

St. Paul: Saturday Session Twenty-nine: Epignosis

The New Testament is so vast that we generally ignore the Old Testament. However, Saul, before his conversion to Paul, experienced *epignosis* in God's Old Testament manifestation (*epiphane*). All Paul's super-knowing, or *epignosis* of Christ grew from his Old Testament *epignosis*. Moreover, Jesus was a Jew, the fulfillment of the Old Testament for His chosen people. So it's worth a glance back to the Old Covenant to trace *epignosis* there. Fr. Ceslaus Spicq, in *Agape in the New Testament*, vol 2, p 396, does the job. He convinces us that Paul perfected his Old Covenant *epignosis* by moving on to Christ's Covenant. St. Paul didn't start from scratch. He advanced from ancient *epignosis* to current *epignosis*.

Genesis recounts God's manifestations to Adam and Eve. *Epignosis* first occurred as God told Adam to eat all the fruits of the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Gen 2:17. God also walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening, Gen 3:8. Similar *epignosis* followed as God made clothing for Adam and Eve, expelled them from the garden. Thereafter, God worked closely with Adam and Eve's descendents. These reminders enable you to think of many other divine manifestations. Fr. Spicq, in *Agape in the New Testament*, vol 2, p 396, refers to God's interaction with Jacob, Gen 35:7, "or in the Temple, as the Almighty (2 Mac 3:30). The Israelites begged Him to make His face shine, or to show them the light of His countenance (Num 6:25; Deut 33:2; Ps 18: 27). His (God's) 'apparition' was synonymous with salvation (Ps 33:17; 67:2; 80:4, 8, 20; cf 119:135). According to the Second Book of the Machabees, *epiphaneia* is a heavenly manifestation (2 Mac 2:21), mercifully accorded by the ruler of spirits, and the Master of all authority. It took the form of an assistance, usually by the granting of a victory, or the punishing of the wicked (2 Mac 5:4; 12:22; 15:27; 14:15). It was quite natural, therefore, for Zachary to see in the Messiah a star lifted up on high to enlighten and save, *epiphania*, those seated in the darkness of sin and error. ***The angel answered and said to him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news"***. Luke 1:19.

These few examples show a progression of manifestations from Old to New Testament times, from preparation to perfection. Spicq examines Paul, Peter, James and John: "Moreover, instead of using the traditional term *parousia* (1 Thes 2:19; 3:13; 5:23; 2 Thes 2:1; 8-9; 1 Cor 15:23...) to refer to Christ's second coming, Pastoral Epistles call it an *epiphania*. They speak of this 'appearance' as essentially glorious, the coming of the Lord (*Kyrios*); of the Savior (*Soter*); of the Great God (*Megas Theos*); the one God (*Monos Theos*); or of His Kingdom (*Basilea*). (cf Ti 2:13; Col 3:4; 1 Pt 5:4; 1 Jn 2:28; 1 Tm 6:14; Ti 1:13; 2 Tm 4:1; compare to 2 Thes 2:8). It is not surprising that St. Paul should have used these specifically Greek religious terms in his letters, which were the first attempts at expressing Christian theology in an occidental language. In the first century, the words had taken on a new richness of meaning which was certainly familiar to St. Paul and his readers. Consequently, when he calls it an 'epiphany of the divine charity', we must understand epiphany in the sense it had in the first century: the appearance of a god, or the gracious and generous coming of a sovereign." 397

Naturally, such a manifestation produced super-knowledge, our familiar *epignosis*. God gives us a gift surpassing our own efforts. If we accept the gift of divine manifestation, we attain divine knowledge. Nothing we could say would match how super this knowledge is. All men desire this knowledge from this manifestation. Spicq again: "From the earliest times, the Greeks had believed that the gods visited men. They intervened in battles, restored health, warded off shipwreck, gave advice, made announcements, issued warnings, and even took part in lawsuits. These interventions were expressed by the verb *phainesthai*. The appearances began to be called 'epiphanies' only at the Hellenistic period, and them particularly in inscriptions. The word *epiphaino* became a technical term of worship. When the divinity manifested itself to mortals, in a dream, or during a night watch, it was to help them by bringing miraculous aid. The emphasis was on the extraordinary character of the gifts. ... An epiphany is the granting of an important miracle. Those who benefited from the visits of the gods sang their gratitude, treasured the memory, erected altars and sanctuaries, and organized feasts and liturgies in honor of the divinity *epiphanes*. These religious epiphanies are best known to us through these monuments erected by those who received them, as gestures of worship and thanksgiving." 396-397.

So in the Old Testament, and in the Greek world at Paul's time, divine manifestations, and knowledge of them, were commonly expected and celebrated. The resulting super-knowledge, or *epignosis* was commonplace among Christians because Jesus was God Incarnate. His manifestation far surpassed all other claims. By focusing upon God manifest in Christ, *epignosis* through Jesus shone brightly. So bright was Christ, that other claims to divine knowledge faded away, gradually. Paul accelerated this fading by his magnificent statements of Christ's brilliance. As Spicq remarks: "When the writers of the epistles presented the Incarnation and coming of Christ to earth as an Epiphany of our Lord, or of our great God and Savior, it is very probable that they did so in order to contrast the revelation of the divine charity with the vain, sacrilegious, pretensions of the pagan monarchs." 400 For example: ***For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him. However not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled.*** 1 Cor 8:5-7.

