

Knowing and Being Known

By

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Chapter 3 of Knowing God

What were we made for? To know God.

What aim should we set ourselves in life? To Know God.

What is the “eternal life” that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. “This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God. “This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me’” (Jer. 9:23-24).

What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of himself. “I desired.....the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings,” says God (Hosea 6:6).

In these few sentences we have said a very great deal. Our point is one to which every Christian heart will warm, though, the person whose religion is merely formal will not be moved by it. (And by this very fact his unregenerate state may be known.) What we have said provides at once a foundation, shape and goal for our lives, plus a principle of priorities and a scale of values.

Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life’s problems fall into place of their own accord. The world today is full of sufferers from the wasting disease which Albert Camus focused on as absurdism (“life is a bad joke”), and from the complaint which we may call Marie Antoinette’s fever, since she found the phrase that describes it (“nothing tastes”). These disorders blight the whole of life: everything becomes at once a problem and a bore, because nothing seems worthwhile. But absurdist tapeworms and Antoinette’s fever are ills from which, in the nature of the case, Christians are immune, except for occasional spells of derangement when the power of temptation presses their minds out of shape—and these, by God’s mercy, do not last.

What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance, and this the Christian has in a way that no other person has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?

From another standpoint, however, we have not as yet said very much. When we speak of knowing God, we are using a verbal formula, and formulas are like checks; they are no good unless we know how to cash them. What are we talking about when we use the phrase knowing God? A special sort of emotion? Shivers down the back? A dreamy, off-the ground, floating feeling? Tingling thrills and exhilaration, such as drug takers seek? Or is knowing God a special sort of intellectual experience? Does one hear a voice? See a vision? Find strange trains of thought coursing through one’s mind? Or what? These matters need discussing, especially since, according to Scripture, this is a region in which it is easy

to be fooled, and to think you know God when you do not. We pose the question, then: what sort of activity, or event, it is that can properly be described as “knowing God”?

What Knowing God Involves

It is clear, to start with, that “knowing” God is of necessity a more complex business than “knowing” another person, just as “knowing” my neighbor is a more complex business than “knowing” a house, or a book, or a language. The more complex the object, the more complex is the knowing of it. Knowledge of something abstract, like a language, is acquired by learning; knowledge of something inanimate, like Ben Nevis or the British Museum, comes by inspection and exploration. These activities, though demanding in terms of concentrated effort, are relatively simple to describe. But when one gets to living things, knowing them becomes a good deal more complicated. One does not know a living thing till one knows not merely its past history but how it is likely to react and behave under specific circumstances. A person who says, “I know this horse” normally means not just “I have seen it before” (though, the way we use words, he might mean only that); more probably, however, he means “I know how it behaves, and can tell you how it ought to be handled.” Such knowledge comes only through some prior acquaintance with the horse, seeing it in action and trying to handle it oneself.

In the case of human beings, the position is further complicated by the fact that, unlike horses, people keep secrets. They do not show everybody all that is in their hearts. A few days are enough to get to know a horse as well as you will ever know it, but you may spend months and years doing things in company with another person and still have to say at the end of that time, “I don’t really know him at all.” We recognize degrees in our knowledge of our fellow men. We know them, we say, well, not very well, just to shake hands with, intimately, or perhaps inside out, according to how much, or how little, they have opened up to us.

Thus, the quality and extent of our knowledge of other people depends more on them than on us. Our knowing them is more directly the result of their allowing us to know them than of our attempting to get to know them. When we meet, our part is to give them our attention and interest, to show them good will and to open up in a friendly way from our side. From that point, however, it is they, not we, who decide whether we are going to know them or not.

Imagine, now that we are going to be introduced to someone whom we feel to be “above” us—whether in a rank, or intellectual distinction, or professional skill, or personal sanctity, or in some other respect. The more conscious we are of our own inferiority, the more we shall feel that our part is simply to attend to this person respectfully and let him take the initiative in the conversation. (Think of meeting the queen of England or the president of the United States.) We would like to get to know this exalted person, but we fully realize that this is a matter for him to decide not us. If he confines himself to courteous formalities with us, we may be disappointed, but we do not feel able to complain; after all, we had no claim on his friendship.

