

## *Gregory of Nyssa*

How can we know anything about God? It would appear the distance, which exists between God and humanity is too wide for us to bridge the gap. After all, what fellowship can we finite creatures have with the infinite God? He is the Creator, we are the created. He is the eternal, we are restricted by time. He is the Being above beginning, who exists from everlasting to everlasting, we are lowly, earth bound creatures with limited knowledge. So how can we know the unknowable or speak meaningfully about God at all? This line of questioning about the knowledge of God, occupied Gregory of Nyssa's entire career. Of course, he was well suited to take up these challenging questions seeing how he was schooled in both secular and sacred learning. God selected Him to be the great leader of orthodox Christianity and the twists and turns of his early life were but the training ground for his future call as Defender of the Faith.

Gregory was born in 335AD in a small region of Cappadocia, which is located in present day Turkey. Born into a very large and pious family, religious activism was in his blood. But very early on, his older brother, Basil, proved himself to be the great theologian of the family. Basil would go on to have a very illustrious career in the Church, and his personal and professional accolades are worthy of attention in their own right. Seeing how his brother was the great religious thinker, Gregory devoted his life to secular learning and, after his father, prepared himself to be a teacher. He mastered early on the philosophical thought of the day and showed a great affinity for Plato and what would later become known as Neo-Platonism. His mind was sharp, so he excelled in his studies. But like many gifted youths, he became rather indifferent to the teachings of the Church preferring instead worldly wisdom. But his life was destined to undergo a dramatic change. When he was twenty years old, his family dragged him along to a Church service honoring the 40 Martyrs of Sebaste. Moved by this tragic tale, and stirred into action by the Holy Spirit, Gregory decided then and there to take up the mantle of the Preaching Office. In 372AD, Gregory was ordained and consecrated as a bishop by his brother Basil. Gregory was assigned

the small city of Nyssa as his first parish. But this was no backwoods assignment. It was ripe with controversy. And before too long, he found himself at spiritual loggerheads with the heretical Emperor Valens. The crisis reached a boiling point when the Emperor had Gregory deposed as bishop and sent into exile. It was not until the Emperor's death that Gregory was allowed to return home and resume his ministry. Despite his rough and rocky start, following the untimely death of his brother, Gregory moved into the spotlight and surpassed his brother in theological depth and insight. His surviving writings provide some of the clearest explanations of God, humanity, knowledge and faith. In fact, his claim to fame is that he was instrumental in shaping the creedal statement we know today as the Nicene Creed. Every time we confess this Creed, as we did tonight, we pay homage to the brilliance and theological depth of Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory would spend the remainder of his life defending this creedal Faith until his death in 395AD.

And so by way of conclusion tonight, I would like to leave you with a nugget of thought from St. Gregory. Let us take up that question I began with: How can we know anything about God? For Gregory this was "the" question of questions. But Gregory was not satisfied with an answer that just stated mere propositions about God. That is to say, he wanted to know God in His fullest expression, and was not content simply to know things *about* God. Therefore, Gregory taught there was more to knowing God than just rattling off shallow statements about what God is like. God is not just a concept we grasp with our mind. God is more than just cerebral or cognitive knowledge. For if God could be fully grasped by our intellect then God would simply be an extension of our mind, bound to conform to our earthly way of thinking. This will not do, said Gregory. God is altogether different from us. But since God cannot be grasped by our reason, how can we know what we can't get our minds around? How can we bridge the immeasurable gap? Gregory taught that we can't. It is impossible for us to reach such knowledge since God and mankind exist on two different planes of existence. The only way the gap is bridged is for God

to make the first move and He does so through Christ's incarnation. Christ, our Lord, is the full revelation of God in the flesh. In Christ, the two planes of existence of God and humanity are brought together. Christ is at one and the same time fully God and fully man. Being so, the gap is bridged as Christ's divine nature dwells harmoniously with His human nature; Christ brings God to humanity and humanity to God.

This union of the two natures in Christ does not change God, but it does change us. Christ makes it possible for us to participate in the life of God. This Gregory called "mystical knowledge". He called it mystical knowledge because the knowledge we gain by contemplating Christ is not earthly knowledge. It is not knowledge that we could ever discover on our own. It must be revealed. In Christ, a whole other world opens up to us with infinite possibilities. In Christ, we can explore the depths of God, which are boundless. We come to know something about who we are and why we were created by following the life of Christ. Seeing how Christ was and is the perfect specimen of humanity, we seek to model Christ's virtues in our own life. We strive to think with the mind of Christ, to have our hearts beat in rhythm with the love of Christ, to embody a purity of soul, and progress onwards toward a freedom from the disturbance of earthly vices and passions. This progression is a restless progression, it never ends nor is it ever complete this side of heaven. We continue, day by day, to press on towards glory. But as we grow in Faith and Virtue, our Lord reveals more and more of Himself. God allows us to gain deeper and deeper access into the mysteries of His Divine Being. This earthly participation in Christ is the gateway to the future life of eternity where we will know God in all His fullness. Even now, Christ has begun this good work in us, and in the words of St. Gregory, "Christ is the Artist, tenderly wiping away all the grime of sin that disfigures the human face and restoring God's image to its full beauty." Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy H. Mills