

Text: John 17:1-3

“Heaven without God?”

INTRODUCTION

(PPT) John Piper: The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there? (John Piper, *God Is the Gospel: Meditations on God’s Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), p. 15.)

(<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/the-critical-question-for-our-generation/>)

Basically, do you want God’s gifts, or do you want GOD?

To the extent that you or I would be content with “the good life” without God, to that extent we don’t know God or love God. And if you think you’d be completely content with all these things but without God, you may not truly be a Christian at all. Christianity is centered in a relationship with the God of the universe who claims us as His sons and daughters. It’s about knowing God.

John 17: Jesus prays to the Father, before He willingly gives up His life to glorify God and love us:

(PPT) “Father, the hour has **come**. **Glorify** your Son, that your Son may **glorify** you. ² For you **granted** him authority over all people that he might **give** eternal life to all those you have **given** him. ³ **Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.**

If eternal life is about knowing God and knowing Jesus, how will you enjoy heaven if you’d don’t enjoy God?

Illustration: Think of your family when you were growing up. Perks from being a member of the family (let’s assume the family is functioning well): Food, a warm place to stay, Xbox, candy, rides to soccer practice or music lessons, rides to friend’s houses and a place

where you can invite friends to hang out, etc. What if you won the lottery and had the opportunity to have all of those perks without your family? No one setting a curfew for you, no one limiting screen time, no parents to get in the way or make demands of you...but still plenty of friends. Would you be content/happy? If you think you would, then you want the perks of being a member of your family, but you don't want your family. Similar to the initial quote from John Piper.

Question: God's gifts aren't bad, but what is your ULTIMATE ambition for this new year? To have more of God's GIFTS, or to know GOD better?

Theme: Life apart from knowing God and knowing Jesus is no life at all. Empty. Meaningless. No matter how exciting it is in the moment, it will fade away to nothing like sand sifting through your fingers. **But Jesus gives true life: He brings you home and allows you to know your God.**

Yes, it can feel frustrating and hard to know God at times because you can't see Him in the same way as you can other people, but seeking Him is worth the challenge. He will reveal Himself to all who seek Him wholeheartedly through Jesus.

Outline:

- **What is "eternal life" and "heaven" all about?**
- **Why should we want to know God?**
- **Knowing God begins now**
- **How would heaven feel like heaven for anyone who doesn't want to know God?**
- **What if we don't want to know God?**

WHAT IS "ETERNAL LIFE" AND "HEAVEN" ALL ABOUT?

"³ Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Does this just mean that if you believe in Jesus, you'll live forever even after you die?

Eternal life IS "forever". There's no more death, so there's no more goodbyes for anyone who trusts in Jesus.

But just living forever isn't necessarily a good thing. Think of the worst day or year you've ever had. Maybe when you've felt most alone, furthest from God and others. Then think of that stretching on day after day, year after year, forever. That's not heaven: That's a TINY hint of hell!

Fellow Christian, God promises to give you more than just “living forever”. He promises to give you Himself, forever. He gives you a life filled with the joy of knowing Him.

When you get to know someone for the first time—whether a really good friend, or a romantic relationship—it's like new color comes into the world, and you feel more alive. **That's just a tiny glimpse of the life God promises to give us in Jesus.** That begins now (even though sometimes we might feel very far from God), and continues in fullness when Jesus returns for us. So eternal life is not just a different QUANTITY of life (going on forever); it's also a different QUALITY of life (full of intimacy with God, joy).

We can't have “heaven” without God, because heaven is all about knowing God, and knowing Jesus.

WHY SHOULD WE WANT TO KNOW GOD?

This is the One who spoke the universe into being—from the birds in your backyard to the massive stars light-years away that would engulf our entire sun, Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, and Jupiter...and this is the One who formed YOU in your mother's womb from a single cell.

This is the One who knows each of the stars by name...and knows your name.

This is the One who speaks and the earth trembles...and who speaks and stills your worries.

