

The Knowledge of God 2

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This is the second in a series of four talks on the three degrees of divine knowledge. I spoke last week, in a preliminary sermon of what I mean by the knowledge of God. And then, today and next Sunday and the next, I want to deal with these three degrees of divine knowledge.

Now, briefly I'll sketch that there are three degrees of knowledge possible to a Christian, that gain by reason. And I will use as a general text, Romans 1:19, 20, because that which may be known of God is manifest in them, for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things which are made, even His eternal power and Godhead.

Now, this is tight writing, there's no poetry here. This is the philosophy of theology. This is theological philosophy. This is a Christian philosopher thinking tightly about truth and revealing it. And he says in effect that reason can know through what it sees in nature, the invisible God, and His eternal power and Godhead. The second degree of knowledge is that which is revealed through faith. And in Hebrews 11:3, we have one text out of very, very many. So many that we're embarrassed to select one and leave a whole book full of them not read. This is Hebrews 11:3; through faith we understand that the world was framed by the word of God. So, the things which are seen were not made of things which do appear. There's an invisible source back of the visible creation that is revealed through faith.

And then, the third is, that which is revealed to our spirits by the Holy Spirit in spiritual experience. 1 Corinthians 2:9-14, but as it is written, eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit. For the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God.

Obviously, here, it takes the Holy Spirit to lead us into this third, and furthering degree of knowledge, further on than reason, even further than faith. It is the Holy Ghost Himself. Which thing also we speak not in the words which man's wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Ghost teaches. Comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man, receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God. The natural man can know God's eternal power, the Godhead through reason. But the natural man, that is the unregenerate man, cannot know the things of the Spirit of God for they are foolishness unto him, neither can he know them because they're spiritually discerned.

I pointed out that these three degrees of knowledge corresponded to the outer court of the temple, which was open to the sky and enjoyed the light of the sun by day and the moon and stars by night; that is, natural light. The second degree, corresponded to the holy place--faith--where there was light from the candlesticks, but no light from the stars nor sun nor moon. No natural light came there. We have to believe whatever reason says. And then, the Holy of Holies, the Sanctum, where there was no light from the sun or moon and no light from the candlestick made by man, but the light came alone from the Divine Presence, even the Shekinah which dwelt between the cherubim. And that corresponds to the third and last degree of knowledge, which is the immediate, unmediated knowledge the spirit can have of God through the Holy Spirit.

Now, nature is a teacher of theology, and I want to talk about that this morning. Next Sunday, I'll talk about that knowledge which is revealed to us by faith, in which reason can neither support nor deny. The third Sunday, I'll talk about that knowledge which is given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Now, the knowledge of God by reason. And I say again, that nature is a teacher of theology. It was Dante that said that nature is the art of God Eternal. And if nature is the art of God, then we can learn much about the Artist from the art. That is so well known that I hardly need to repeat it. Pascal, the greatest mind probably that France ever produced, certainly the greatest French theologian that ever lived and Christian, said that nature is an image of God; so is near perfect because it is an image of God, but not all together perfect because it is only an image of God. I'll repeat that another way. That nature being the setting forth of God, the garment of God, is near to being perfect, because it is God's image. But it is not absolutely perfect, because it is not God, but only the image of God. And you remember that Milton when he was blind in that magnificent *Paradise Lost*, bemoaned the fact that he was blind and said something to this effect that, from the book of knowledge, the fair book of knowledge presented a universal blank to him now of nature's works. And wisdom at one entrance was quite shut out because he could not see. Therefore he said, this universal Book of Wisdom has been shut, one page has been shut to me because I can't see.

Now my brethren, I do not quote these men only to say what I want to say better than I can say it. And in speaking of the knowledge of God in nature, I would have it understood that I am not trying to show off any learning or am I trying to go exhibit any particular penetration, but rather I would approach it on my knees. And I would approach it in the spirit of Sir John Bowring who wrote this great, these great words. Almighty One, I had bend in dust before Thee, even so veiled cherubim, in calm and still devotion, I adore Thee, all wise, and all present Friend. Thou to the earth it's emerald robe hast given or curtained it in snow, and the bright sun and the soft moon in heaven before Thy presence bow. Thou Power Sublime, Thy throne is firmly seated on stars and glowing sun. Oh, could I praise Thee; could my soul elated waft Thee seraphic tones. Had I the lyre of angels, could I bring Thee an offering worthy Thee, in what bright notes of glory would I sing Thee

blessed notes of ecstasy. And I only want it understood that I bend in dust before Him as veiled cherubim and in common still devotion I adore Him. All-wise, all-present Friend.

