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GOSPEL STANDARD BAPTISTS

Sermon preached by Mr J H Gosden  
at Galeed Chapel, Brighton  
on Wednesday evening 22 June 1921

JOHN 17 v 3

"And this is life eternal that they might know  
Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou  
hast sent"

This must needs be very precious, invaluable knowledge that is eternal life, and it becomes us, as believing in this utterance of the Saviour to His Father, to enquire, as we may be enabled to do so by the Holy Ghost, what this knowledge is, which is said by Christ to be eternal life. It is of infinite importance to us, for without this knowledge it is obvious that eternal death reigns in us. The Saviour, the Lord Jesus, the Son of God is here addressing His Father in the behalf of His church, and makes utterance of these words in this chapter, as He tells us further down, for the purpose of producing, in the hearts of His followers, joy. The divine truths He names are calculated, as the Spirit may apply them to us - bringing them as from His own sacred lips into our minds and hearts - to produce joy, strength, peace; to form in us something that is very strengthening, giving us some knowledge of the inner working of the heart of Christ for His children, of His secret and sacred and intimate communications with His Father on their behalf. It is an infinite wonder, and has been to me at times such, that the Lord Jesus Christ should condescend to discover to poor men these communications, in the account of them, that took place between Himself and His Father about the church. If we have an interest in those communications, what a wonder it will be for us, and how it will strengthen our hearts, to be assured, to have in our own souls the persuasion that it is indeed so; that He now is at the Father's right-hand, the Son incarnate on the throne, a Lamb as it had been slain, communicating with His Father on our behalf in all the fulness of the merit of His Person and His continuing sacrifice. How blessed will be that persuasion; how it will cause us to be separate from the world in our desires and pursuits. How it will give us a gracious independence of our fellow men, and a proper carelessness concerning the things of

this life, and yet a gracious carefulness to maintain in this life, amongst men, good works. How it will endear the Lord Jesus to us. How it will satisfy our souls concerning our portion here and our portion hereafter. How it will increase our appetite for the knowledge of Him and communion with Him who thus condescends to exert Himself in the behalf of poor sinners on earth, He being in heaven. Here He says: "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent."

I would, as the Lord may help me, speak a little of what this knowledge of God is. First, what it is not; it is not of course a comprehensive knowledge of the essence of the invisible God. God is said to be, in the Scriptures - and known to be by all - invisible, immortal, whom no man hath seen nor can see; He cannot be seen, therefore. Neither is it a comprehension of that which is infinite, which is impossible to the greatest intellect of finite man, but it is a knowledge, and a true knowledge, of that which is infinite and which cannot therefore be comprehended and it is a knowledge more known by the effects of it in the soul than it is by the things that are known. "If", the great Dr Owen said, "what we know of God, we believe; what we do not know of Him, we know". That is to say, he said, what was known of God was known by what was the reverse in us. What we assert of Him we believe because we know the reverse in ourselves. For instance, if we say, God is holy, we know Him to be holy more by what we know of ourselves. It is a reflexive knowledge that is had of God, and if Dr Owen said that, what must some of us say, whose minds are so cramped? But my dear friends, I have been thankful at times to believe this, as you were singing; the simplest Christian cannot err, nor be deceived nor die who is taught to know God in His Son and there is no true knowledge of God apart from Him. Though in this verse the Lord Jesus Christ seems, as it were, to differentiate between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of Jesus Christ whom He has sent, yet He does connect them. It is a knowledge that has an effect and it is not an acquisition, not that knowledge that is acquired by any effort of human nature. Eternal life cannot be acquired by us. No effort can bring us that knowledge which, in the reception of that knowledge and acquisition of it, will bring also eternal life to us. It is a gift, as the Lord Jesus Christ says in the second verse, "As Thou hast given Him power over all flesh, that He