This is the One who is complete in Himself—forever Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...and the One who loved you so much that He gave up His life to embrace you. Jesus REVEALS God to you through His life, death, and resurrection for you, and He also RECONCILES you to God through His death and resurrection, so that you can actually know God personally.

Francis Chan: “It is alone with [God] that I empty myself of pride, lies, and stress. Pride: standing before a Person clothed in unapproachable light has a way of humbling you (1 Timothy 6:16). **Lies:** speaking to an All-Knowing Judge tends to induce honesty (Hebrews 4:13). **Stress:** kneeling before the God who causes men to fail or succeed replaces our

anxiety with peace (Psalm 127:1).” (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-greatest-thing-you-could-do-today>)

So why should you want to know God? Because He’s GOD! He alone is worthy of all our worship, and He alone brings you home as His beloved child.

KNOWING GOD BEGINS NOW

“Father, the hour has **come**. **Glorify** your Son, that your Son may **glorify** you. ² For you **granted** him authority over all people that he might **give** eternal life to all those you have **given** him.”

How do you get to know God? Come to Jesus. The Father has granted Jesus authority over all people, and He GIVES eternal life to all the Father has given Him...beginning now. And if eternal life is about personally knowing God, we see that Jesus both shows us what God’s like, and brings us into a personal relationship WITH God.

He shows you who God is through His life: Healing, confronting, freeing, teaching. He shows you who God is through His death: He died for you because He loves you that much! He shows you who God is through His resurrection: God is all-powerful, even over death.

And He doesn’t just show you what God’s like: He brings you home to God. So you can personally know God as your Father, and Jesus as your Lord. That doesn’t mean you’ll always FEEL God or SEE Him like you can see and feel your friends. Until Jesus returns, I think knowing God is more often by faith (taking Him at His word) with tastes/glimpses of more direct experience of Him—and through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. But we can still rely on Him, listen to His word in Scripture as the Holy Spirit applies it to us, love Him, and walk with Him. And then when Jesus returns, faith will become sight.

So if you want to know God—or even if you want to WANT to know God—come to Jesus. Listen to Him. Let Him reveal Himself to you. (And not just the Hollywood idea of Jesus as a nice guy who never offended anyone, but the real Jesus who is fierce in His dedication to God’s glory, and fierce in His love for us.) You can’t know God if you’re avoiding Jesus. He’s paved the way to bring us back home!

And if the Church is the body of Christ, I would also suggest that you can’t get to know Jesus well if you’re avoiding His body/people. It’s even possible to come to church every week, and yet never let anyone truly get to know you. If you want to know God better, I’d

urge you to begin connecting with other mature, humble believers who love Jesus, and begin being real with them—share your struggles with those who are trustworthy, let them know you, and get to know them, giving and receiving forgiveness whenever needed.

And for anyone who comes to Jesus, God promises to give you the beginning of that life NOW as you take Him at His word and follow Him. Yes, it will be hard. Yes, there will be all sorts of baggage that you see as you seek Him. But knowing Him is worth the pain.

And when Jesus returns, all that clouds our intimacy with God will be removed. “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13:12, NIV)

If you are not yet a Christian, you might not care about being close to God. But you still long for good relationships, pleasure, security, more. And as long as you are looking for the good life in these things, you won’t find it. Apart from God Himself, all of the pleasure you think you’ve found in other places will fade away (SAND)—with nothing left but alienation from God, judgment, hell. **The good life is only in a relationship with your God.** And the only way you can have that closeness is through Jesus: Only He, Himself God, can bring you home to your God.

HOW WOULD HEAVEN FEEL LIKE HEAVEN FOR ANYONE WHO DOESN’T WANT TO KNOW GOD?

So if heaven is about knowing God, how would heaven feel like heaven for anyone who doesn’t WANT to know God?

