

The People Who Know Their God

by J.I. Packer

I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. "But it doesn't matter," he said at length, "for I've known God and they haven't." The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something I had said, but it has stuck with me, and set me thinking.

Not many of us, I think, would ever naturally say that we have known God. The words imply a definiteness and matter-of-factness of experience to which most of us, if we are honest, have to admit that we are still strangers. We claim, perhaps, to have a testimony, and can rattle off our conversion story with the best of them; we say that we know God--this, after all, is what evangelicals are expected to say; but would it occur to us to say, without hesitation, and with reference to particular events in our personal history, that we have known God? I doubt it, for I suspect that with most of us experience of God has never become so vivid as that.

Nor, I think, would many of us ever naturally say that in the light of the knowledge of God which we have come to enjoy past disappointments and present heartbreaks, as the world counts heartbreaks, don't matter. For the plain fact is that to most of us they do matter. We live with them as our "crosses" (so we call them). Constantly we find ourselves slipping into bitterness and apathy and gloom as we reflect on them, which we frequently do. The attitude we show to the world is a sort of dried-up stoicism, miles removed from the "joy unspeakable and full of glory" which Peter took for granted that his readers were displaying (2 Peter 1: 8). "Poor souls," our friends say of us, "how they've suffered"--and that is just what we feel about ourselves! But these private mock heroics have no place at all in the minds of those who really know God. They never brood on might-have-beens; they never think of the things they have missed, only of what they have gained. "What things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ," wrote Paul. "Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him . . . that I may know him . . ." (Philippians 3:7-10). When Paul says he counts the things he lost "dung", he means not merely that he does not think of them as having any value, but also that he does not live with them constantly in his mind: what normal person spends his time nostalgically dreaming of manure? Yet this, in effect, is what many of us do. It shows how little we have in the way of true knowledge of God.

We need frankly to face ourselves at this point. We are, perhaps, orthodox evangelicals. We can state the gospel clearly, and can smell unsound doctrine a mile away. If anyone asks us how men may know God, we can at once produce the right formula--that we come to know God through Jesus Christ the Lord, in virtue of His cross and mediation, on the basis of His word of promise, by the power of the Holy Spirit, via a personal exercise of faith. Yet, the gaiety, goodness, and unfetteredness of spirit which are the marks of those who have known God are rare among us--rarer, perhaps, than they are in some other Christian circles where, by comparison, evangelical truth is less clearly and fully known. Here, too, it would seem that the last may prove to be first, and the first last. A little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about Him.

To focus this point further, let me say two things:

First, one can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of Him. I am sure that many of us have never really grasped this. We find in ourselves a deep interest in theology (which is, of course, a most fascinating and intriguing subject--in the seventeenth century it was every gentleman's hobby). We read books of theological exposition and apologetics. We dip into Christian history, and study the Christian creed. We learn to find our way around in the Scriptures. Others appreciate our interest in these things, and we find ourselves asked to give our opinion in public on this or that Christian question, to lead study groups, to give papers, to write articles, and generally to accept responsibility, informal if not formal, for acting as teachers and arbiters of orthodoxy in our own Christian circle. Our friends tell us how much they value our contribution, and this spurs us to further explorations of God's truth, so that we may be equal to the demands made upon us. All very fine--yet interest in theology, and knowledge about God, and the capacity to think clearly and talk well on Christian themes, is not at all the same thing as knowing Him. We may know as much about God as Calvin knew--indeed, if we study his works diligently, sooner or later we shall--and yet all the time (unlike Calvin, may I say) we may hardly know God at all.

Second, one can know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God. It depends on the sermons one hears, the books one reads, and the company one keeps. In this analytical and technological age there is no shortage of books on the church book stalls, or sermons from the pulpits, on how to pray, how to witness, how to read our Bibles, how to tithe our money, how to be a young Christian, how to be an old Christian, how to be a happy Christian, how to get consecrated, how to lead men to Christ, how to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit (or, in some cases, how to avoid receiving it), how to speak with tongues (or, how to explain away Pentecostal manifestations), and generally how to go through all the various motions which the teachers in question associate with being a Christian believer. Nor is there any shortage of biographies delineating the experiences of Christians in past days for our interested perusal. Whatever else may be said about this state of affairs, it certainly makes it possible to learn a great deal at second-hand about the practice of Christianity. Moreover, if one has been given a good bump of common sense one may frequently be able to use this learning to help floundering Christians of less stable temperament to regain their footing and develop a sense of proportion about their troubles, and in this way one may gain for oneself a reputation for being quite a pastor. Yet one can have all this and hardly know God at all.

