

Sunday 21st January 2018
2 Peter 1v1-11 cont.
The fountain of all good, the Knowledge of God

We have been looking at 2 Peter chapter 1, and have seen that the apostle is exhorting us to a vigorous, muscular, determined and persevering faith which, by the knowledge of God, will have an effect on us. The effect will cause us to grow in self-control, and patience. This will lead on to the formation of Christ-likeness in us which will show itself in love for other Christians, and love for all peoples. Notice that the inward transformation of our character leads to the external effects. We are changed from the inside out, not from the outside in. It is about our hearts being changed, and our heads follow!

We are told that the result of this process will be a growing assurance that we are elect and called by God to belong to Him. This in turn will cause us to live a vibrant Christian life, and eventually burst into heaven, not creep in as if we don't belong there. We are further told that if we develop this character, it will keep us from being unfruitful in our Christian lives. I used the picture of having the medicine on our shelves, but not taking it, to show how we can have Christ, but not exercise faith. If we do not exercise our faith, our lives will shrink and become unprofitable to God.

This unprofitable condition is the dominant state of the Church in the west in our present time. If we were to take the time to investigate the Church in China and South Korea, and parts of Africa and South America, we would discover that things are very different there than here!

Today we will consider the fountain of this passage, from where the possibility of growth arises. It all comes from the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, as referred to in v 3 and 8. Before we go any further, a word about being unfruitful. In this passage there is both promise and warning. There is the promise of fruitfulness to those who keep the command and so grow, and a warning that to fail to respond will result in unfruitfulness. This manifests in fear, doubt and uncertainty. The outcome will be a poor entry into the eternal kingdom. It is sad to see people who are Christians coming to their last day in fear and agony of soul, not because of pain or illness, but because of fear and doubt as to their eternal state and destination. The time to ensure our condition is now, not at the end where pain, weakness and medication may have clouded our minds and incapacitated us.

Scripture often places blessings and warnings together. The classic example of this is Deuteronomy 28 which lays out the blessings of obedience to the covenant, and the curses or consequences which will follow if disobeyed. While we have this passage in Deuteronomy open, I hope you are looking it up, let me draw your attention to something. The purpose of the passage to show the desirability and wisdom of obedience.

I have heard many people say something like this over the years. 'I could never believe in a God who is so unpredictable and cruel as the God in the Old Testament. All those wars and killings and punishments.' I suppose you have heard this too! Look again at chapter 28. There are two paths presented. The path of obedience, and the path of disobedience. To choose obedience is to follow the path of promise and blessing. To walk in disobedience is to choose to come under the curse promised. The sad events of the OT are in fact the proof of God's faithfulness. He is doing what He said He would do, it is we who chose to obey or to disobey!

We also get warnings and choices in the New Testament. The application of the Sermon on the Mount has the parable of two houses. One is built on sand, the other on rock. Matthew 7 verse 24ff. When the storm comes, when, not if, which house stands? So it is with life, and the Christian life. Christians are meant to stand, but if we are not built firmly on the rock, we will shudder and crack or even fall. We still sing the old hymn, 'On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand.' This passage in 2 Peter is how to stand and build on solid rock. The solid rock is Christ.

Mark 11 verse 20 is the conclusion of the incident of a barren fig tree. Jesus comes to the fig tree which is recognizable by its leaves. However, He does not find any fruit on it and curses it. People have struggled with this passage over the ages. It seems harsh, and it is easy to get lost in the detail, but sometimes the main thing is the main thing and indeed the only thing. The point of this passage is not to debate it, but to take heed to the warning that we really do not want to risk being unfruitful. This is not about degrees of unfruitfulness or incomplete fruitfulness, but is a strong encouragement not to find ourselves in a position where this passage could apply to us. The point is we are to be stirred up to give ourselves, to make every effort, to be fruitful in the knowledge of Christ!

We can have knowledge of Christ, and yet not do anything with it. In this case the knowledge will become a haze and we will forget and become idle. To me this is like the hare and the tortoise story. The hare sits down under a tree and goes to sleep and is overtaken by the tortoise. Let's not be like the hare. It's ok to be tortoise like, but keep making every effort. Plodding along is good.

What then is the Knowledge of Christ?

In short, it is knowing about God, His attributes, character, plans, purposes, and ways. It is knowing who Jesus is, why He came to earth, what He did while here, the Cross, His death, His resurrection and Ascension. It is knowing about the Holy Spirit and what He does. This is a lot of knowledge, but we don't have to get it all in one go. This is a life-long journey, not the next bus stop. This knowledge is like a book, the story develops, it is not all in the last page, and the butler doesn't always do it.

