

Knowing the Unseen God • John 1:18

Dinner was over and all the guests moved from the dining room table to the living room. They were all casual acquaintances. They had known each other's names and a little bit about background and family, but the hostess wanted them to get better acquainted. So she started a sharing conversation that was meant to include everyone in the room. Each person was asked to tell about his or her greatest experience or greatest goal in life.

After a long pause, Bill began. He told about winning a bronze medal in the 1964 Olympics. That got the conversation started. Mary was next. She was in a doctoral program, seeking her PhD. She was near the end and was looking forward to the day of graduation. Tom couldn't think of anything, so eventually they skipped him. Rosemary recalled the day she was married and all the joy that had come from her marriage and family. Karen and Kevin didn't hesitate a moment in reviewing their conversion to Jesus Christ just 18 months earlier and how Jesus Christ had changed their lives.

What would you have said if you had been at that dinner party? Perhaps, having been caught off-guard, you wouldn't have said anything too profound. But, suppose you had a little time to think about it. What would you say is the most important experience or goal in all of life? What would you say is more important than anything else?

If you really thought about it, I hope you would say that more important than anything else in life is to know God, that knowing God is the greatest ecstasy, the greatest fulfillment, the greatest goal in life. Knowing God is the reaching of life's noblest purposes.

Knowing God is so all-important because God is our Creator. God is the one who answers our prayers and fulfills our dreams. God is the epitome of love, holiness, goodness, righteousness and everything else that is important. He is the only one who can make our lives complete and right . . . the way they were designed to be.

We can test and try lots of other goals and purposes but there is no way that anything else can or will come even close to the reality of knowing God! To know God is the greatest purpose of life!

That's what the evangelist John was driving at when he wrote in John 1:18, "*No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.*"

Backtrack with me for a moment. If you agree that to know God is the greatest purpose of life then you see immediately that there is a problem. The problem is right at the beginning of verse 18. It is that no one has ever seen God, spiritually or physically.

Early in my ministry there was an elderly man in the church who was convinced that God the Father has a physical body. He was adamant about

this and quite sure that I was a heretic. He came to my ordination council to speak his piece. He wrote letters to area pastors and even authored a book and paid to have it published. He couldn't be persuaded by the vast volume of scripture. He ignored the fact that we are told in John 4:24 that "*God is spirit*" and later in the gospel of John and elsewhere in the New Testa-

ment that a spirit does not have flesh and bones. He gave no credence to 1 Timothy 1:17 where we read that God is invisible. And he wouldn't listen to John 5:37 that says, "*You have never heard his voice nor seen his form.*"

God is the epitome of love, holiness, goodness, righteousness and everything else that is important. He is the only one who can make our lives complete and right... the way they were designed to be.

You may say, “What about Old Testament appearances of God?” There is an important biblical teaching here that we need to understand. Throughout the Old Testament we find what are called theophanies. A theophany is God temporarily taking on some kind of a physical form for an accommodating appearance to his human creatures.

Do you remember in Exodus 3 when “*the angel of the Lord appeared to (Moses) in flames of fire from within a bush?*” He heard God’s voice tell him to take off his shoes because he was on holy ground. Then, “*Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.*” That was a theophany. God is neither an angel nor a burning bush but he took on a temporary physical appearance for communication purposes.

In Exodus 33 Moses was on top of the mountain and he had to be hidden in the crevice of the rock away from the glory of God, but we are told that he saw the back of God. In Daniel 3 God took on a temporary physical form to appear with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the fiery furnace. And, in Genesis 32, God took on a temporary physical form to wrestle all night with Jacob by the brook Jabok until finally Jacob was touched and blessed. All of these are theophanies.

God has taken on temporary physical appearances in the past, but that’s not the essence of God. John 1:18 teaches that no one has seen God as he really is. No one could because the reality and essence of God the Father is that he is invisible; he is Spirit; he is un-seeable by anyone ever.

We might talk to a blind person who, in the course of conversation will say, “I see what you mean.” Or, a blind person might say, “I’ll see you later.” At first that may make us a little uncomfortable, but then we understand that the word “see” also means “to know”.

What John was here teaching was that up to that time absolutely no one had even seen God in the sense of understanding and comprehending him as he really is. What a tragedy because the greatest purpose, joy and fulfillment of life is to know God. And now we are being told that all those things are being deprived from us because God cannot be seen or known.

To this first point of John 1:18 the Greek philosophers could agree. Plato wrote that never man and God can meet. Celsus laughed at the way Christians called God “Father” because “God is always beyond everything.” And Apuleius said that men could perhaps catch a glimpse of God like one sees a streak of lightning flash across the sky . . . a split second of illumination followed by darkness.

What a problem! No one has ever seen God!

But there is a solution. The solution to the problem is that Jesus Christ makes God known. We’ve said it before in the study of earlier verses: If you want to see God, look at Jesus Christ. If you want to know God, know Jesus Christ. Now we are told why the unseen God can be known through Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is unique and divine. The verse uses the Greek word *monogenes* which means “unique” or “one of a kind”. We are not here being taught that Jesus had a birth-type beginning as the Son of God but rather that he is the only one of his kind. It means that Jesus Christ is the unique Son of God.

But there is something even more fascinating here. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible has a footnote reference by the word “Son” in verse 18 that says “other ancient authorities read God”. Many of the oldest and best manuscripts of the book of John use the word *theos* instead of *uios*. But whichever word is used the clear teaching of this whole chapter is that Jesus is unique because Jesus Christ is God.

Jesus Christ is the person of the trinity who left heaven to become human so that we could know God. In fact, the only way we can ever know God is through Jesus Christ.

Other religions are only quests for God. The Christian faith is far more than a human attempt to reach God. It is the revelation of God’s making himself known to us.

Do you see the practical sense of it? Fulfillment of life comes only in knowing God, but we are unable to know God. So, God became man so that he could be known to us. The sole route to fulfillment in life is by knowing God through Jesus Christ.

The translation we use today says “*who is at the Father’s side*”. Another translation says, “. . . who is in the bosom of the Father”. This is an old Hebrew expression that was used to describe the very closest of relationships. They used it to describe the communion of a mother and a child, a husband and wife, the very closest of friends.

Jesus has the very closest relationship with God the Father. It is closer than we will ever understand or be able to describe. Their communication, their contact, their conversation is the eternal ultimate of intimacy!

This same Jesus who is unique, divine and intimate with God the Father is our Savior, our Friend, our Lord, our Lover, our Confidant and our way of truly knowing and loving God. To know Jesus Christ is to know God!

Alfred Edward Housman was an English poet and pessimist who died in 1936. A few lines from

***If you want to see God, look at
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God, know Jesus Christ.***

one of his poems have intrigued me for a long time because I think he captures the frustrations and fears of his fellow men, not just in the early 1900s, but for all time. He wrote:

And how am I to face the odds
Of man’s bedevilment and God’s?
I, a stranger and afraid
In a world I never made.

Maybe you have wondered how you can face the formidable odds. Maybe you sense that you are a stranger in a world that you never made.

I think that you and I know all too well the problem. But now we claim the solution to facing life. The solution of making it in the world, the solution to fulfillment, the solu-

tion to life is to know God through Jesus Christ. That is the greatest and highest goal in life!

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