should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him". Then describing what that life is, He says, "And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent." Ignorance of God, therefore, is death, and this is a solemn truth, and is made to be a solemn truth, in the hearts of some men who feel what their own native condition is, as ignorant of God. Men who think that they can find out the knowledge of the Holy are not appalled at the ignorance that is in them of Him who must be known in order to life. It is a great thing to think of God; a much greater thing to know Him whose knowledge is so great, whose Being is so incomprehensible and who, in His essence, is not to be seen. It is a great thing to know that God who is everywhere present, who fills all space, in whose almighty power is the destiny of every thing, every person, every being. When the Psalmist had some little knowledge of God, then He was amazed. He had a knowledge of the knowledge of God given to him; an apprehension of that which God could comprehend in Himself, and that appalled him, for he said, ...."there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether." "Thou understandest my thought afar off.....and art acquainted with all my ways". And this knowledge that God had of a finite man, David, appalled that man, when he knew and realised what God was in His prescience, in His knowledge, in His omniscience. It is a knowledge by manifestation. It is a wonderful thing that the eternal God has made Himself capable of being known by finite creatures; that He will be known. He was known by Adam in his innocency as a creature. Adam had most intimate communion with God, his Creator. There was no terror and no fear, and no estranging in the knowledge and position that Adam was in with his Creator in Eden's garden. No fear in it, no inaccessibility in God to an innocent person. But, that sinners, who by sin have made themselves eternally dead to God as to their own power, should nevertheless be put into a position of knowing God - the knowledge of whom is life eternal - is a wonder of divine grace and divine wisdom and divine power and goodness. "That they might know Thee, the only true God". This knowledge has an effect, the rich knowledge of God. When He makes Himself known - and that is only how people know Him - then it has an effect. It is a holy knowledge. It is the knowledge of the Holy God and has an effect therefore of making the person in whom the knowledge is given, to know himself. It is a light, a holy light, that shines into a dark place. The light shineth

in darkness and the darkness comprehended it not, but when the light of God shines by the living light of the Holy Spirit into the heart of men, then God is known in some degree truly, though it may be a small degree, in His infinite holiness. And the effect of that knowledge is that the sinner, in whom it is, cries out in effect - though it may not be in word - "Woe is me for I am undone". I abhor myself in dust and ashes. You may read God's Name, you may read His Word, you may see His creation, and so know Him and, so knowing Him, be without excuse if you disobey Him, but only in that knowledge do you, as it were, hear of Him with the hearing of the ear. But when the light of His glory shines into the heart, then it is as if you see that glory and abhor yourself because of the revelation that glory makes, that holiness makes, in your unholy, corrupted heart.

That they might know Thee in Thy holiness. It is a fearful knowledge of God which men have, to which knowledge is attached eternal life, and if God has never been terrible to you, then it must be said that you have no true knowledge of a holy God. Holiness must necessarily be terrible to an unholy person. "That they might know Thee the only true God". He is known. He makes Himself known as this - the only true God; the fulness of truth, the fulness of all that is excellent and good and just. Such a knowledge of God fills a man with wonder and it has this effect in it; it causes the person to whom it comes - though he may have no comfort in the knowledge he has - in some degree to adhere to that divine Being that is made known to him. There is a kind of attraction in the perfections of God when they are made known to a sinner. Justice alone does not attract a sinner, but the perfections of God, made known by the Holy Ghost, do cause the person almost involuntarily to adhere, in some way, to that Person and seek after a further knowledge of Him. It is an effectual knowledge which is by faith, as distinct from a knowledge that may be by sense, that men know God. All knowledge other than that knowledge, which is by faith, puffeth up, but this knowledge, which is by faith, has in it also a movement of affection behind it, known later and expressed later in acts of affection. This knowledge is by charity and all knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth and the commencement of the edifice is when God makes Himself known in His holiness. It is by this that men are hewn out of the rock, dug out of the pit, separated from their former selves, regenerated by this

knowledge, and built up eventually into Christ. "That they might know Thee, the only true God"

That they might know Him, next, as a God that may be approached. And this is a wonder, in the knowledge of God, when His holiness is made known and His justice, and thereby, reflexively, your own unholiness and injustice and pollution and sin and death. It is a wonderful thing for a sinner to know God, having Him revealed to him as being approachable, and He does make Himself known in this way. And in this way it is that the experience of life is known, for the sinner moves towards God by the power of the Holy Ghost within him. He has an appetite for Him, wants Him, wants something from Him. It is almost, one might say, an involuntary appetite that the sinner has. Something is wrong with him; God is terrible to him; and yet there is an involuntary wanting of Him, a going after Him, a desire if he might but know Him in a comfortable way, might know Him as the true God, without terror; might approach Him; and He makes Himself known as approachable in the Person of the Son. The Father cannot be known without the Son; the Son cannot be known without the Father. There is no division in the eternal God, the eternal Trinity. He is known and is to be known truly in the Trinity, in and by and through the Son Jesus Christ whom He sent to declare Him. Therefore the Lord Jesus here says "This is life eternal that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent". It is by faith that Jesus Christ comes to be known. Paul speaks of knowing Christ after the flesh but henceforth knowing Him thus no more, and we, none of us, know Christ after the flesh, and can only know Him by the power of living faith. And He is known as the way to the Father; it is a great thing thus to know God as being accessible, and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent. And all our hope of life depends upon this, and our life itself depends upon the Person who was sent, and the sending of Him, and what He did when sent. "Jesus Christ whom He hath sent".