However, that is not all the knowledge of Christ is. For example, if we were to look up how to change a light bulb in a DIY manual, we would be told and shown pictures of the process, tools needed and all that sort of thing. However, the doing of it may very well

prove a bit more complicated. For example. I don't like heights anymore, or they don't like me. I have no problem changing a light bulb in a lamp, or from the first rung of the steps, but if I have to go higher and can't hold on to anything, the knees go weak, wobbly and the task becomes much harder. In actual fact, there are some light bulbs that I would not wish to attempt to change. The actual process of putting the knowledge we have into practice, into our experience, is much more demanding than gaining the head knowledge alone.

Another way we could express it is that this passage in 2 Peter is talking about 'Eureka' knowledge. This is more than intellectual knowledge gained from a manual or a dictionary, it is the knowledge that comes when we have a moment of illumination, and we see it, we comprehend it. I have often complained about the instructions that come with self-assembly furniture. It is only when the instructions become clear and we see the truth and sense of the instructions that we can really say that we now know how to put the shelf up! The Bible calls this revelatory knowledge. It is knowledge we get when the penny drops.

The evidence that the knowledge spoken of is more than head knowledge comes from passages such as Proverbs 2 verses 1-5. In this passage, knowledge is described in terms of hidden treasure. This does not mean that the treasure is so hidden that it cannot be found, but it means that it is a treasure that does not fall on our head, but has to be searched out, sometimes at great cost or effort. Many years ago, treasure was found a few dozen yards off the North Coast of Northern Ireland. It came from one of the vessels of the Spanish Armada which had foundered on the rocks. The treasure was found by divers, but it still took hard and dangerous diving work to recover the treasure. It was there, but the divers had to make every effort to recover it against strong currents, waves and cold!

The knowledge of Christ spoken of here is the knowing of God, not just about Him. To know God is to know a person and the only way to do that is to cultivate a relationship with them. The person who knows God in a way that is saving is not the person full of expertise and debate, but the person who speaks of one they have come to love because they are loved by Him.

2 Peter tells us that God has made provision for us in His great and precious promises. These are only known by knowing God. Think of it this way, and some of you may have actually had this happen to you. A letter comes to you from a solicitors office inviting you to come to the reading of a relatives will, as it will be to your advantage. From this letter, there is the promise of an inheritance, but we are not told how much or what. However, if we knew the relative, if we knew they had a mansion, a Rolls, servants and property, and if we were favourites, and spent happy times with them, then we could be justified in thinking that what was coming to us was great.

This is how it is with God. If we know what He is like, then we will realise how great and precious these promises are. Our expectations and our inheritance are related to our relationship with God.

The question now arises, how do we get the riches of God's promise, the promise of His life in us, working to change us and fit us for eternity?

It requires application, the application of robust faith. Let me interject here that this passage in 2 Peter only applies to Christians. It is impossible to have faith, saving, effective faith apart from being a Christian. We go from 'faith to faith', not 'no faith to faith'. Not having faith to having faith requires conversion, being born again. We must turn away from the path we are on and turn to Christ, asking Him to come into our lives. This is almost like the old water pumps that had to be primed before water could be pumped up. Conversion is being primed by Christ coming into our lives to enable us to use the faith He gives to grow in faith. The seed has to be planted before it can grow, so Christ has to be planted in us before Christ-likeness can grow.

Psalm 119 verses 9-16 includes much advice on how the knowledge of God we need comes to us. Verse 15 in particular reproduces a key ingredient that also appears in many Psalm including Psalm 1. It is the discipline, or practice of meditation. Christian meditation is not mindfulness, it is more. It is not the clearing of the mind as described in Eastern mysticism. Rather, it is the filling of the mind, not with our thoughts, but with the Bible's thoughts and words. We are to think, we are to read carefully, not just superficially, but Christian meditation is more than reading and our thinking.

This is where we and the unseen God come into effective contact. When we read and think and ask ourselves questions about the text, when we read it and pray over it, this is where the Holy Spirit, the author of Scripture comes in and as it were turns the light on, illuminates it. This is where we suddenly see the significance of a passage where before we wondered what the point of it all was.

