



ΝΤΙ • γινώσκω • To Know

Philippians 3:4b-11

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

February 16, 2020

The Bible, for all it offers us regarding faithfulness and discipleship, can be a challenging text to fully understand. The Old Testament and New Testament texts, as you'll find them printed in the pew Bible, were canonized by the 5<sup>th</sup> Century. The Old Testament was first written in ancient Hebrew; the New Testament was first written in ancient Greek.

Over the past 1800 years, these original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts have been translated and interpreted time and time again. Each printed translation claims to be just a little bit better than the next because of their more accurate understanding of the ancient languages and the intent of the Biblical Word.

Over the past couple months, we've been looking at some individual words of the ancient languages to see how, at times, the English language is insufficient for explaining the Bible's original intent. We're asking question to help us claim a more faithful interpretation. What nuances of the ancient languages have been lost in the translation to English? How might the context of ancient Israel, or the greater witness of the Bible, help us to read the text in such a way we can claim a more faithful understanding of God's will for humanity and for us as seeking disciples?

Over the past 7 weeks, we've looked at a singular word from either the Greek or the Hebrew. Today, we're looking at a pair of Greek and Hebrew words. The Hebrew word is *yada* (yaw-dah), and the Greek word is *ginosko* (gi-know-sko). Though perhaps having slight differences between the Hebrew and Greek, the words translate interchangeably. In the Septuagint, a copy of the Bible written fully in the Greek language in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century, the Greek word *ginosko* was used anytime the Hebrew word *yada* appeared in the text. They are understood to have the same relative meanings.

The challenge with these words *yada* and *ginosko* is that they have a wide breadth of meanings when compared to any single English word. In English, we really don't have any *one word* that encompasses the nuanced meanings of these two ancient words. In our translations of the text, these two words are replaced with a variety of English options, each chosen to help us understand the specific context of that individual verse. Though most often translated as the verb, "to know," these words are also translated into English as, "to perceive," "to admit," "to understand," and "to be acquainted with." Yet, even this variety of English options seems to miss the fulness of what the text intends when it speaks of *yada* and *ginosko*.

We'll get to this morning's passage in Philippians shortly, and we'll consider its use of the word *ginosko*. However, first, to help us understand the deeper meaning of the words *yada* and *ginosko*, we're going to walk through a number of Biblical passages that use these words, and consider the depth these words have to offer.

The word *yada* appears almost 950 times in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, including 52 times in Genesis alone. The first two uses we find, which use the verb "to know," are found in Genesis 3:5, which reads: "For God knows that when you eat of [the fruit] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In this verse, you can hear that the word *yada* is referring to a deep knowledge, such as the knowledge of God – not about God, but having knowledge as if you were God. The verse uses *yada* to talk about knowledge in such complete detail, that it seems only God is capable of having that kind of knowledge.

Just two verses later, in Genesis 3:7, we read, "Then the eyes of both were opened (both Adam and Eve), and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves." This is the knowledge of God – because of eating the fruit, they now know what was only known to God before. *Yada* refers to a deep knowledge that is Godly knowledge.

*Yada* is not only the knowledge of God, it's also knowing God. We find an example of this in Psalm 9:16. The text reads, "The Lord made himself known, he has executed judgement; the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands." In this verse, and many others like it, we find the word *yada* is speaking about the knowledge *of* God – that is, knowledge *about* God. The Lord made himself known – the Lord revealed himself. If the first use in Genesis 3 references the knowledge *of* God, meaning, God's knowledge ... here, the word is used to refer to what we know *about* God. It's knowing God's ways, it's knowing *God*. *Yada* is a knowledge of the divine and it is divine knowledge.

Yet another example of *yada* can be found in Isaiah 29. In this text, the word *yada* is referring to a person who is knowledgeable – it speaks of them as a "person who can read" – more directly from the Hebrew, "a person who has knowledge." Isaiah 29:11-12 say, "The vision of all this has become for you like the words of a sealed document. If it is given to those who can read (that is, those who have *yada*) with the command, 'Read this', they say, 'We cannot, for it is sealed.' And if it is given to those who cannot read (that is, those who do not have *yada*), saying, 'Read this', they say, 'We cannot read.'" In this text, *yada* is not referencing the knowledge of the divine or divine knowledge, but it is more loosely speaking about knowledge in general. It is referring to knowledge as a preferred trait: wisdom and intelligence.

We see this same use in Esther 4:1, which reads, "When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes ..." "Learned," is formed using this verb *yada* – more literally, "when he had *yada*" (when he had knowledge). It is not referring to divine knowledge or knowledge of the divine, but general wisdom. *Yada* can refer to knowing something or someone in complete detail – to know the truth, or the full of reality.

In a similar mindset, it should be of no surprise that *yada* is also used to refer to the knowledge of one another. In Job 19:14, we read, “My relatives and close friends have failed me.” The phrase that forms “close friends,” or “familiar friends,” is formed using this Hebrew word *yada*. Those who know me best are my “close friends” – they have a special knowledge of who I am. The word is speaking of deep knowledge – personal knowledge – intimate knowledge.

And speaking of intimacy, yes, *yada* is even used when referring to healthy and covenantal sex. In Genesis 4:1, the text reads, “Now Adam *knew* his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, ‘I have produced a man with the help of the Lord.’” The word *knew* is used for the word *yada*. The word *yada* is used almost every time the Bible refers to two people having sex, when the sex is understood to be healthy and covenantal. There are other Hebrew verbs that are used anytime there is an unhealthy or non-covenantal sexual exchange – like the time David “lay” with Bathsheba, which uses the Hebrew word *shakab*. In these unhealthy cases, the focus of the verb is not “head or heart knowledge,” but “a physical or bodily exchange.”