He sent Him to be the prophet, His prophet in the church, that He might be, as He was eternally the Word, so now He might be the Person in whom God would communicate His will and mind and purpose that was purposed from eternity to His church. That He might effect in His Person His eternal counsels; that He might seal up and finish, in respect of all the merit of it, the covenant of grace, Jesus Christ

came. He was sent by His Father and invested by His Father with a fulness of authority for His mission here upon earth as the Redeemer of the Church, to give eternal life to as many as the Father gave to Him. And the knowledge of Him, as thus being sent, is said here to be life eternal. And do we know Him and God in Him? It is not a common thing to know Jesus Christ as the sent of the Father, for to know the true God is to know the Trinity; is to know the essential Son as being the eternal Son of God; and it is to know, by the testimony of the Holy Ghost in your conscience that that Person who is Jesus Christ, the Man Christ Jesus, is true Almighty God. This is infinitely important in the true knowledge of God. Men who deny the divinity of Jesus Christ cut away all the hope that they could have properly of eternal life and the remission of sins. The covenant of grace was sealed by the blood of God. The Scripture says, the church was purchased by the blood of God. The Son of God, Jesus Christ, the Man Christ Jesus in His human body did shed His blood, and being indissolubly united to His eternal Person, that blood is called, though the blood of a real Man, the blood of God. And all that Christ did as Man He did with all the infinite virtue of His Godhead. In this Person is life. In Him was life; in Him was light; and God gave to Him life that He might give life to His church. Gave Him a commandment that He should lay down His life, that through that death, His people might be delivered from death, the curse of the law and all that they had, through sin, brought upon themselves. "This is life eternal that they might know Thee, the only true God." How willing was the Son to discover to men the eternal God; how willing He was to show to men the everlasting love of God in covenant. How He came, saying He delighted to do the will of His Father; that Father's law was in His heart. How willingly He came to be a Man, to take upon Himself the form of a servant and to serve His church, to serve His Father in the church and for the church. "That they might know Thee, the only true God", true in covenant, having made it, and keeping it. This is known and discovered in the very sacrifice of Christ; the faithfulness, the truth of God to His covenant engagements is seen here as nowhere else. That scene of suffering love at Calvary where this sacred Person, speaking in the words we are considering, was crucified; where He uttered those memorable words "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" exhibits the faithfulness of God to His engagements. It was no accident that Christ was found at Calvary. It was no

unwillingness in Christ that brought Him there, no weakness brought Him there. He went willingly in His heart; was faithful to His covenant engagement as God - a party in the covenant. And as Man there was in His heart obedience to His Father. It is a beautiful truth - the Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ, and it is a humbling truth to believe that that very Son of God, whose union with His Father in a real Sonship and in an equality in the eternal Trinity, we can never fully know, yet all the virtue of it being in His Person as He was the Man Christ Jesus; it is a beautiful truth and strengthens the soul of a poor, weak sinner to seek God's favour through and in Him. There is infinite merit in this. That they might know God in His love, in the gift of His Son, and in the death of Christ.

"And Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent". And He is known also and particularly known as He is ascended into heaven as the Mediator between God and man. This is eternal life; life flows this way; the beginning of eternal life comes this way from God through Jesus Christ. There is a way set up whereby life may freely flow unto sinners, whereby they may be healed of their sins, their diseases, and be brought to God. He offered Himself a sacrifice that He might bring sinners to God. He went into heaven with all the virtue and merit of His sacrifice, there to represent His church to God, and sends His Holy Spirit to represent a reconciled God and Father to His people. He is necessary as Mediator, for the knowledge of God, for the knowledge of God's dispensation to us. We must know Jesus Christ in order to know the Father's will and mind toward us, and this makes the knowledge of Christ a particular and personal and practical thing. Doctrine is very beautiful, and if one was more spiritual would be more so to one, but religion is a practical thing, a solemn thing. A matter it is between God and the soul and a daily matter, and therefore the knowledge of Christ is most important to us, for only through and by Him, can we find access to the Father. We often speak about the presence of the Lord with us; we desire it for our friends and we pray for the presence of the Lord and what greater and better than the presence of God with a person or with a people. But how is that presence to be known? Only in and through Jesus Christ. Only by the testimony of the Holy Spirit entering the heart and bringing something from Christ to the sinner. That Christ is always with His church is a divine truth. "Lo I am with you always even to the end of