I can remember as a young teenager, reading through the book of Acts. My mother bought me daily Bible reading notes in those days, which I usually stored up and read at the end of the month – not how to do it! I read through the book of Acts and thought what a boring book! Parents, I am sure you have heard that before – it means that the speaker has not come to faith yet, they can't see because they are dead spiritually. In this case, pray for their conversion until it happens.

Some-time later, I became a Christian and again found myself in the book of Acts, and what a difference. I didn't understand much of it, but I do remember phoning a friend to read him verses which were so exciting to me. That is the difference between head and heart knowledge. We may not understand the ramification of a passage, but it moves our hearts as something true and full of potential, even exciting. It is meditation on the Scripture and the working of the Holy Spirit on the Word that makes the truth true in us.

Colossians chapter 1 verses 3-9, especially verse 6. Speaks of this seeing of truth. This passage talks about coming to understand the grace of God in all its truth. We can tell our dog that we love them, but if we do not treat them with kindness, they will still shrink back from us. We need to taste the truthfulness of truth. Understanding, seeing the

truthfulness of God's grace will dispose us to run to Him, not hide from Him when we fall, fail, sin, or find ourselves in trouble. Please also note and mark it in our minds that this passage is set in the context of Paul's prayer for the Church in Colossae. Verse 9 tells us that even though the people in the Church had this living knowledge of God's grace, Paul still prayed for them to know more. Why is this? Because no matter how much we know of God's grace, and no matter how much of God's grace we have, there is always more, and there will be more for all eternity! This is why prayer is the work of the Church. We look for better methods to do stuff in Church. God is looking for better people, people who are growing!

In the Book of Ephesians, Chapter 1, Paul tells the people what he prays for them. Verse 17 says that he prays that God will give them,

'the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know Him better....'

It is the Holy Spirit who opens our understanding, who gives us revelation of who Christ is. The Holy Spirit illuminates the Scripture to teach us not only the theory, but to apprentice us to the truth, so that we can do the truth. I think it is better to call out an experienced plumber, who has done the job of fixing burst pipes many times, than googling how to fix a burst pipe ourselves. The Holy Spirit through the Scriptures apprentices us to truth, takes us into it, leads us in the experience of it, and forms it in us. This is what happens in Christian Biblical meditation.

The good news is that we do not need to have the intellect of an Einstein to do this. We can even be dyslexic – which can give rise to interesting errors in even reading the text! We don't need a secondary school education to grow as a Christian. All these are additional blessings, but some of the most fruitful Christians have been common and uneducated people. This was the insult leveled at the disciples. D. L. Moody, a famous preacher in the 1800's was no scholar, yet thousands came to faith in the USA and the UK, even Glasgow, when he preached. I recently read that his last letter to his granddaughter contained 23 spelling mistakes, and he was often criticized for his bad grammar. So there is hope for us all.

The way all this works is that even with a little faith, no matter how little, if we turn to the Scripture with a desire to grow in the knowledge of Christ, the Holy Spirit will start shedding light on the word. Perhaps at first we will hardly notice it. Perhaps at first it will be a faint hope or a slight thrill that the Word is of relevance to me because it gives me hope of change. Perhaps we will begin to become aware that there actually is someone out there who has an interest in me, and that He is not as far away as we once thought.

This is why our faith has to begin to become robust, because the knowledge of God does not come to us all at once, but is like the early dawn. As dawn begins to break, we can only see the rising light out of the corner of our eye. Then we become aware of a glow in the East. Then outlines become clearer, and colour begins to come into what we see. Perhaps the day may come when we have to shield our eyes from the light!

The start of this is to begin to engage with the Bible. This is why we encourage people to come to the Bible Studies of Tuesdays, not because any of us are experts, but to learn, and to have the Holy Spirit teach us. An unread Bible will do nothing for us, we may as well throw it out if we don't open and read it. Why not bring your Bible to Church and follow the readings and references. Don't be embarrassed if you don't know where a book is in the Bible. I am slightly dyslexic, I still forget the order of the Minor Prophets, and yes, I still feel silly doing so!

Don't be discouraged if you come to the end of a passage and think, 'what was that all about?' Read on, and God will give us daily bread as we are able. As we do this, we will grow and be able to manage more. Think of it this way. We don't sit a baby down to a full three course meal that an adult would eat, they are given a smaller portion so that they will grow up, not become sick. As the child grows, they can manage solid food and more food. We all start as babies, better to eat a little and grow than not eat at all and languish.

The Scripture, the Holy Spirit and our giving our attention to it. This is the way to the knowledge of God, and the knowledge of God is the way to grow up in Christ, and that is the way to a good Christian life.