Paul's argument has prevailed among us. We no longer imagine that any other forms of *epignosis* exist. But in the first century, Paul had to overcome both pagan and Jewish claims to *epignosis* from *epiphania*. He committed himself to Jewish claims early in his life. But Christ outshone them. So Paul converted. That conversion from Jewish to Christian *epignosis* was hard, but worth all the effort. The value of that conversion urged Paul to share his

wealth. Converts learned to overcome pagan claims to *epignosis*. Converting others was more difficult, because they believed in their higher knowledge. In fact, it was impossible for any human to convert another. Instead, as Paul put it: ***I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.*** 1 Cor 3:6. God gave the increase because Paul bore witness to Christ. Paul was merely the trumpet of God's *epiphania* which caused *epignosis* in his converts. The steps are not mechanical. They are mystical. But when we follow Christ's steps, Christ-life flourishes. So it was with Paul. So it was with the early Church, when Christians let the Spirit flow freely. We hope that in our time, the Second Spring has sprung.

Paul exalted the *epignosis* that sprang forth among his converts. He praised God for it in ringing words: ***but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love, in the word of truth, in the power of God;*** 2 Cor 6:4-7. Because Paul delighted in *epignosis*, he hymned its glory, flowing from Christ's *epiphania*. We who glimpse this glory can partake of that same *epiphania*, and gain that same *epignosis*. However, God does not clone us. None of us can be another Paul, for each of us is unique. Our details vary personally. So our trumpet sounds a different note. It harmonizes with Paul's note, but is not the same. Nor do we sound our notes at the same time. But the heavenly symphony needs both notes. Even if Paul plays solo, and we play only occasional harmony, God conducts the overall masterpiece. Paul says as much: ***But just as you abound in everything, in faith and utterance and knowledge and in all earnestness and in the love we inspired in you, see that you abound in this gracious work also.*** 2 Cor 8:7. Abounding beyond measure in all things, from our faith we speak our super-knowledge of Christ, thanks to His super-manifestation. If we remain earnest, or sincere, or pure in faith, then we abound in grace-work also. Grace produces great virtue. Thus Christ inspires others through us.

Others see us as somehow super, because of our *epignosis*. Paul shows why: ***We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.*** 2 Cor 10:5. Though "destroying" and "taking every thought captive" sound aggressive, Paul is properly forceful. Our speculations, or imaginary suppositions, trip us up. Most people have nothing but images, most of them false. These false images are exactly the things we need to destroy. Paul notices that many of these "lofty things" rise up against the knowledge of God. This is an excellent reason to destroy them. There are all too many self-inflated things, self-defined as lofty, but really disgusting. Communism was just such a lofty thing raised up against knowing God. Fortunately, enough Christians took every thought captive to Christ. Therefore Communist lies finally collapsed of their own weight. Paul knows that every anti-human "lofty thing" eventually succumbs to Christ. Why? Because He is Truth. To know Him is to learn super-knowledge. Paul is so alive to this *epignosis* that his epistles abound with "every thought" captive to Christ. Reviewing Paul, we take more thoughts captive, because we obey Christ, and attain *epignosis*.

Paul excelled at communicating *epignosis* because he captured the main thoughts of his day. As Spicq says: "St. Paul deliberately used the stylized language of the dynastic or imperial religion, to expose the authentic revelation of the true God. In using the framework of an epiphany of *agape* to describe God's relations with men, he was presenting the divine economy as similar to the relations of the Hellenistic sovereign with his subjects." 403 Our task today is to deliberately use today's stylized language of the idol people worship. *Agape* is much better than whatever people worship today. Freedom in *agape* is so much better than the slavery of addiction to some idol. We must do today what Paul did then.

Today, when we see people worshiping government power, we should do as Paul did. Many people attribute to government the goodness that belongs to God alone. They are forever frustrated when government fails. All we need to do is compare government failures to Christ's success. Then, like Paul's converts, we proclaim: ***There is another king, Jesus.*** Acts 17:7. Since kings are long gone from America, we could substitute "president". Even more obvious, we could substitute "congress". As Spicq says: "In briefest terms, the Christian Epiphany is essentially a *soteriological theophany*, a divine 'virtue', force, and kindness, which have appeared on earth. Better still, the Epiphany is the manifestation of God's presence under the form of Lord and Savior. His appearance in the world began with the birth of the Son of God. From the very first, He presented Himself as the universal *Kyrios* to Whom all the faithful make appeal. His Incarnation was the beginning of His reign, and the Church the place of his *epidemia*. His Epiphany is the accomplishment of the promises of salvation made by God, and the realization of age-old, or timeless, hopes. It is specifically this: ***Salvation has appeared.*** Ti 2:11. To say that Christ 'appeared' as Savior means, in the language of the first century, that He delivers us from evils, from sin and death, but especially that He is kind and generous, and brings us countless wonderful blessings – above all-peace. He is *theos* and *soter* because He possesses all power, and governs the world, but primarily because He desires and accomplishes the good of His subjects. In the first place, He makes them pass from death to life; He brings about a 'palinogenesis' a renewal of soul. His most personal gift is life itself, the only life worthy of the name (1 Tm 6:19) – life that is eternal because it is divine (Ti 3:7)." 404-405 Paul sums it up: ***But even if I am unskilled in speech, yet I am not so in knowledge; in fact, in every way we have made this evident to you in all things.*** 2 Cor 11:6. May Christ inspire us to imitate Paul's *epignosis*, and his zeal to share the good news that Christ appeared, and saved us all.