say "How many divine persons are there in the single divine being?" and you say, "I don't know what you're talking about," then you don't know God. The only people who actually know the Father are those to whom the Son has revealed Him. The only people who know Christ are those who have His Spirit. That is the crystal-clear teaching of the New Testament. And so, in this chapter Paul has outlined the various activities of the Father, Son, and Spirit in salvation. He has just sketched another small account of the work of each person in the earlier part of this verse. Clearly, the context is telling us that if we are to know God, then we must know Him as Triune. We must know Him as Father who eternally begets a Son and from whom the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds.

C. Context: An Understanding that God Raised and Exalted Christ, v. 20

In the following context, too, we see that Paul's prayer involves knowing God as the God who raised and exalted Christ. We need to see not just God's Triune life, but also the work of Jesus Christ the God-man who lived, died, and rose again and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. This too is part of knowing God.

The Christian's greatest need is to know God. That is what Paul requested for the believers who already had every spiritual gift. That is the obvious consequence of the truth that Christianity is about a relationship. Your relationship with God needs to get better and deeper. And even as he prays for that, the apostle can't help but pray in way that highlights the Trinity and the resurrection and exaltation of the Son of God. Because Jesus really truly died and really truly was raised from the dead, you need to know that before and while you approach God. After all, it is only the death of Christ that makes it possible for you to know God better!

D. In Short, We Need to Know God as the Christian God!

Let me summarize. Paul is teaching us here that we need to know God by His Spirit. We need to know Him as Triune. And we need to know Him as the One who raised and exalted Jesus Christ. There is no genuine knowledge of God that is simply a generic theism. To truly know God means

knowing Him explicitly as the Christian God, knowing Him as the God who is Three Persons and as the God who raised and exalted Jesus Christ. If your God didn't do these things, He isn't the God that Paul knew and prayed to. If you don't know these things about your God, then you need to study and learn them.

As we said last week, true prayer is Trinitarian. True knowledge of God knows Him as the God of the Bible who does and is all the things that the Bible ascribes to Him. Brothers and sisters, the Christian's greatest need is to know God precisely as the Christian God. It's a relationship. If you know me simply as a human being, and don't know me as an English teacher, classical music lover, and bookworm, then you don't know me! And in the same way, if you know simply that God is a deity but not that He raised and exalted Christ, then you don't know Him.

Why is it important to know God? Because we were made for relationship. We were made to know Him personally and to live with and for Him.

II. Why We Can Know God at All, v. 18a

And indeed, that's immediately where Paul goes. He has just prayed for the Spirit to be involved in granting the knowledge of God to these Ephesian believers, and then he adds a perfect passive participle, "The eyes of your hearts having been enlightened."

What does this mean? It means that the prerequisite to knowing God is having the faculty for knowing Him. We need intellectual eyes and they need intellectual light in order to truly know God. But the good part is that if the Holy Spirit comes to you as a Spirit of wisdom and revelation, then you have already had the eyes of your heart opened and had your heart flooded with the intellectual light that allows you to see God. The Spirit is given to those whose faculties for knowing God have already been awakened and supplied with what they need to work.

A. We Have Hearts to Know

First of all, then, Paul mentions that we have hearts to know. Metaphorically, then, he speaks about the "eyes of the heart," that is, the faculty by which the heart perceives other persons. The eyes give us knowledge, and Paul is focusing here on the prerequisites for the knowledge of God. In order to know God, he says, your heart has to be engaged! You cannot know God simply through the intellect, or simply through the body, or simply through any particular power of the soul. You can only know the Persons of the Trinity in the same way you know any person — that is, as a complete, whole, embodied person yourself. It takes everything that you are, symbolized by the core of your being (your heart) to really know another person. That's why we can "meet" people through email, on the phone, over a video call, etc. — but we don't really get to know someone until we have met in person. The Father and the Holy Spirit do not have bodies like we do — and so we can meet them in person anywhere. But they are most present in the gathered assembly of God's people, as ch. 2 points out. Do you want to know God? Then you must seek to know Him with your heart. The knowledge of God needs to make a difference to you at a heart level. No level shallower than that is sufficient.

B. God Has Given Us Light to See Himself

But more than that, God has granted us light to see Him. It doesn't do much good to open your eyes if you're in total darkness. And in the same way, it does little good to turn your heart toward God and strive to know Him if you don't know where or what He is. Yet God shines the light of His face upon us. God grants us additional light in our understanding that we might know who He is and what He has done.

You are not in darkness that the day of the Lord should surprise you! You know the truth; the light of God has shone in your hearts; the glory of God shines on you. Brothers and sisters, God has already given you a heart to know Him and light with which to see Him. And so if you don't know Him, the fault is not His. It's yours. If you haven't begged for the Spirit's presence, begin to do so. Live as people who have received the light of the knowledge of God. Walk in the light, as He is in the light.

Your greatest need is to know God. You have the power to know Him; if you are a believer, then God has changed your heart to make it able to know Him rightly. If you're not a believer, then ask God to reveal Himself to you. Ask Him to change your heart and illuminate your mental eyes so that you can see Him in His beauty. Seek His Spirit. Beg Him to reveal Himself to you, to make your heart know Him perfectly. He who called you is faithful; He will surely do it. The grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.