

Can I Know God Personally?

John 17:1-3

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This is the last in the Explore God series on big questions. We've been trying to spark a conversation, to get people all over Texoma talking about God and faith and life. We've considered if life has a purpose and we've seen that our purpose is in being created in God's image to relate to God. We've looked at reasons for believing in God. We've struggled with the challenges that evil and suffering bring. We've wondered if Christianity is too narrow. We've explored who Jesus is and what he does. We've seen that the Bible is a reliable source and guide for exploring these and other questions. Hopefully, we've entered into this conversation and seen how it relates to us. Also, we're discovering resources that can help us share faith with others who are exploring or struggling or seeking.

Last week, after I presented some ways the Bible is reliable, some of you thanked me and said that helped you. But on Monday morning, someone stopped by the office and said, "You totally lost me yesterday! I had no idea what you were talking about." I said, "I'm sorry." This person then apologized and I said, "No, I need to know whether I'm getting through to people." We talked a little about the sermon and I suggested going to the church website and reading it. Later, this person came by again and said they had gone to the website and read the sermon twice. Then they looked up some related material on the Explore God website. A light clicked on for them at some point and they got it.

Now, I don't mean to make you work that hard to understand what I'm talking about. And I admire this person's persistence and patience. But if I can motivate people to think and pray and do some searching for themselves, I'm pleased. So if you have questions about what we've been talking about, come and visit with me. Or do some study on your own. Or get into a Sunday School class or other small group. Life in Christ is an adventure where we're always exploring, always growing, always learning.

Today's question and message deal with experiencing God and faith for ourselves: "Can I Know God Personally?" Does that question stir a

longing in you—what if I could know God personally? Or, if you're like me, your immediate response is, "Yes, we can know God personally." Now we need to ask, How? What does that look like?

John 17 is a prayer Jesus prays with and for his disciples (including us) on the night before his crucifixion. In this prayer, we see a theme that runs all through John's Gospel, and especially in chapters 13-17. Jesus reveals the Father. Jesus makes God known. He says that eternal life is *knowing God*. Eternal life is not some abstract concept in the far-off future. It's a relationship—a relationship with God whom we know through Jesus.

All through this prayer Jesus says to the Father, "I have revealed your name—I have brought you glory on earth—I have given them your word—I have made your name known."

A name represents a person. In the Bible, name is character. By making God's name known, Jesus makes God known. Jesus reveals God's character. He shows us that God *is* and that God is holy and righteous, majestic and powerful, a Father who loves and creates and redeems and heals. Jesus makes God known through his miraculous signs, his teaching, and finally, through his death and resurrection. As we come to Jesus, we can know God. And in knowing God we have eternal life.

We've said before that human beings are made in God's image. We are made to be like God in some significant ways. So, if humans are like God in some sense, when we look at humans we can get some glimpse of what God is like. Especially when we think about being personal and made for relationships, we can see that God is personal and someone to relate to.

So, what does knowing God mean? We might start by asking how we know someone. How do we know anyone? Sometimes when we say we know someone, we mean we know who they are or we know something about them. Politicians or celebrities or people in the news. Somebody asks, "Do you know so-and-so?" When we say yes, we mean we know who they're talking about. We are aware of that person.

When I was in high school, our school paper (The "Canine Capers"—we were Bulldogs) was printed in the town paper (*The Appleton City Journal*). One feature of the school paper was the "Senior Spotlight." Each week, two or three seniors were spotlighted. Along with our picture were

things like our favorite TV show, food, movie, etc. When I went to college, my folks subscribed to the *Journal* for me. The "Senior Spotlights" now featured people who were in the class behind mine. My college friends could read those and know a few facts about those people. But I knew them because I had grown up with them and gone to school with them.

As we're talking about knowing God, we're talking about knowing for ourselves, being personally acquainted, being in relationship, knowing like we know a friend, or like parents and children know each other, or like husbands and wives know each other.

The question is, can we know God *personally*? We talk about a personal relationship with God or having a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And that's vital. But we need to understand what it means. A personal relationship with God through Jesus does not mean that the relationship is self-made or self-defined. It's not that we determine what kind of relationship we have with God. We don't make it up for ourselves. We don't define the terms of the relationship.

When we talk about personal relationship with God, we mean it's not second-hand. To know God personally is to know God for ourselves, not relying on someone else's faith or knowledge. What others believe and experience can help us. But someone else's experience can't substitute for our own. We can experience God ourselves. We can know God ourselves.

How do we know God personally? We can only know God as God makes himself known. Sin has so disrupted our relationship with God and so clouded our perception that we can't figure God out or climb up to God or get in good with God by ourselves, in our own goodness and strength. God has to come to us.

Thankfully, God does come to us. God does reveal himself. We can know God because God already knows us. I recently read a description of how God's knowing us helps us know God. The Lord is a God of abundance and complete generosity. God creates and respects what he creates. We are known by God. For us to know God we need to wake up to the fact that we are already surrounded by his knowledge of us. We let God determine how we will know him. God takes the first step toward us. If we're seeking to know God who already knows us, we focus on preparing for and receiving

God's communication with us. There's a gap between God and us, but God crosses that gap by knowing us through Jesus Christ. God's self-communication is respectful and vulnerable and allows our response to matter. By honoring us this way, God makes it possible for us to honor God (Daniel Hardy and David Ford, *Praising and Knowing God* 107-08).

So, if we can only know God if God reveals himself, how does God make himself known? God makes himself known through his mighty acts, especially in the history of Israel. God makes himself known supremely in Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us about God making himself known, so it becomes part of God's revealing himself.

Where is God at work? Where is God's action visible? To see it we need to slow down and pay attention.