But if instead he starts at once to take us into his confidence, and tells us frankly what is in his mind on matters of common concern, and if he goes on to invite us to join him in particular undertakings he has planned and asks us to make ourselves permanently available for this kind of collaboration whenever he needs us, then we shall feel enormously privileged, and it will make a world of difference to our general outlook. If life seemed unimportant and dreary hitherto, it will not seem so

anymore now that the great man has enrolled us among his personal assistants. Here is something to write home about—and something to live up to!

Now this, so far as it goes, is an illustration of what it means to know God. Well might God say through Jeremiah, “Let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me”—for knowing God is a relationship calculated to thrill a person’s heart.

What happens is that the almighty Creator, the Lord of hosts, the great God before whom the nations are as a drop in a bucket, comes to you and begins to talk to you through the words and truth of Holy Scripture. Perhaps you have been acquainted with the Bible and Christian truth for many years, and it has meant little to you; but one day you wake up to the fact that God is actually speaking to you—you!—through the biblical message. As you listen to what God is saying, you find yourself brought very low; for God talks to you about your sin and guilt and weakness, and blindness, and folly, and compels you to judge yourself hopeless and helpless, and to cry out for forgiveness.

But this is not all. You come to realize as you listen that God is actually opening his heart to you, making friends with you and enlisting you as a colleague—in Barth’s phrase, a covenant partner. It is a staggering thing, but it is true—the relationship in which sinful human beings know God is one in which God, so to speak, takes them onto his staff, to be henceforth his fellow workers (see I Cor. 3:9) and personal friends. The action of God taking Joseph from prison to become Pharaoh’s prime minister is a picture of what he does to every Christian: from being Satan’s prisoner, you find yourself transferred to a position of trust in the service of God. At once life is transformed.

Whether being a servant is a matter for shame or for pride depends on whose servant one is. Many have said what pride they felt in rendering personal service to Sir Winston Churchill during World War II. How much more should it be a matter of pride and glorying to know and serve the Lord of heaven and earth!

What, then does the activity of knowing God involve? Holding together the various elements involved in this relationship, as we have sketched it out, we must say that knowing God involves, first, listening to God’s Word, and receiving it as the Holy Spirit interprets it, in application to oneself; second, noting God’s nature and character, as his Word and works reveal it; third, accepting his invitation and doing what he commands, fourth, recognizing and rejoicing in the love that he has shown in thus approaching you and drawing you into this divine fellowship.

Knowing Jesus

The Bible puts flesh on these bare bones of ideas by using pictures and analogies. It tells us that we know God in the manner of a son knowing his father, a wife knowing her husband, a subject knowing his king and a sheep knowing its shepherd (these are the four main analogies employed). All four analogies point to a relation in which the Knower “looks up” to the one known, and the latter takes responsibility for the welfare of the former. This is part of the biblical concept of knowing God, that those who know him—that is, those by whom he allows himself to be known—are loved and cared for by him. We shall say more of this in a moment.

Then the Bible adds the further point that we know God in this way only through knowing Jesus Christ, who is himself God manifest in the flesh. “Don’t you know me...? Anyone who has seen me has

seen the Father”; “no one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn. 14:9,6). It is important, therefore, that we should be clear in our minds as to what knowing Jesus Christ means.

For if earthly disciples, knowing Jesus was directly comparable to knowing the great man in our illustration. The disciples were ordinary Galileans with no special claims on the interest of Jesus. But Jesus, the rabbi who spoke with authority, the prophet who was more than a prophet, the master who evoked in them increasing awe and devotion till they could not but acknowledge him as their God, found them, called them to himself, took them into his confidence and enrolled them as his agents to declare to the world the kingdom of God. “He appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out to preach” (MK 3:14). They recognized the one who had chosen them and called them friends as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16), the man born to be King, the bearer of “the words of eternal life” (JN. 6:68). And the sense of allegiance and privilege which this knowledge brought transformed their whole lives.

Now, when the New Testament tells us that Jesus Christ is risen, one of the things it means is that the victim of Calvary is now, so to speak, loose and at large, so that anyone anywhere can enjoy the same kind of relationship with him as the disciples had in the days of his flesh.