We come back, then, to where we started. The question is not whether we are good at theology, or "balanced" (horrible, self-conscious word!) in our approach to problems of Christian living; the question is, can we say, simply, honestly, not because we feel that as evangelicals we ought to, but because it is plain matter of fact, that we have known God, and that because we have known God the unpleasantness we have had, or the pleasantness we have not had, through being Christians does not matter to us? If we really knew God, this is what we would be saying, and if we are not saying it, that is a sign that we need to face ourselves more sharply with the difference between knowing God and merely knowing about Him.

We have said that when a man knows God, losses and "crosses" cease to matter to him; what he has gained simply banishes these things from his mind. What other effects does knowledge of God have on a man? Various sections of Scripture answer this question from different points of view, but perhaps the most clear and striking answer of all is provided by the

book of Daniel. We may summarize its witness in four propositions.

1. Those who know God have great energy for God.

In one of the prophetic chapters of Daniel we read: "the people that know their God shall be strong, and do exploits" (11:32) RSV renders thus: "the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action." In the context, this statement is introduced by "but", and set in contrast to the activity of the "vile person" (verse 21) who sets up "the abomination that maketh desolate," and corrupts by smooth and flattering talk those whose loyalty to God's covenant has failed (verses 31,32). This shows us that the action taken by those who know God is their reaction to the anti-God trends which they see operating around them. While their God is being defied or disregarded, they cannot rest; they feel they must do something; the dishonor done to God's name goads them into action.

This is exactly what we see happening in the narrative chapters of Daniel, where we are told of the "exploits" of Daniel and his three friends. They were men who knew God, and who in consequence felt compelled from time to time actively to stand out against the conventions and dictates of irreligion and false religion. Daniel in particular appears as one who would not let a situation of that sort slide, but felt bound openly to challenge it. Rather than risk possible ritual defilement through eating palace food, he insisted on a vegetarian diet, to the consternation of the prince of the eunuchs (1:8-16). When Nebuchadnezzar suspended the practice of prayer for a month, on pain of death, Daniel not merely went on praying three times a day, but did so in front of an open window, so that everyone might see what he was doing (6:10 f.). One recalls Bishop Ryle leaning forward in his stall at St. Paul's Cathedral so that everyone might see that he did not turn east for the Creed! Such gestures must not be misunderstood. It is not that Daniel, or for that matter Bishop Ryle, was an awkward, cross-grained fellow who luxuriated in rebellion and could only be happy when he was squarely "agin" the government. It is simply that those who know their God are sensitive to situations in which God's truth and honor are being directly or tacitly jeopardized, and rather than let the matter go by default will force the issue on men's attention and seek thereby to compel a change of heart about it--even at personal risk.

Nor does this energy for God stop short with public gestures. Indeed, it does not start there. Men who know their God are before anything else men who pray, and the first point where their zeal and energy for God's glory come to expression is in their prayers. In Daniel 9 we read how, when the prophet "understood by the books" that the foretold time of Israel's captivity was drawing to an end, and when at the same time he realized that the nation's sin was still such as to provoke God to judgment rather than mercy, he set himself to seek God "by prayer and supplications, with fasting, and sackcloth, and ashes" (verse 3), and prayed for the restoring of Jerusalem with a vehemence and passion and agony of spirit to which most of us are complete strangers. Yet the invariable fruit of true knowledge of God is energy to pray for God's cause--energy, indeed, which can only find an outlet and a relief of inner tension when channelled into such prayer--and the more knowledge, the more energy! By this we may test ourselves. Perhaps we are not in a position to make public gestures against ungodliness and apostasy. Perhaps we are old, or ill, or otherwise limited by our physical situation. But we can all pray about the ungodliness and apostasy which we see in everyday life all around us. If, however, there is in us little energy for such prayer, and little consequent practice of it, this is a sure sign that as yet we scarcely know our God.

2. Those who know God have great thoughts of God.

There is not space enough here to gather up all that the book of Daniel tells us about the wisdom, might, and truth of the great God who rules history and shows His sovereignty in acts of judgment and mercy towards individuals and nations according to His own good pleasure. Suffice it to say that there is, perhaps, no more vivid or sustained presentation of the many-sided reality of God's sovereignty in the whole Bible.

In face of the might and splendor of the Babylonian empire which had swallowed up Palestine, and the prospect of further great world-empires to follow, dwarfing Israel by every standard of human calculation, the book as a whole forms a dramatic reminder that the God of Israel is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, that "the heavens do rule" (4:26), that God's hand is on history at every point, that history, indeed, is no more than "His story," the unfolding of His eternal plan, and that the kingdom which will triumph in the end is God's.