So, nature teaches us certain things about God. And reason can understand them. And this is one of the reasons why man is guilty before he ever hears the gospel at all. Some people say, why send missionaries to the heathen when they even are in innocence. And if they don't hear the gospel and don't hear about Jesus, they will not be able to reject Jesus and thus bring guilt upon themselves.

Now, this saying comes from a misunderstanding of the whole thing. The heathen are not lost because they reject Jesus. They are lost because they have known from the beginning that God is, and certain things about God. And yet have loved darkness more than light and have continued in their darkness and have loved sin and iniquity and have exalted their own ego above the throne of God and have lived wicked, opinionated, self-contained, godless, unbelieving, and obscene lives. And when they hear of Jesus, if they reject Him, they will add one more final sin to their terrible list, but it will only be one. The heathen are already lost, because that which can be known of God is revealed in them so that they clearly understand it, even His eternal power and Godhead.

Now, I will point out some of the things that nature teaches. One is, that God is. By looking around on the world, every people and tongue and tribe has concluded that God is. And there is not a language among the thousands of languages spoken by man in all history and in all the world today that does not have a name for God. Reasonable beings gazed down or up or out or around and whispered God. They knew that God was. Only the fool says in his heart there is no God. And there are not many of such fools. There are many sinners, certainly, and there are many millions who will have their own way whether God is or is not. But there is scarcely one in a million, that will say, there is no God. Mostly God is found in the language of mankind, whether it be the language of a forgotten tribe, or whether it be some great language, such as Latin or English. And thus, the nations of the earth, and all times and places and under all circumstances, have looked out and up and around and down, and have exclaimed--God is. But it teaches us more than that God is. It teaches us that God is eternal.

Now we are soul constructors that we must ask, where did this come from? You know, my brethren, we think what we think and are as we are because of the way we're constructed. Any anatomist will tell you that you walk the way you walk because of your body structure. I couldn't, for instance, walk like the big tall usher here for the simple reason I don't have his body structure. And he wouldn't want to walk like me, because he doesn't have mine. We walk the way we walk because of our anatomical structure. And so, we think the way we think because of our mental structure. God has made us a certain way. And one thing that God made us to ask is, where did this come from?

When we look at a thing, or discover or run upon it, our minds make us say, where did this come from? How did it get here? And experience teaches the antecedent. Always remember that. That experience, even from the newborn babe to the ancient sage, always teaches the antecedent. The Explorer goes far into the hidden jungles of South America, and there he finds a building. And long, long it's been forgotten and gone and it's almost rotten down. But he says, where did it come from? How did it get here. And into his mind comes the thought of antecedent intelligence. And he says, this didn't make itself. It didn't pile itself up here and make its windows and doors and its roof and it's entablature and its arches. It was built by somebody. So, the idea of antecedent comes into their minds.

A man is traveling where he believes no man has ever been, and he sees a track and he knows it to be a human footprint. And he says, who put it here? Somebody was here before that track was made. So, he goes back to antecedent again, and says, before the track was the foot, and before the track was made, the foot was here. Or he looks about him at the fauna of the earth, anywhere from the great mastodon or the whale that swims in the sea or the tiny mouse that runs under the rock, and says, how did it get here? And you can trace it back and back and back and back and back through generation and generation and generation. And through the simple knowledge of biology and the facts of life, he knows how that mouse got here, by its father before it and its father before it.

And so, he goes back to the first mouse and says, antecedent again, and puts a capital letter there. He says before the first mouse was a God who made mice. Before the first elephant, was a God who made elephants. Before the first bird spread its wings, was a God who made birds. For he gazes up into the heavens above and sees the stars and says, who put that there? Where did that come from? It's as natural for him to ask that question as it is for a lame man to limp. It's in his structure. He can't help it. It's in his mind. Who put that star there? Where did that sun come from? And then again, the word antecedent leaps into his mind. Something was before that star was there. He looks out at mankind, and sees men running up and down in the earth, and says, where did we come from?