We need to listen. God is not silent. All over the Bible, God is speaking. God speaks creation into being. God speaks to Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham and Sarah. God spoke to Moses in a burning bush. God spoke to Balaam through the donkey Balaam was riding. If God can do that, he can speak through anybody! God called to young Samuel as he slept. God spoke to Elijah, not in the wind or fire or earthquake, but in a gentle whisper or even sheer silence.

We might think, "I wish God would speak out loud to me." But again, are we paying attention? Are we listening?

One time, Jesus prayed to the Father, asking him to glorify his name. The Father answered from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." The crowd that was there heard the voice and said, "It thundered." Others thought maybe an angel spoke to Jesus (John 12:27-29). They heard God's voice and didn't recognize it or acknowledge what God said.

How is God speaking? How is God trying to make himself known to us? How are we responding?

We know God through faith. We trust that God is real and we commit ourselves to him before we have all the answers. Then faith seeks understanding. We learn and grow and discover how real God is.

I like this story of how one person came to know God. Tatiana Goricheva was a brilliant philosophy student at a university in Russia in the 1970s. She had mostly given up on Marxist ideology. Her studies in

philosophy brought her to the brink of despair. She engaged in sophisticated academic discussions during the day and then at night would carouse and hang out with thieves and addicts. She began to explore Eastern philosophy and started practicing yoga. One day, she was wearily going through her yoga exercise and repeating mantras without pleasure. But a yoga book suggested using the "Our Father," the Lord's Prayer, as an exercise. So she began to say it as a mantra. She writes,

I said it about six times, and then I was suddenly turned inside out. I understood—not with my ridiculous understanding, but with my whole being—that he exists. He, the living, personal God, who lives in me and all creatures, who has created the world, who became a human being out of love, the crucified and risen God.

Her life changed. She gave up not only her earlier values and ideals, but also her old habits. Her heart was opened and she started to love people. Joy began to fill her. She entered into Christian community. And, she suffered for her faith (this was Russia in the 1970s). She eventually went into exile in Western Europe. She wonders how she could have overlooked God's presence before. (This story is re-told in James Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?* 192-95)

I hope you're still praying the Lord's Prayer at noon every day. There's no telling what will happen.

Some of us come to know God in dramatic, powerful ways like Tatiana Goricheva or Saul of Tarsus. Some of us come to know God more gradually and gently. I've told my story before, but it's the one I know best. Since I was very young, I've known about God. The church and the Bible and Christian faith have always been my frame of reference. When I was around eleven or twelve, it started to become more personal. I realized I was being called to make a commitment, to believe, to experience salvation for myself. I prayed a simple prayer inviting Jesus into my heart. Later, I was baptized and joined the church. Still later, I prayed to be filled with the Holy Spirit so I'd have power to witness and live as a Christian. I discovered that reading and studying the Bible and theology helps me grow. Sharing what I

learn is one way to serve and witness. How did you first come to know God? How are you growing? Are you getting to know him better?

At the end of John 17, Jesus prays, "I have made you known *and will continue to make you known.*" Knowing God is not a one-time thing where we say, "O.K. I got that done." It's an adventure. We have barely started exploring God. We will spend eternity getting to know God better. But it starts now and then we keep growing. This relationship gets deeper and fuller and broader. God aims to take in all of our life and for every area of life to be devoted to him.

Bob Benson had finished preaching a sermon where he felt he laid out the truth precisely and powerfully. He had told about how as a teenager he had come to know Jesus and how he had walked with him for thirty years and that the relationship just kept growing sweeter and richer. After the service, an elderly woman said to him, "Thirty years? You're just beginning to get to know Jesus, son" (*Something's Going on Here* 148).

Our family's favorite version of *A Christmas Carol* is the *The Muppet's Christmas Carol*. Michael Caine does a great job as Scrooge. When The Ghost of Christmas Present appears to Scrooge, the ghost says, "Come in and know me better, man!" Isn't that God's invitation to us? "Come in and know me better." We respond to God's invitation. We can know God because God already knows us.

We know God directly—as the Holy Spirit is in us and gives witness that we are God's children.

We know God through Scripture. Reading the Bible, discussing the Bible, hearing it preached, studying it are all means of grace that help us grow.

We know God by prayer. Relationships need conversation to be healthy and alive and growing. Prayer is our conversation with God.

We know God in community. We need to know God *for* ourselves, but not *by* ourselves. Knowing God broadens us to know other people. We love God by loving each other.

We know God in service. As we give ourselves away in serving others, we discover that God is in that. We're just joining God in the work he's already doing.

Have you come to know this loving, faithful, living God? Are you experiencing eternal life as you know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent? Is Jesus continuing to make God known to you through the Holy Spirit? Are you getting to know Jesus better? God knows you and wants you to know him. Will you say yes to that relationship?

Explore God Additional Resources

Websites

www.exploregod.com

<http://ntwrightpage.com/> (N. T. Wright, an outstanding New Testament scholar)

<http://philipyancey.com/>

<http://reknew.org/blog/> (Greg Boyd, pastor and author)

<http://seedbed.com/> (numerous resources from Asbury Theological Seminary)

<http://wesley.nnu.edu/> (extensive Wesleyan resources)

<http://wesleyanaccent.seedbed.com/>

Books (all are available at www.amazon.com)

Gregory Boyd, *Letters from a Skeptic; Is God to Blame?*

E. Stanley Jones, *The Divine Yes*

C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity; The Problem of Pain*

Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Exposing Myths About Christianity*

James W. Sire, *Why Should Anyone Believe Anything at All?*

James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful God*

Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ; The Case for Faith*

Robert G. Tuttle, Jr., *Shortening the Leap: From Honest Doubt to Enduring Faith*

Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God; The Jesus I Never Knew; Reaching for the Invisible God; Where Is God When It Hurts?*