the world", but with respect to experience, how often a poor saint feels as if the Lord has left him; feels the fear at times lest He has entirely forsaken him. Therefore we need to know the Lord Jesus as Mediator, through whom and by whom we may go to the Father. There is no prayer apart from this knowledge. We may beat the air and talk to God and blaspheme His Name without this knowledge. But O the true knowledge of Jesus Christ as the Mediator enthroned in glory at the Father's right-hand - having gone to the end of the law in every precept of it, having suffered it in all its claims, as broken, for a sinner; He, with all the merit of this, and all the acceptance of this at the Father's right-hand, sitting as He does in the throne, the throne of grace - this encourages a sinner and enables him to pray and to go to God. And therefore, God shines; He shines forth beams from the mercy seat upon sinners; gives them glimpses of His glory; a smile. It is a great thing to feel accepted in prayer, to feel that your prayer does enter and receive attention. This is knowing God and Jesus Christ whom He hath sent, and you cannot separate the knowledge. I know what it is to have been tempted with respect to the Trinity; fearful of God and yet thinking of Jesus Christ and detaching them, one from another. I believe the enemy is very busy trying to make two or three Gods to the Lord's people at times, but the Holy Spirit in Scripture says: "There is One God and One Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus", and we have not to ascend into heaven for this knowledge. The true knowledge, though it may be small, of God, is a gift. It is in the word of faith dropped into the heart dropped into the heart by the power of the Holy Ghost. All the life and the living energy of this knowledge, and the living light of it, is from God, and all the sustenance of this knowledge, and the nourishment of this faith, by which God is known, is from God in the truth. No man can keep alive his own soul in the knowledge of God. But it is said to be eternal life; therefore when there is a true knowledge, though it may be small, yet true knowledge by the revelation of God, that is the beginning of eternal life. It is a knowledge that cannot be lost. Though you may feel to get more and more ignorant of God and are appalled by the ignorance, yet it is true that when once a sinner has known God and Christ Jesus whom He hath sent, that knowledge is, according to the Lord Jesus here, life eternal and such a one will never finally fall. It is a very imperfect knowledge. The Apostle Paul, one must suppose, knew the

Lord Jesus Christ, knew God more than any living man. He had such wondrous revelations of God as that he dare not utter all the things that he saw; yet he desires to know Him. His prayer is "That I might know Him and the power of His resurrection". And he makes this acknowledgement; in anticipation of what I shall know, he said, "When I was a child I spoke as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man I put away childish things." And he transfers that to his present dark knowledge of God and Christ to that knowledge of Him which, in the perfection and fulness of it, he believed he should have in eternity. It is but a knowing in part, but what a great mercy it is if you and I can truly, before God, profess in secret that we have been granted in infinite mercy and condescension some knowledge of Himself, whereby we have been made to abhor ourselves in dust and ashes and repent; whereby we have been made to seek after Him and to say in our hearts that we would follow after Him wherever He went. "Entreat me not to leave Thee" is the language of a soul that knows God in Christ. 'Tis an attracting knowledge. It is a knowledge that creates in the soul an appetite that never will be satisfied except in the increase of the knowledge of the Object and in an enjoyment of the Object known. The tempter will have the people of God, if he can, be dissatisfied with all knowledge but that which is tangible, but the Lord will teach, and does teach, His people, that faith, living faith is effectual and true knowledge, and at times the soul is satisfied with that knowledge. Not satisfied with himself in the attainment of knowledge, but satisfied with the Object discovered to him in the way in which it is discovered by faith. Why, how would you know God if not by faith? Does the natural mind set up some high imagination and reasoning whereby you would seek to touch, to feel, to handle, to have something tangible? The Apostle Paul said the weapons of his warfare were spiritual to pull down all such reasoning, to make way for faith. Faith is a hungry grace, but it is a satisfying grace and it goes after its Object.