The central truth which Daniel taught Nebuchadnezzar in chapters 2 and 4, and of which he reminded Belshazzar in chapter 5 (verses 18-23), and which Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged in chapter 4 (verses 34-37), and which Darius confessed in chapter 6 (verses 25-27), and which was the basis of Daniel's prayers in chapters 2 and 9, and of his confidence in defying authority in chapters 1 and 6, and of his friends' confidence in defying authority in chapter 3, and which formed the staple substance of all the disclosures which God made to Daniel in chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11-12, is the truth that "the most High ruleth in the kingdom of men" (4:25, cf. 5:21). He knows, and foreknows, all things, and His foreknowledge is foreordination; He, therefore, will have the last word, both in world history and in the destiny of every man; His kingdom and righteousness will triumph in the end, for neither men nor angels shall be able to thwart Him.

These were the thoughts of God which filled Daniel's mind, as witness his prayers (always the best evidence for a man's view of God): "Blessed be the name of God for ever and ever; for wisdom and might are his; and he changeth the times and the seasons; here moveth kings, and setteth up kings; he giveth wisdom . . . he knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him . . ." (2: 20ff.); "O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping covenant and mercy to them that love him, and to them that keep his commandments . . . O Lord, righteousness belongeth unto thee . . . To the Lord our God belong mercies and forgivenesses . . . the LORD our God is righteous in all his works which he doeth . . ." (9:4, 7,9,14). Is this how we think of God? Is this the view of God which our own praying expresses? Does this tremendous sense of His holy majesty, His moral perfection, and His gracious faithfulness keep us humble and dependent, awed and obedient, as it did Daniel? By this test, too, we may measure how much, or how little, we know God.

3. Those who know God show great boldness for God.

Daniel and his friends were men who stuck their necks out. This was not foolhardiness. They knew what they were doing. They had counted the cost. They had measured the risk. They were well aware what the outcome of their actions would be unless God miraculously intervened, as in fact He did. But these things did not move them. Once they were convinced that their stand was right, and that loyalty to their God required them to take it, then, in Oswald Chambers's phrase, they "smilingly washed their hands of the consequences." "We ought to

obey God rather than men," said the apostles (Acts 5:29). "Neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy," said Paul (Acts 20:24). This was precisely the spirit of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego. It is the spirit of all who know God. They may find the determination of the right course to take agonizingly difficult, but once they are clear on it they embrace it boldly and without hesitation. It does not worry them that others of God's people see the matter differently, and do not stand with them. (Were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego the only Jews who declined to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image? Nothing in their recorded words suggests that they either knew, or, in the final analysis, cared. They were clear as to what they personally had to do, and that was enough for them.) By this test also we may measure our own knowledge of God.

4. Those who know God have great contentment in God.

There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that they have known God, and God has known them, and that this relationship guarantees God's favor to them in life, through death, and on for ever. This is the peace of which Paul speaks in Romans 5:1--"being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"--and whose substance he analyzes in full in Romans 8. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus . . . the Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs . . . we know that all things work together' for good to them that love God . . . whom he justified, then he also glorified . . . if God be for us, who can be against us? . . . Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . I am persuaded that neither death, nor life . . . nor things present, nor things to come . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (verses 1, 16 f., 28, 30, 33, 35 ff.). This is the peace which Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego knew; hence the calm contentment with which they stood their ground in face of Nebuchadnezzar's ultimatum--"if ye worship not, ye shall be cast the same hour into the midst of a burning fiery furnace; and who is that God that shall deliver you out of my hands?" Their reply (3:16-18) is classic. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter." (No panic!) "If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us . . . and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king." (Courteous, but unanswerable--they knew their God!) "But if not"--if no deliverance comes--"be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods." (It doesn't matter! It makes no difference! Live or die, they are content.)

Lord, it belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live;
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this Thy grace must give.

If life be long, I will be glad,
That I may long obey;
If short--then why should I be sad
To soar to endless day?

The comprehensiveness of our contentment is another measure whereby we may judge whether we really know God.

Do we desire such knowledge of God? Then--

First, we must recognize how much we lack knowledge of God. We must learn to measure ourselves, not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts. Many of us, I suspect, have no idea how impoverished we are at this level. Let us ask the Lord to show us.

Second, we must seek the Savior. When He was on earth, He invited men to company with Him; thus they came to know Him, and in knowing Him to know His Father. The Old Testament records pre-incarnate manifestations of the Lord Jesus doing the same thing-- accompanying with men, in character as the angel of the Lord, in order that men might know Him. The book of Daniel tells us of what appear to be two such instances--for who was the fourth man, "like a son of the gods" (3:25, RSV), who walked with Daniel's three friends in the furnace? and who was the angel whom God sent to shut the lions' mouths when Daniel was in their den (6:22)? The Lord Jesus Christ is now absent from us in body, but spiritually it makes no difference; still we may find and know God through seeking and finding His company. It is those who have sought the Lord Jesus till they have found Him--for the promise is that when we seek Him with all our hearts, we shall surely find Him--who can stand before the world to testify that they have known God.

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