As I noted earlier, the Hebrew word *yada* is replaced in kind with the Greek word *ginosko*. It has all the same meanings in the New Testament that *yada* has in the Old Testament, including sex. Matthew 1:25, speaking of Joseph and Mary, reads, “[Joseph] had no marital relations with [Mary] until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.” The Greek word for “marital relations” is *ginosko*. More literally, Joseph did not *know* Mary until she had borne a son – there was no intimate knowledge of one another until after Jesus was born.

In every use of *yada* and *ginosko*, the focus is on a right knowledge at a deep and intimate level, knowing unblemished truth, such as one might expect from the knowledge of the divine and divine knowledge. As I said earlier, the English language has no substitute that can do justice to these two words. In the English vocabulary, we have no singular word that can adequately describe the knowledge of the divine, divine knowledge, *and* healthy and covenantal sex. When we translate, we often lose some of the ancient nuances. While we have no singular word that can substantially fill their space, that is the breadth of these two words in the Hebrew and Greek languages.

So, given the comprehensive scope of *yada* and *ginosko*, let’s return to Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi. How might we best understand this text given what we now know of *ginosko*?

In verses 4-6, Paul is explaining exactly why it is he is so qualified as a leader for a faith community, if not also as a person of faith in Jesus Christ more generally. He was circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day – a right act according to the Jewish Torah. He is a member of the people of Israel – he has the right lineage. He is of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, just further establishing his blood line. As to the law, Paul is a Pharisee – he knows the law as well as anyone. As to zeal, he was a persecutor of the church – he was not going to allow this new radical movement of Jesus to wrongly overthrow the Jewish faith. And yet, he is righteous to the law – indeed blameless, always doing as God had called him to do.

In the early years of the church, in the church's formative years after the gifting of the Holy Spirit, this list would have been a list to praise. Paul had done all he had ever been called to do. This list proved his fidelity to God, and should he choose to use it as such, it gave him a reason to boast in his discipleship and faithfulness.

But in verse 7, Paul says, this list is all for not. "I consider these gains as a loss because of Christ." He goes on, "Indeed, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of Christ Jesus my Lord."

Generally, when speaking of how great Christ is, we preachers focus on all the things you should give up to take on Christ. You'll hear a preacher say that if you'll give yourself over to Christ, Christ will take away all your sin: all your bad habits, your adultery, your anger, your addictions, and all your persecutory behaviors. For the most part, we pitch Christ as this Savior who is better than all of our wrongdoings. And yet here, Paul is saying, Christ *isn't* just better than all our sin ... Christ *isn't* just better than all those things that *separate* us from God. I mean, how great is God really if all I can say is that God is greater than my failures? "NO!," Paul says, Christ is greater than even the things we have to boast about in our faithfulness before God. It's not just my sin and wrongdoings that are regarded as a loss because of Christ, but even the gains I've had are insignificant because of the value of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

"For Christ's sake," Paul says, "I have suffered the loss of all things, (even the great things,) and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through the faith of Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith." We're going to speaking more about this next week – about the righteousness we have because of God's faithfulness – but look at what Paul is saying here. He says, it doesn't matter that I have all these accolades of faithfulness. I do not have a righteousness of my own that comes from the law. No, I have a righteousness that comes from God based on faith.

And then verse 10 brings us back to *ginosko*: "I want to know (I want to *ginosko*) Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection of the dead."

Paul says, I want to know the full beauty of Christ – the power of the resurrection *and* the sharing of his sufferings. I want the *yada* knowledge – I want the *ginosko* knowledge – I want the intimate knowledge that is defined as truth, as unblemished reality, as divine understanding, as an understanding of the divine ... in depth, I want to know Christ so well, that my knowledge is best described using the words of "covenantal intimacy." Paul doesn't just want to hear the stories of Christ; he doesn't just want to read the Biblical passages that tell us about the narrative of Christ; Paul doesn't just want to reflect on the theological implications of Christ as the incarnate second person of God ... no. Paul wants a deep and intimate knowledge of the divine: a knowledge through which he can share in the suffering and resurrection of Christ, and through which he might also attain the resurrection from the dead.

I see too many people who claim faithfulness to God, but who have never moved past the insufficiencies of our English language to understand who God is and what God desires for us as disciples of a risen Lord. Paul says, the zeal of our faithfulness is insufficient. All these accolades of how many Bible passages we can quote, and how many people we can shame for having broken the Biblical law, and how early in our life we might have been baptized or confirmed ... Paul says, this is not what it means to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. Even these lofty proclamations are a loss when compared to the value of knowing Jesus Christ as Lord. The text isn't Lord; Christ is Lord. The church isn't Lord; Christ is Lord. The Pope isn't Lord; Christ is Lord. The Bishop isn't Lord; Christ is Lord.

What we are invited to long for is a knowledge of Christ and the power of his resurrection, and the sharing of his sufferings ... a deep, truthful, honest, intimate relationship with the one who proclaims that God is love, who proclaims that we are redeemable and redeemed, who proclaims with his life, his death, and his resurrection that God is God, that we are not, and that in grace, Christ's faithfulness makes possible for us each, and for all of us, to be found righteous before God. May you know the Lord, may you *yada* the Lord, may you *ginosko* the Lord, and receive the life that comes with such surpassing value. For the glory of God. Amen.