The only differences are that, first, his presence with the Christian is spiritual, not bodily, and so invisible to our physical eyes; second the Christian, building on the New Testament witness, knows from the start those truths about the deity and atoning sacrifice of Jesus which the original disciples grasped only gradually, over a period of years and, third, that Jesus’ way of speaking to us now is not by uttering fresh words, but rather by applying to our consciences those words of his that are recorded in the Gospels, together with the rest of the biblical testimony to himself. But knowing Jesus Christ still remains as definite a relation of personal discipleship as it was for the Twelve when he was on earth. The Jesus who walks through the gospel story walks with Christians, now, and knowing him involves going with him, now as then.

“My sheep listen to my voice,” says Jesus; “I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). His “voice” is his claim, his promise and his call. “I am the bread of life...the gate for the sheep....the good shepherd....the resurrection” (Jn. 6:35; 10:7, 14; 11:25). “He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears my words and believes him who sent me, has eternal life” (John 5:23-24). “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me and you will find rest” (Matthew 11:28-29).

Jesus’ voice is “heard” when Jesus’ claim is acknowledged, his promise trusted and his call answered. From then on, Jesus is known as shepherd and those who trust him he knows as his own sheep. “I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27-28). To know Jesus is to be saved by Jesus, here and hereafter, from sin, and guilt, and death.

A Personal Matter

Standing back, now, to survey what we have said that it means to “know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent,” we may underline the following points.

First, Knowing God is a matter of personal dealing, as is all direct acquaintance with personal beings. Knowing God is more than knowing about him; it is a matter of dealing with him as he opens up

to you, and being dealt with by him as he takes knowledge of you. Knowing about him is a necessary precondition of trusting in him (“how could they have faith in one they had never heard of?” [Romans 10:14]), but the width of our knowledge about him is no gauge of the depth of our knowledge of him.

John Owen and John Calvin knew more theology than John Bunyan or Billy Bray, but who would deny that the latter pair knew their God every bit as well as the former? (All four, of course, were beavers for the Bible, which counts for far more anyway than a formal theological training.) If the decisive factor was notional correctness, then obviously the most learned biblical scholars would know God better than anyone else. But it is not; you can have all the right notions in your head without ever tasting in your heart the realities to which they refer; and a simple Bible reader and sermon hearer who is full of the Holy Spirit will develop a far deeper acquaintance with his God and Savior than a more learned scholar who is content with being theologically correct. The reason is that the former will deal with God regarding the practical application of truth to his life, whereas the latter will not.

Second, knowing God is a matter of personal involvement—mind, will and feeling. It would not, indeed, be a fully personal relationship otherwise. To get to know another person, you have to commit yourself to his company and interests, and be ready to identify yourself with his concerns. Without this, your relationship with him can only be superficial and flavorless.

“Taste and see that the LORD is good,” says the psalmist (Psalm 34:8). To “taste” is, as we say, to “try” a mouthful of something, with a view to appreciating its flavor. A dish may look good, and be well recommended by the cook, but we do not know its real quality till we have tasted it.

Similarly, we do not know another person’s real quality till we have “tasted” the experience of friendship. Friends are, so to speak, communicating flavors to each other all the time, by sharing their attitudes both toward each other (think of people in love) and toward everything else that is of common concern. As they thus open their hearts to each other by what they say and do, each “tastes” the quality of the other, for sorrow or for joy. They have identified themselves with, and so are personally and emotionally involved in, each other’s concerns. They feel for each other, as well as thinking of each other. This is an essential aspect of the knowledge, which friends have of each other; and the same applies to the Christian’s knowledge of God, which, as we have seen, is itself a relationship between friends.

The emotional side of knowing God is often played down these days, for fear of encouraging a maudlin self-absorption. It is true that there is nothing more irreligious than self-absorbed religion, and that it is constantly needful to stress that God does not exist for our comfort or happiness or satisfaction, or to provide us with “religious experiences,” as if these were the most interesting and important things in life.

It is also necessary to stress that anyone who, on the basis of “religious experiences,” “says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:4; compare vv.9, 11; 3:6, 11, 4:20).