We all know we can trace our genealogy back. We can know where our father was, our grandfather, our great-grandfather. Most of us Americans are lost after we get back about three generations. But we know that whether we can identify our ancestors or not, we had ancestors back to the first one who stood up on the earth. And before that first one, was a God who made men. So we have the word antecedent. Always, always we look in any direction and say that He did it, He did it, He did it. And we may have different names for Him and different conceptions of Him, but always reason cries, He did it. He was there first. He created the world, so He must have been before the world. He created time, so He must have been before time. And if He was before time, then He is eternal.

So, His eternal power and Godhead are revealed simply by looking around about us. We don't have to hear the gospel or know the Bible, we only have to see around about us a bit, and we know this, and all our excuses are taken away. And there we stand with the veil pulled aside and in the presence of the great and Almighty God, all-wise, all-present Friend.

And then also, that the theology of nature teaches us that God is omnipotent. Now, reason says so. Reason cries out that God, who must contain all things, and who must bring into being such awful forces as these. Imagine the force of the wind. The poets write of the breezes, of the zephyrs as they like to call them. They kiss the cheek of the child as he plays in the meadow or makes daisy chains beside the brook. Poets have always loved the breeze and the zephyr. But when the breeze and the zephyr rise in a wild, mad fury and hurl themselves upon a town in Kansas or Missouri; In one minute in what was a smiling little helpless, sleepy village, lies a wrecked rubble and the dead are dug out for days out of the rubble. No sun is smiling down. Now, the wind is gone, but still the stretchers carry out the dead. And the wind did it and did it in one minute. Did it in forty seconds, sometimes it will do it.

And the great God who made those mighty winds to roar out of the deep and hurl great chunks of the ocean up onto the seashore. That God must be an omnipotent God. And the lightning that flashes down out of the dark cloud and rends the oak that has stood for 100 years against the storms. That God must be a mighty God. And that God who put gravity in everything and holds the suns and stars together, and holds the pebbles down on the beach and holds the great mountain there on the plain and holds the building down in the city. That great God who made gravity must be a great God.

Think about life itself. Think what power it must take to perpetuate life and carry it on and carry it on. Only rarely, rarely in the course of history has there ever been an extinct creature. Mostly they perpetuate themselves on and on and on. The tiniest little insect that may crawl on your book as you read in the park. And you reach over and carelessly touch it. And then getting rid of it, you crush it unintentionally. And it's crushed away until it doesn't even make a mark on the book. A little insect it was. It had a life there, a real life. But before you crushed it carelessly on the corner of your book, it had laid an egg somewhere; begotten itself again. And so, its species goes on and on and on. And think of the power that carries on all grain and all fruits and all life and all birds and fishes and people, and carries it on and on. This great God must be an omnipotent God. But my brethren, it means more than omnipotence. It means that God must be also omniscient. That is that He must have all knowledge.

Have you ever stopped to think that if a man put a machine together and missed on one point, left out one wheel or left out one shaft or one cam or one anything, the machine would probably rip itself apart or at least it wouldn't work. It's got to be all there. And the man who puts it together has to know all about that particular machine. And so, the God who put this machine we call the

universe together, He had to know all about it. Ignorance of even one thing would ruin everything and bring the universe down in chaos. So that God had to know at once and perfectly all that could be known or can be known about spirit and matter and mind and life and feeling and sensation and space and time and relation and directions and events and deeds and words and thoughts and all the doesn't fall in those categories. He must know everything absolutely perfectly. For ignorance of any one thing or at least division of one thing somewhere, the wheels of the universe would have ground on and then ground themselves apart.

But the God who made this universe and made it all, from the galaxies to the cutworm. That great God knew all that was. And so the invisible is revealed in the visible, and we and they who know not God, and we who do know God by faith know this at least, that God is an eternal God and that He's an omnipotent God, and that he's an omniscient God and knows it all or else his own world would fall apart. But it means more that He's omniscient. It means that He's all-wise. They're not the same. Omniscient means that He has all knowledge. And all-wise means that He has all wisdom to know what to do with the knowledge.

