

Knowing God

Once upon a time, long ago and far away, there were two people, a man and a woman, who had it all. Adam and Eve lived in a perfect paradise where God was their personal friend. But, as astonishing as it may seem, they were not satisfied with perfection. They wanted to experiment with the one thing about which they knew nothing, and that was sin.

What they discovered was that it was nothing like they thought it would be. For when they lifted the lid to see what sin was like, to their horror, all kinds of awful things burst out, like sickness, pain, misery, loneliness and death. They reached and they grabbed and they tried to push the lid back down again, but it was too late. The world could never again be the same. It was, without a doubt, one of the most horrible moments in all of history.

It was not until later that they discovered the very worst part of it. For not only had they gained the horrors of sin, they had lost their relationship with God. It was the greatest loss humankind has ever experienced. It was a loss that people have tried to regain ever since.

Many, quite logically, have tried to restore that relationship through religion . . . Hebrew and Hindu, Muslim and Mormon, Animalist and Buddhist and Christian as well, looking to restore that relationship with God through rituals, sacrifices, liturgies and creeds. Some people try monasteries, some people try crowds, some books, some penance.

Others don't even know what or who they are looking for. They just somehow sense that there is something missing in life. They try everything from education to sex and from hard work to hard drugs. Yet, nothing quite seems to satisfy. Nothing ever seems to be right.

The truth is that what we are missing is knowing God. And until we regain what Adam and Eve lost, nothing else will ever satisfy or suffice.

I suppose you might compare it to a mother whose child is lost. She will never be satisfied, never content, never complete until her baby is back. You may offer her possessions or friendship or even a huge sum of money, but you know in advance what her response will be. She wants her child back. Nothing else will begin to satisfy the longing that she has for the child that she misses.

So it is for us, only the one we need is God.

Suppose that God were to come here today. Let me read to you from Isak Dinesen's, *OUT OF AFRICA*. It tells the story of her Kenyan cook, Kamante, and it reads like this:

One night after midnight, he (Kamante) suddenly walked into my bedroom with a hurricane-lamp in his hand, silent, as if on duty. It must have been only a short time after he came into my house, for he was very small; he stood by my bedside like a dark bat that had strayed into the room, with very big spreading ears, or like a small African Willow-the-wisp, with his lamp in his hand. He spoke to me very solemnly, "Msabu," he

said, "I think you had better get up." I sat up in bed bewildered; I thought that if anything serious had happened, it would have been Farah who would have come to

fetch me, but when I told Kamante to go away again, he did not move. "Msabu," he said again, "I think that you had better get up. I think that God is coming." When I heard this, I did get up, and asked why he thought so. He gravely led me into the dining-room which looked West, toward the hills. From the door-windows I now saw a strange phenomenon. There was a big grass-fire going on, out in the hills, and the grass burning all the way from the hill-top to the plain; and when seen from the house it was nearly a vertical line. It did indeed look as if some

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gigantic figure was moving and coming toward us. I stood for some time and looked at it, with Kamante watching by my side, then I began to explain the thing to him. I meant to quiet him for I thought that he had been terribly frightened. But the explanation did not seem to make much impression on him one way or the other; he clearly took his mission to have been fulfilled when he had called me. "Well, yes," he said, "it maybe so. But I thought that you had better get up in case it was God coming."

What if God were to show up today? What would he look like? What would he say? Would he be a column of fire, white hot and brilliant? Would he look like a man, but unlike any other man we've ever seen? Perhaps he would appear like a fog or mist to fill the room like the vapor over a marsh on a summer morning. Would his voice boom or whisper? Would our hearts soar with excitement or stop with fear?

Let me tell you a few things of which I am sure. The experience would be unlike any experience that anyone alive has ever had before. Our minds would not wander in the least. Our attention would be 100 percent. Every other issue of life, no matter how pressing it had seemed, would at that moment be comparatively unimportant. This day, this date, this experience would become the most lasting and memorable experience of all of our entire lives. If we saw and heard and knew God here today, we could never again be the same.

But is such a thing possible? Could we mortals ever really see God face-to-face? Let me give you four answers, all of which are about experiencing and knowing God.

The first is that God is very different. In fact, he is so different that he is not like anything we know.

How could you describe a Beluga whale to an African army ant that has never seen the sea or a fish? Or how do you explain snow to a tribesman of some tropical village who has never even been cold?

We are creatures. God is the Creator. We are mortal. God is immortal. We are finite. God is infinite.

As the prophet asked in Isaiah 40:18, "To whom then, will you compare God? What image will you compare him to?" This is precisely why idolatry is so sinful and stupid. Every time anyone tries to make a statue or a painting or a totem look like God, it is always completely wrong. This is why we tell little children that their drawings of God won't work. Every drawing, every idea, is made far more of our imagination than anything related to the true God.

God is just too different, too unlike us. Comprehending God is like drinking the ocean or visiting the sun . . . even if we could do it, we would die in the process. Yet, we keep trying because we understand that knowing God is very important.

In fact, nothing is more important. We are designed to know God much as an airplane is designed to fly. Without God we are incomplete. Something is always missing. Knowing God brings the only absolute and ultimate satisfaction there is.

Jesus himself prayed in John 17:3 that the only way we can ever have eternal life is to "know the only true God."

I give to you two illustrations of the importance of knowing God. The first is for the philosophical types and the second is for the practical types.