But, for all this, we must not lose sight of the fact that knowing God is an emotional relationship, as well as an intellectual and volitional one, and could not indeed be a deep relation between person were it not so. The believer is, and must be, emotionally involved in the victories and vicissitudes of God’s cause in the world, just as Sir Winston’s personal staff were emotionally involved in the ups and

downs of the war. Believers rejoice when their God is honored and vindicated and feel the acutest distress when they see God flouted.

When Barnabas came to Antioch “and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad” (Acts 11:23). By contrast, the psalmist wrote: “Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed” (Ps 119:136). Equally, Christians feel shame and grief when convicted of having failed their Lord (see, for instance, Ps 51 and Luke 22:61-62) and from time to time know transports of delight as God brings home to them in one way or another the glory of the everlasting love with which he has been loved (“transported with a joy too great for words” [1 Peter 1:8]).

This is the emotional and experiential side of friendship with God. Ignorance of it argues that, however true a person’s thoughts of God may be, he does not yet know the God of whom he is thinking.

Third, knowing God is a matter of grace. It is a relationship in which the initiative throughout is with God—as it must be, since God is so completely above us and we have so completely forfeited all claim on his favor by our sins.

We do not make friends with God; God makes friends with us, bringing us to know him by making his love known to us. Paul expresses this thought of the priority of grace in our knowledge of God when he writes to the Galatians, “Now that you know God—or rather are known by God” (Gal. 4:9). What comes to the surface in this qualifying clause is the apostle’s sense that grace came first, and remains fundamental, in his readers’ salvation. Their knowing God was the consequence of God’s taking knowledge of them. They know him by faith because he first singled them out by grace.

The word know, when used of God in this way, is a sovereign-grace word, pointing to God’s initiative in loving, choosing, redeeming, calling and preserving. That God is fully aware of us, “knowing us through and through” as we say, is certainly part of what is meant, as appears from the contrast between our imperfect knowledge of God and his perfect knowledge of us in 1 Corinthians 13:12. But it is not the main meaning. The main meaning comes out in passages like the following:

“And the LORD said to Moses, ‘I am pleased with you and I know you by name’” (Exodus 33:17). “Before I formed you (Jeremiah) in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart” (Jer. 1:5). “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me....I lay down my life for the sheep....My sheep listen to my voice; I know them....They shall never perish” (John 10:14-15, 27-28). Here God’s knowledge of those who are his is associated with his whole purpose of saving mercy. It is a knowledge that implies personal affection, redeeming action, covenant faithfulness and providential watchfulness toward those whom God knows. It implies, in other words, salvation, now and forever, as we hinted before.

Being Known

What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters.

This is momentous knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort—the sort of comfort that energizes, be it said, not enervates—in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench his determination to bless me.

There is, certainly great cause for humility in the thought that he sees all the twisted things about that my fellow humans do not see (and am I glad!), and that he sees more corruption in me than that which I see in myself (which, in all conscience, is enough). There is, however, equally great incentive to worship and love God in the thought that, for some unfathomable reason, he wants me as his friend, and desires to be my friend, and has given his Son to die for me in order to realize this purpose. We cannot work these thoughts out here, but merely to mention them is enough to show how much it means to know not merely that we know God, but that he knows us.

Discussion:

1. Read aloud the first five paragraphs on page 1. What should be our purpose in life?
2. What did affect did those five paragraphs on you?
3. Why are Christians immune from Absurdist tapeworms and Antoinette's fever?
4. What does it mean to *know* someone?
5. Under the heading "What Knowing God Involves" how does Packer illustrates our relationship with God? Do you think it is a good analogy? Why or why not?
6. What happens when the Almighty Creator, "before whom the nations are as a drop in a bucket," breaks through to an individual and speaks to him personally? Are you thrilled at being God's covenant partner?
7. What four things does the activity of knowing God involve?
8. What four analogies does the Bible use to describe our relationship with God? What do they have in common?
9. How is a contemporary Christian's relationship with Jesus different from the relationship Jesus' first disciples had with him? How is it the same?
10. What does it mean to say that Knowing God is a matter "of personal dealing"? of personal involvement"? "of grace"?
11. Why is the fact that God knows us more important than the fact that we know God?
12. What does it mean to know God?