Have you ever run across a well-educated college fellow who couldn't make a living and his wife had to support him. And he couldn't get along in society. He wasn't adjusted. He didn't know how to say good morning, hid behind a post and slunk down the street. He was completely unadjusted. He couldn't do anything. And yet, he might have been a PhD. He knew all about Aristotle and Plato and Homer and all about mathematics, but he simply was a learned fool, if I might be so brash. He had a head full of bookish knowledge, but he was ignorantly read and had loads of learning lumber in his head. And he knew nothing really as he ought to know, because he didn't have wisdom, which told him what to do with the knowledge.

So, God might have been all-knowing and have all the knowledge there is, but lacked the wise skill to make it work. But the great God who had all knowledge, also has all wisdom to know what to do with that knowledge as you know. Observation discovers design. Those who dig in the bowels of the earth for the old races that have passed away and dig up civilizations that are long, long been extinct, they find machinery or hunks of machinery or bits of machinery or flecks of stone chipped out. Or they find funny, little old-fashioned things that they can figure out what they were for. They say design, design, design. They made it. They made this. They find two rocks standing up like this and another rock laying across the top. That's the first art, and they say design, design.

And the greatest and most beautiful cathedral on the North American continent or in Europe, had to begin with a little rock standing up and another little rock standing up and another little rock laying across. That was design. That was the arch, and from that, all the grandeur of architecture grew; design they say. And if 10,000 years from now, if things should continue as they are, 10,000 years from now, some strange race which you and I can't figure out, should come upon our Chicago, now covered with the dust blown from the dust bowl of the West, and should go down

and down and down, and at last find Chicago and find a kitchen and find the can opener and find a can of salmon still lying there after the passing of the centuries. And the wise diggers into the past would pick up the can opener and brush it off, and say, I wonder what that's for. There's design there. And a bright young student would come forward and say, Professor, I see, give it to me. Around and around he'd go and open the can of salmon. Design is the word and everywhere, everywhere from the microbe on up, everywhere design, design.

As a boy I used to see the design. As a boy we used to knock down, or the frost would do it for us, the great chestnut, from the great chestnut trees that used to make beautiful Pennsylvania green, but were later destroyed almost completely by the blight. You used to see those burrs. Some of you have never had in your hand a chestnut burr. Smaller than my fist and almost completely round. And it's spiked like a porcupine all the way around, as if Mother Nature were saying, let my babies alone. Don't you bother my babies. And many and many a boy has given up the battle. He's not able to open that chestnut burr because there were just too many spikes. And so, Mother Nature protected the seed there. And it fell finally and nature opened that burr and the seed fell into the ground and pretty soon a chestnut tree came up. Mother Nature was protecting her seed that she might make another chestnut tree and another one, on down the years.

Well my brethren, all throughout nature I see that design. But you know something else? You know that when you once have broken through the burr and gone past the spikes and have gotten inside that burr and break it open on the great rock and falls apart, you know what you find in there? You find two beautiful chestnuts if they're ripe. They're beautiful brown from which we get our word chestnut. You've heard of chestnut furniture and chestnut horses and chestnut colors, this and that. Well, that's where they get the word. It's a brown that I do not think any artists could quite imitate; so beautiful and rich it is. And it has been all this time held and protected by the softest velvet.

That burr that comes down there, cut down by the squirrel or knocked down by the frost or knocked down by a boy. That burr is a spike on the outside to protect it from its enemies, but a soft velvet on the inside to protect itself from the burr, kept there in perfection. Never was there a baby, what do they call it, lined more beautifully and soft than Mother Nature lines the inside of a burr where she keeps her chestnut. She must love chestnut trees. And I'm glad they're finding their way back again; and small chestnut saplings are found again all throughout Pennsylvania. She's coming back. In another generation the boys will be back again knocking chestnut trees down as I did 40 years ago.

Now, what does that mean? It means design. It means that in details we see design. And reason cries, if there is design in the details, then there must be a grand design in the whole of nature. The grand total must add up to design. And the great God Almighty in his balance of nature, must be a God All-wise.

And then there's the God who cares. And this is the last I'll speak of this morning. I could go on for five hours, but I'll stop off here. That God cares for His world. God cares for His world, and He put care in the bosoms. He put care in the bosoms of everything. The old cow out in the field with her mellow breath, and her long, mellow, trombone that she blows at milking time. That cow is only a common beast, but she cares for her babies. And when they're taken away, she'll bawl for two or three days; literally bawl for two or three days and run up and down and try to get through the fence. She cares. Everywhere in nature, there's care.