Existentialism has been a powerful 19th and 20th century philosophy with such famous writers as Soren Kirkegaard, Albert Camus and John Paul Sartre. It teaches that every one of us is alone and every one of us is responsible and that life is understood in terms of experiences – and that eventually everything comes to death. And death must be faced *alone* (no one can share death).

When we do all face death, nothing is more important than knowing God. Whatever seems more important now will be totally unimportant then.

During the first year Charleen and I were married, my parents bought and sent to us a cuckoo clock from Berchtesgaden, Germany. I hung it on the living room wall and attached the weights . . . and they dropped straight to the floor

as the clock ticked like a machine gun, the hands spun like a fan and the bird set a world record for the number of “cuckoos” in ten seconds. I tried to fix it but couldn’t. A local clockmaker couldn’t fix it either. The only solution was to return it to the German who made it in the first place because he was the only one who knew how.

We are like that clock - too broken inside either to work right on the outside or get fixed by anybody around us. We need to go back to the God who made us. We need to know God or we will never get fixed or work right.

Knowing God is very important. But there is only one way that we will ever know him. He must tell us. He has to come to meet us. The good news is that he has! God has revealed himself to us. And he has done it in three different ways.

The first way God has revealed himself to us is through creation. We can know God through the things he has made much as we can know an artist through his paintings . . . not well, not intimately, but we can still know him.

So God has revealed himself through a second means and that is through the Bible. God has told us so much more about himself through the Bible. We can see how he relates, hear what he says, learn much about who he is. It’s like reading a biography or a whole truck-full of personal letters. Not the same as face-to-face, but still very good!

But God has revealed himself in a third way, and that is the best of all. God became human. We could not reach him, and so he came to us. He lived on our earth and spoke our language. He died our death to pay for our sin so that we could know God personally and live with him eternally.

Some people may say, “That is not the way I want it. I want to see God. I want him to show up so that I can look at him face-to-face. I want him to speak out loud to me here and now. I want to know him the way I want to know him.”

Listen carefully: God says in Psalm 46:10,

“Be still and know that I am God.”

God is God, not us! He calls the shots. He sets the terms. God shows himself as he chooses and when he chooses. The miracle of all miracles is that God has revealed himself at all . . . and that therefore we may know God.

Charleen and I never met. At least I never remember meeting her. Because she is slightly older than I am, she was already here when I was born. So, in a sense, I have always known her. I cannot remember a time in my life when I did not know her. But I never particularly noticed her until I was about 14 years old. She didn’t pay much attention to me until I reached her height. Then we started dating the month I turned 15. I asked her to marry me years later on December 18, 1964. We were married the following June 18th. And for over 35 years I have come to know her better and better.

There is a mystery to the intimacy of the way two people know each other in a marriage. It is

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forged in the best of times and in the worst of times. I have come to know her as a friend, as a high school sweetheart, as a college classmate. I have come to know her as

a distant correspondent through many hundreds of letters. I have come to know her in the intimacy of marriage. Through the years we have laughed together until we thought we would burst. We have shared pain and cried in ways no one else can ever know. I know her in the delivery room as our children were born. I know her in two overseas wars as we held hands together when the bullets were flying outside and peoples lives were being taken. I know her well, but there is still so much more to know.

And so it is with God. Some of us never remember a day when God’s name was not spoken around us. We grew up with him. But there had to come a time of personal commitment on a date as definite as the 18th of June. On that day we agreed to his terms, confessed our sins and accepted his Son as our Savior and Lord. On that

day we exchanged vows: he promised to forgive our sins and love us forever in heaven; we promised to love him and obey him forever.

Through the years we have gotten to know him better . . . in the best of times and in the worst of times. We have learned more about him - sometimes through pain, sometimes through pleasure, through delight as well as difficulty. We have learned that he is a fantastic lover, a generous friend, but also that he is a Master who expects our loyalty, faithfulness and obedience.

We have met him and gotten to know him through the pages of his book, the Bible. We have come to know him through the conversations of prayer and through baptism and communion and through the experience of being at the bedside of a dying child or a party of Christian friends.

Sometimes we have ignored him and even been unfaithful to him, but he has still loved us. We have come to know him far better, but there is so much more, an eternity's worth, still to know.

St. Paul said it well in I Corinthians 13:12, "Now we see but a poor 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."

My friend, there is nothing better, nothing more important, than knowing God.

As the poet Martin Luther Long tells it:

I had walked life's way with an easy tread,
had followed where pleasures and comforts led.

Until one day, in a quiet place –
when I met the Master face-to-face.

With station and rank and wealth for my goal—
much thought for my body, but none for my soul,

I had entered to win in life's big race –
when I met the Master face-to-face.

I had built my castles and raised them high,
with their towers had pierced the blue of the sky.

I had sworn to rule with an iron mace,
when until I met the Master face-to-face.

Met him and knew him and blushed to see
that his eyes full of sorrow were fixed on me.

And I faltered and fell at his feet that day,
while my castles melted and vanished away.

Melted and vanished, and in their place,
nought else could I see but the Master's face.

And I cried aloud, "Oh make me mete
to follow the steps of Thy wounded feet.

My thoughts are now for the souls of men.
I lost my life, only to find it again.

E're since that day in a quiet place,
when I met the Master face-to-face.

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