

Article of the Month
April, 2018

KNOWLEDGE
(“Gnosis” and “Epignosis”)

When we read our New Testament Scriptures, we always want to gain as much of their meaning as is possible for us. We are restricted, however, when we cannot read the original language in which they were written. By the Lord's grace, however, we, in our day, have the help of so very many lexicons, concordances, etc., so that we can check to see what we may be missing.

This month's study is on the word "knowledge." What we cannot see in our English translations is that the word comes from TWO different Greek words. One is "gnosis," the other is "epignosis" — the same word with three letters added to its beginning. The distinction may seem minor, but it is not; it is singularly important — a MAJOR factor in our gaining understanding.

GNOSIS

"Knowledge," when translated from "gnosis," is a reference to INFORMATION *FACTS*. We would never want to imply that this is not important. If we have the wrong *facts*, the entire basis of our faith structure can be false! But KNOWING facts does not always secure our standing with God. We can be *right*, but **dead right!** As Paul says in I Corinthians 13:2, “If I have ... all knowledge, but do not have love, *I AM NOTHING!*” (“Knowledge” in that passage is “gnosis.”) Yet, in any number of other Scriptures, it is clear that WITHOUT GNOSIS we cannot be faithful.

EPIGNOSIS

Sometimes translators attempt to show us that this word has a special meaning. For instance, in the NAS translation, "epignosis" is often translated "true knowledge." We are glad the translators want to help us to see a distinction, but "true knowledge" falls far short of what we need to learn about this word. As the matter of fact, "true knowledge" might imply to some that "gnosis" is FALSE knowledge! THAT IS NOT THE CASE! "Epignosis" literally means "over-knowledge" in the sense that it is BIGGER or ABOVE knowledge.

Epignosis is closely allied to the English word “acknowledge.” When we *acknowledge* something, we not only know ABOUT it, but we ACCEPT it as a part of our being. "Epignosis" has this idea of ABSORBED KNOWLEDGE — knowledge that has CHANGED US. We can probably all see that THIS KIND of knowledge is worthy of being sought diligently. It is closely akin to Paul's words in Romans 12:2:

" ... be ye TRANSFORMED by the *renewing of your mind...* "

This is what "*epignosis*" is. It is knowledge (facts or information) which has made us think (and, therefore, *act*) differently. Our growth as members of the "body of Christ" is reliant upon this "epignosis." But "epignosis" cannot happen unless "gnosis" is behind it! A character cannot be built on error. But **truth** (gnosis) IS NOT CHARACTER.

A COUPLE OF EXAMPLES

We will here give a few citations to see how the Apostles use these words for our edification. However, the best way to see how these two words affect our faith and practice is to take the time to read ALL the passages which use these two words. We will shortly provide a listing of every use of the two words in the Bible. If we are good students and hungry Christians, we will find pleasure in examining each use. We may well be surprised at how this information affects some of our favorite Scriptures!

GNOSIS

"Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth." (I Corinthians 8:1 KJV)

When we have FACTS, we CAN let it go to our heads! Facts need buffering factors to keep us from thinking that if we know something, we are better than people who don't! So Paul says that facts need a character steeped in "agape" (charity or love) to keep us from making "wise" fools of ourselves!

"But thanks be to God, Who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place." (II Corinthians 2:14 NAS)

In this text, Paul shows that if we KNOW about God, we can spread that knowledge about him every place we go. We CANNOT spread "acknowledgement" (epignosis) OF God; but we CAN spread FACTS (gnosis) ABOUT Him. Obviously, if we don't HAVE the facts, we can't spread them. This shows why knowledge (gnosis — facts) is, indeed, important. The LACK of knowledge (gnosis) means that no "sweet aroma" can happen. As an example, being steeped in the error about hell's being an eternal torment does not provide a "sweet aroma," but a *stench*. This is why "gnosis" is so important.

EPIGNOSIS

" ... always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth."
(II Timothy 3:7)

Understanding the real meaning of "epignosis" helps us to gain from this text much more meaning than might otherwise be had. Paul is not saying that these persons never gain facts. Quite to the contrary, he is saying that they are ALWAYS gaining facts — "ever learning." But the problem is that they are never able TO APPLY in their lives what they have learned in the way of information. They "never ... come to the ABSORPTION

("epignosis") of the truth." We have probably all known people who can spout the facts but never seem able to have their characters reformed by those facts!

" ... Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."
(I Timothy 2:4)

This text is in the wonderful context of the coming kingdom when Jesus will function as the "mediator between God and men." The text is not telling us that God desires all men to come to have the INFORMATION of truth. It is telling us that God wants all men to come to the condition of ACKNOWLEDGING the truth. In other words, He wants men to ABSORB the truth so that they can reform their characters and live forever.

A COMPREHENSIVE LIST

While the above few examples help to illustrate the meanings of these words, there is nothing quite like an exhaustive examination of ALL the uses of a word. The Scriptures are "God-breathed" (meaning INSPIRED by God.) If we learn from Him, we will learn the best. It is well worth our while to notate in our Bibles the source (gnosis or epignosis) of every Scriptural usage of the word "knowledge." Our understandings and joys will be multiplied when we do this.

The following list will work in ANY translation; but we may have to hunt in some translations to determine which word in the verse is "knowledge" since some translations may choose to use an alternate word. As one example: The KJV translates "gnosis" as "science" in I Timothy 6:20.

ALL USES OF GNOSIS:

Luke	1:77 11:52
Romans	2:20 11:33 15:14
I Corinthians	1:5 8:1 (X2) 8:7 8:10 8:11 12:8 13;2 13:8 14:6
IICorinthians	2:14 4:6 6:6 8:7

	10:5
	11:6
Ephesians	3:19
Philippians	3:8
Colossians	2:3
I Timothy	6:20
I Peter	3:7
II Peter	1:5
	1:6
	3:18

ALL USES OF EPIGNOSIS

Romans	1:28
	3:20
	10:2
Ephesians	1:17
	4:13
Philippians	1:9
Colossians	1:9
	1:10
	2:2
	3:10
I Timothy	2:4
II Timothy	2:25
	3:7
Titus	1:1
Philemon	6
Hebrews	10:26
I Peter	1:2
	1:3
II Peter	1:8
	2:20

IN SUMMARY

It is necessary to have KNOWLEDGE ("gnosis"). But knowledge can become a snare and a trap if we don't have the character to use it well, or if we don't let it become a part of us. Its becoming part of us ("epignosis") is what God desires in all His creation. By marking our Bibles with the corresponding Greek word every time

we come across the word "knowledge," we will be fortified by Scripture every time we read these passages.

A brief synopsis of "gnosis" and "epignosis" is this:

GNOSIS: We HAVE the truth.

EPIGNOSIS: The truth HAS US.

They go together and are inseparable. But distinguishing between the two of them can be the determinant of success or failure.
