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Three Degrees of Religious Knowledge

In our knowledge of divine things three degrees may be distinguished: the knowledge furnished by reason, by faith and by spiritual experience respectively. These three degrees of knowledge correspond to the departments of the tabernacle in the ancient Levitical order: the outer court, the holy place and the holy of holies. Far in, beyond the "second veil," was the holiest of all, having as its lone piece of furniture the Ark of the Covenant with the cherubim of glory shadowing the mercy seat. There between the outstretched wings dwelt in awesome splendor the fire of God's presence, the Shekinah. No light of nature reached that sacred place, only the pure radiance of Him who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all. To that solemn Presence no one could approach except the high priest once each year with

blood of atonement.

Farther out, and separated by a heavy veil, was the holy place, a sacred place indeed but removed from the Presence and always accessible to the priests of Israel. Here also the light of sun and moon was excluded; light was furnished by the shining of the seven golden candlesticks.

The court of the priests was out farther still, a large enclosure in which were the brazen altar and the laver. This was open to the sky and received the normal light of nature. All was of God and all was divine, but the quality of the worshiper's knowledge became surer and more sublime as he moved in from the outer court toward the mercy seat and the Presence, where at last he was permitted to gaze upon the cherubim of glory and the deep burning Fire that glowed between their outstretched wings.

All this illustrates if it does not typify the three degrees of knowledge possible to a Christian. It is not proper that we should press every detail in an effort to find in the beautiful Old Testament picture

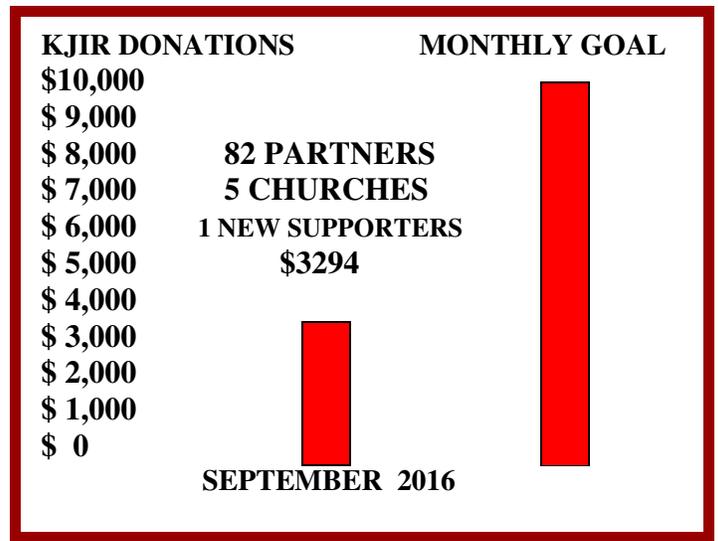
more than is actually there; but the most cautious expositor could hardly object to our using the earthly and external to throw into relief the internal and the heavenly. Nature is a great teacher and at her feet we may learn much that is good and ennobling. The Bible itself teaches this: "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge" (Psalm 19:1-2). "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise" (Proverbs 6:6). "Behold the fowls of the air" (Matthew 6:26). "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead" (Romans 1:20). Reason working on data furnished by observation of natural objects tells us a lot about God and spiritual things.

Continuing...

This is too obvious to require proof. Everyone knows it. But there is knowledge beyond and above that furnished by observation; it is knowledge received by faith. "In religion faith plays the part by experience in the things of the world." Divine revelation through the inspired Scriptures offers data which lie altogether outside of and above the power of the mind to discover. The mind can make its deductions after it has received these data by faith, but it cannot find them by itself. No technique is known to man by which he can learn, for instance, that God in the beginning created the heaven and the earth or that there are three Persons in the Godhead; that God is love or that Christ died for sinners or that He now sits at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. If we ever come to know these things it must be by receiving as true a body of doctrine which we have no way of verifying.

This is the knowledge of faith. There is yet a purer knowledge than this; it is knowledge by direct spiritual experience. About it there is an immediacy that places it beyond doubt. Since it was not acquired by reason operating on intellectual data, the possibility of error is eliminated. Through the indwelling Spirit the human spirit is brought into immediate contact with higher spiritual reality. It looks upon, tastes, feels and sees the powers of the world to come and has a conscious encounter with God invisible. Let it be understood that such knowledge is experienced rather than acquired. It does not consist of findings about something; it is the thing itself. It is not a compound of religious truths. It is an element which cannot be separated into parts. One who enjoys this kind of knowledge is able to understand the exhortation in the book of Job: "Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace" (22:21). To such a man God is not a conclusion drawn from evidence nor is He the sum of what the Bible teaches about Him. He knows God in the last irreducible meaning of the word *know*. It may almost be said that *God happened to him*. Maybe Christ said all this more simply in John 14:21: "I...will manifest myself to him." For what have we been laboring here but the sublimely simple New Testament teaching that the Triune God wills to dwell in the redeemed man's heart, constantly making His presence known? What on earth or in heaven above can be a greater beatitude?

A.W. TOZER



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Christian Life.....

The sensitive spirit learns very quickly to discern God's voice. That which would naturally be considered as simple depression of spirits comes to be instantly recognized as a hint that God has something to say to us, or something to ask in us for ourselves or others. Often our physical sensations come to be quick, instinctive interpreters of some inward call; for when we do not quickly listen to God's voice He knocks more loudly, until the very body feels the pain and warns us that the Lord has need of us. If we were more watchful we would find that nothing comes to us at any moment of our lives which has not some divine significance, and which does not lead us in some way to communion or service. He who thus walks with God soon learns the luxury of having no personal burdens or troubles, but recognizes everything as service for God or for others.

A.B Simpson