And if I might not be accused of being senile, I might point out that we had four kittens at our house. Three of them are pretty things. And one of them Mother Nature was, I guess, careless or angry, so she put together the homeliest little mutt of a kitten you ever saw in your life. It was supposed to be black, but didn't quite make it. It looks as if it was streaked with ugly mud. It looks as if it had been born to ride the rumble seat of a broom with a witch on in front on Halloween. That's what it looks like. But you know what? Last evening, we were sitting out taking a little air. The old momma cat, we had gotten rid of all the other ones. People wanted them but they didn't want the ugly one. And the old mama cat came with a piece of liver and deposited it down for her little ugly baby. She didn't think it was ugly, she liked it. She still likes it. And when it goes, finally, if anybody would be foolish enough to take it, she would weep in her poor cat way. Care is found everywhere.

How oft did Jesus say, would I have gathered you under my wings as a hen gathers her chicks. You that never lived in the country, you don't even know what that means. But I know what it means. And those that have visited or lived even a short time in the country know. Why, there's a dozen maybe, little furry fellows with their little, round beady black eyes pecking away for whatever they can pick up. And there's the old hen carelessly scratching and going about with a restful cluck, cluck, cluck. I don't know what she's saying to them. Just sort of reminding them that she's around.

And then the farmer boy, hears something that the average person wouldn't hear it all. He hears a high whistle out of sight, way out of sight, but a high, piercing exciting whistle. He knows what it is. He knows it is the hawk. And that old hen knows what it is. She changes from the restful cluck, cluck, cluck, to a high, rapid cluck, and every little chick dashes for her wings. She spreads those wings out and fluffs out all her feathers and they all gather in there. And I have watched with amusement to see, out between the feathers, out in front of the wing, out behind the wing, out in front of the breast, out in all angles, little, white beaks and little, beady eyes. They're wondering what it's all about and what's all the concern about. They know that the mother has gathered them in.

And that's what Jesus meant. He would have gathered them in. But I mean to give at this application, that that hen has a care there. And so, you'll find it everywhere. The bees bring in the nectar that the future generation of bees might have honey to eat. And the egg contains not only the germ that will be the bird, but also the food that will feed the bird till it hatches. So, through all nature, there's care, care. He is the God who cares. He looked at His world and said, behold, it is very good.

And sin came in, and now we have that strange admixture of sin and nature, and sin in nature. But nevertheless, our Heavenly Father cares. I grumble a little because it was going to be so hot today, but I checked myself and apologized to God.

God made his sun and made it to shine down on the earth. And He made moisture. We call it humidity. But if it wasn't here, we'd all dry up and die, and future ages would find the dried, blackened bodies. But God has given us the sun and the moon, and He's given us all His beautiful trees. And He's taught the birds to migrate and the beast to hibernate, and He's taught man to build and dress against the cold. God cares. He's the God who cares. I say nature teaches us theology, and that's taught in the outer court. That's taught out there where the light of nature beams down. And reason cries and says the Hand that made us is divine.

Now I close with these testimonies. For I've only given you an imperfect sketch. It was Pope, Alexander Pope said, all are but parts of one stupendous whole, whose body nature is, in God, the soul. There he had the thought that God was the Soul of the world as you have a soul in your body. The world would be dead, except that God lives in it and makes it live. I think that's a lovely thought and a true one. And Solomon said, go to the ant thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise. And Christ said, behold the birds of the air. And He said, consider the lilies, how they grow. And the seraphim that Isaiah saw and heard, chanted, holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty. Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory. And in our famous hymn that we sing, holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabbath, heaven and earth are full of the majesty of Thy glory.

Oh, brethren, nature is a great teacher. And life is a great instructor. And all around about us, whether it's the bird that flies to our window, or the leaf that flutters outside, or whether it be the great desert of Arizona, or the rocky peaks of Switzerland, or the great broad, undulating ocean. Whether it be farm or city, village, or desert, the invisible God is crying out to us His eternal power and Godhead. There's something better, and there's no salvation there. And no one in a million years could be saved by knowing this. We are saved by the next degree of knowledge, that which is revealed to us by faith, and of that we'll speak next Lord's day. But today, let us say together Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of Hosts. Heaven and earth are full of the Majesty of who is God.