The new heavens and the new earth aren’t just all the nice things you’ve ever experienced and all your friends together in one place. The new heavens and the new earth are where God Himself lives, and where He reigns without any rivals. That means nothing evil or wrong can be there.

So if someone hates God or wants to avoid Him, how could they ever enjoy the place where they can never escape Him?

WHAT IF WE DON’T WANT TO KNOW GOD?

So if you hear any of this and you realize that you don’t desire God like you should, let that sink in. Don’t just distract yourself. Guilt is meant to drive you to Jesus. Because

there's hope even if you find that you don't love God as you should, or even if you find that you hate God. There's good news, and that's the only way out of that guilt back into God's arms. The good news is that Jesus both RECONCILES you to God, and REVEALS God to you. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, working together for your salvation.

The good news is that Jesus doesn't just save you from hell; He saves you from your lack of desire for him! He reveals the Father to you in His power and love. Only then will you be able to actually enjoy the joys of the new heaven and the new earth. How does He do this?

First, Jesus died for people who didn't want God.

Jesus died for His enemies to make us His friends (see Romans 5). Jesus died for us who wanted to avoid Him, to give us a whole new set of desires so we would know and love Him. He died for us who didn't want Him, because HE was determined to give us life and joy.

Jesus didn't just die for your bad ACTIONS towards God; He also died for your hatred and apathy towards God. All of your lack of desire for God was laid on Jesus at the cross. **Take refuge from your apathy by running to Jesus for forgiveness.** You can't know God unless you're at peace with Him....and Jesus—Himself God—is your peace! **He is GLORIOUS!**

But God doesn't just forgive our bad desires.

He also gives us a new desire to know Him—the only One who deserves our ultimate love.

If you come clean with God about how you've avoided Him and not wanted Him, He will forgive you.

And if He forgives you, do you think He'll say "no" if you ask to know Him better? I think that's a prayer God will always answer as you come to Jesus. He GIVES eternal life to all the Father has given to Him. It won't mean an easy life, but it will be GOOD. God the **Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together to bring us home. He is GLORIOUS!**

So maybe you're...

- **a Christian who deeply wants to know God better.** This passage is an encouragement: Even more than you want to know God, He wants you to know Him!
- **a Christian who’s realizing how little you want to know God.** This is convicting...so confess and know that God forgives you. You can come home! Wanting to know God isn’t **only about emotions**, but it does mean a hungry, passionate, steady pursuit of God.
- **realizing that although you thought you were a Christian, you actually have no desire for God Himself.** All you want is good things on your own terms. If this disturbs you, take refuge in the only refuge there is—Jesus Christ, who has died for His enemies to make them His friends. God alone can give you a new heart that desires to know Him! He never rejects those who take refuge in Jesus.
- **not a Christian. You don’t want to be in hell...but all you want in heaven is to be with the people you love—nothing about Jesus.** And if you don’t know God, you’ll try to fill the gap with other things...but they won’t satisfy. If this is you, hear God’s word that there is no life, love, or lasting friendship without Him. There’s only judgment, hell. **So ask Jesus to reveal Himself** to you as you begin to trust and follow Him—who alone reconciles you to God and reveals God to you. Knowing God leads to joy you can’t even imagine—that you can taste now and that you’ll experience more fully when Jesus returns!

God reconciled us to Himself while we were still his enemies. So whether or not you’re already a Christian, don’t let your lack of desire for God—or even your hatred of Him—keep you away from the good news in Jesus! **The good news is not that you wanted God, but that He wanted you—and brings you home through Jesus.**

MAKING TIME TO GET TO KNOW GOD BETTER

Practically, how to we seek to know God better?

If a husband wants to get to know and love his wife better, he’ll tell her that, but he’ll also make time for regular date nights...etc.