"And Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent". This is a practical knowledge and a daily practised knowledge. Would to God that we each might, for ourselves, daily practise this knowledge, Faith worketh by love. A knowledge of God brings people in whom it is to love God and, loving God, to follow after Him and after His precepts. There is no true knowledge of God where people speak of God and argue about God

and talk about the doctrines of grace and there is no following after Him in His ways and precepts; it is not effectual knowledge. If we live in enmity and in malice and in adultery and in lust and in idolatry and covetousness and murder and in worldliness and in all those things which the Scriptures speak against, as being against God, then who can say we have any true knowledge of God. There is a word which has sometimes made one feel how short one comes, but one believes it to be true, where it says "God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of His glory in the face of Jesus Christ", and that light of the knowledge of the glory of God does, in some small degree - in the degree in which it is known and seen - transform a person into the image, in desire and pursuit, of that which is seen. Is Christ meek and lowly and humble? Was He, upon earth, the lowly, meek Lamb? Was there no guile in His lips, and no deceit in His heart? Did love bring Him to give up His life for His enemies? And shall a knowledge of God in Christ thus made known by the Holy Ghost not produce in a person in whom that knowledge is an earnest, anxious desire and pursuit after these sweet and precious graces which, in all their perfection, were in, and exercised by, Jesus Christ? You cannot know Jesus in any way properly and truly without wanting to be like Him, and how this depresses a poor soul when he realises how far he is from this. How often one has had that petition to be conformed to the image of God's dear Son, according to the promise in Romans "Whom He did predestinate them He also called, and whom He called them He also justified," and He predestinated them to be conformed to the image of His Son. This is eternal life. Do we know God in any way thus, so as to find Him to be to us absolutely indispensable, both to our safety, our satisfaction, and our delight? Is there anything in us which, when God is absent from us, cannot be satisfied? Do you, any of you, fear that word in Jeremiah "My people are destroyed through lack of knowledge; through deceit they have refused to know Me." May the Lord save us from a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ which is ineffectual and untrue; a letter knowledge of an unspeaking Christ, a Christ who does not communicate with us, and does not, at times, dwell in our hearts by faith. "This is life eternal that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent.

One effect of this knowledge is worship. It is a wonderful thing for a sinner to be enabled and led to worship God without terror. There is no terror in real worship, for perfect love casteth out fear, for fear hath torment. And there is no satisfactory worship really to the comfort of the soul when there is tormenting fear. This knowledge of the Lord God - an appeased Father, a holy and righteous Lord, fully satisfied; an atonement fully completed - "It is finished"; a Saviour, faithful, loving, unchangeable, almighty, who is the very Son of God in heaven - this knowledge, as it may be given to us, takes away the tormenting fear, and causes the soul to worship that God who is thus made known. It is a knowledge of familiarity, and yet that familiarity is a holy one; a familiarity which removes estrangement but which increases reverence. Well, I feel myself to be very ignorant of God; I feel it before Him frequently. There is an infinitude in Him to be known, and He is known in Jesus Christ in all the fulness of His Deity, in all the completeness and perfection of His humanity; in all the sufficiency of His offering; in all the prevalence of His intercession; in all His wisdom, love and care and faithfulness to His Church and to His Father as the Son over His own house. He is known by the discovery He condescends to make to poor sinners who cannot do without Him. This is the favour which He bears to His people, to make Himself known. There is one way in which He is known which is peculiarly sweet and solemn and heart melting and blessed, and that is in the possession of Him. "This God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our Guide even unto death". Men are possessed by God and they are brought to claim Him in Christ as their Portion. They pray at times earnestly

Come and claim us as Thy portion  
And let us lay claim to Thee

And when the Lord allows them to claim Him for their Saviour He is known thus in a very blessed and precious way. "This is life eternal that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent". These words are to be completed, to be fulfilled in the fullest extent of them. Knowledge, the fullest of it, consistent with creatureship, is to be enjoyed by those who, in a very small way here, are favoured to know God. Did you every know Him so as to be

sorry you were sinners? Did you ever, in secret, turn aside from all the occasions of life, to seek mercy at His hands? Was it ever a solemn business with you, persisted in, in your heart, to seek to know Him, to know that He was your Saviour, that He died for you? These are the effects of knowledge of Him, for you cannot so seek Him without having faith's report of Him in your heart. "Faith cometh by hearing", and a knowledge of God cometh by hearing "and hearing by the Word of God". And Isaiah in one place says that He is found of them that sought Him not in the first instance. This knowledge then is a free gift. Eternal life is given to men, sinners, by God in Christ; was given to them in Him before all worlds. So if we have ever experienced the sweetness of the knowledge of God in Christ, what a debt of praise we owe to Him for singling us out from the ruins of the fall to be so favoured.

The glory of Christ and the salvation of the soul are inseparable. What the Holy Spirit does in the church to glorify Christ is to take of Christ's things and to show them to sinners, and so if He does to us we shall know Him and love Him and He will condescend to be glorified in us. May it be so for us in our soul.

AMEN.