Francis Chan, “The Greatest Thing You Could Do Today”: “There is no substitute for being alone with God. If you don’t have time, you need to quit something to make room. Skip a meal. Cancel a meeting. End some regular commitment. There is literally nothing more important you could do today. God literally determines whether or not you take another breath. “He himself gives to all mankind life and breath and

everything” (Acts 17:25). Could anything be more important than meeting with the One who decides if you live through this day? Could anything be better? How can we not make time to be with the Maker of time? What plans do you have today that you think so important that you would race past the Creator to get to them?”

(<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-greatest-thing-you-could-do-today>)

A seminary professor of mine told about what he learned through his daughter when she was 4. Every night he would tuck her in bed, read a story, sing a song with her, and then kiss her goodnight. Then one night, he tucked her in, read a story, sang a song with her, and was about to kiss her goodnight when she looked up into his eyes and said spontaneously, “Daddy, I LOVE you!” He was on cloud nine—warmed his father’s heart. The next night, he went up, tucked her in, read a story, sang with her, and was lingering, hoping she would say she loved him again. But she just turned over, said, “G’night Dad!” and went to sleep. My professor observed how he’d been trying to capture and recreate that one special “Moment” of feeling really close to his daughter. But the reality is that we can’t force “Moments”; they come in the CONTEXT of “Habits”—like him spending that time together with his daughter every night no matter what. Trying to force the “Moment” would actually stifle the relationship instead of growing it.

And it’s similar with our relationship with God: There may be some “Moments” when we FEEL extra close to God. But those “Moments” often happen within the CONTEXT of habits—regular time with Him, listening, obeying, trusting, even when we don’t FEEL close to Him. So getting to know Him better often involves time—regular time with God even when we don’t feel close to Him.

Getting to know God involves effort and time and even the willingness to suffer. If you don’t know God, everything else will try to fill the gap (money, pleasure, friends, sports, career)—but they will never substitute for knowing Jesus. And getting to know Him takes TIME listening to God’s word and Spirit, obeying Him, and building Christ-centered relationships. And effort trusting God enough to turn from those substitutes to Him???

So this Monday when you wake up and don’t feel like reading God’s word to you or talking with him...ask Jesus to help you get to know Him. Then make time with God even if you don’t see any results—because He WILL reveal Himself to those who come to Jesus and seek Him. If you had an ambition of playing D-I sport or making a team, you’ll sacrifice towards that end even when you don’t feel like it. What greater ambition is there than to know Jesus?

And this Tuesday when you know something God wants you to do but you don't feel like obeying, remember that as you obey you might get to see God revealing His faithfulness in new ways, and obey no matter the cost...because you have the greater ambition to know and love Him.

And this Wednesday night when you realize you've gone through your whole day without even a thought of God...thank Him that He loves you even when you ignore Him—and don't go to sleep before reading a few verses from one of the gospels, the epistles, the psalms, anything. Read with the goal of getting to know your Savior better.

And this Friday when you're enjoying time with friends or family, remember that all of that enjoyment is meant to whet your taste for intimacy with God. Friends and family are great, but they can't satisfy a hunger to know God. Receive every good gift as Him saying "I love you"???, and respond by telling Him that you love Him too.

And next Sunday when you come to church but feel far from God, and your prayers seem to get lost on their way to God, trust that Jesus is powerful, and He WILL reveal God to you in time. Come, listen to His word to you, take Him at His word, be REAL with other trustworthy believers about your sins and struggles, and seek Him alongside other believers.

SENDING

God alone is all-satisfying. Do you want to know Him...or even just WANT to want to know Him? Confess any apathy, be assured of His forgiveness that is yours in Jesus, seek Him, follow Jesus, and He WILL reveal Himself to you.

In 2018, what will be your FIRST pursuit? Will it be to spend more time with family, to work out, to get up earlier, to make varsity....or will it be to know Jesus? As you taste His goodness, it will put everything else in perspective—and instead of trying to find the good life in friends, family, pleasure, or work, you'll be able to enjoy those things as gifts from the One who gives you the good life: A relationship with Himself.