

To Know Him . . .

In our house group in the last few weeks, we have been looking at the book of Hebrews and seeing some of the exciting links to the Old Testament that show us more of what it really means to have been brought into new life in Jesus.

One of the passages that always shines out to me is **Hebrews 8:8-12**, which is a direct quotation from **Jeremiah 31:31-34**. (Read it!) When the LORD gave these words to Jeremiah, it was in the midst of troubled times. The ten tribes of the kingdom of Israel had already been taken off into Assyria and Nebuchadnezzar was just about to take the king of Judah and the people of the remaining two tribes off to Babylon for 70 years of exile. And yet, in the midst of all this 'ethnic cleansing', the LORD does not just speak about restoration – that would have been amazing enough – but about something totally new. Right at the heart of it is the promise that all his people will know him.

Throughout the Old Testament, especially from the birth of the nation of Israel as they left Egypt after 430 years of captivity, 'knowing God' was something of a rarity. Abraham, the father of the nation, certainly had a close working relationship with him, so much so that the LORD says "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (**Genesis 18:17**) and he refers to Abraham as his friend (**Isaiah 41:8**). It is noticeable that neither his son Isaac nor grandson Jacob had anything like the same relationship, though Jacob eventually came through to relying on the LORD – after years of trying to manipulate things the way he wanted them – and was given his new name, Israel.

The next 'high spot' seems to be Moses, about 400 years later. He also had to go through some difficult training and eventually, by the time Moses reached his eighties, the LORD would speak to him face to face, as one speaks to a friend (**Exodus 33:11**).

After that, it seems, the only ones who would have anything like a real relationship with the living God would be the prophets who heard his words and the occasional king who might sometimes respond to what the prophets passed on. The notable exception was King David, whose poetry in the Psalms leaves no doubt that here was a man whose life was captivated by the heart of God. He was by no means perfect, as we know, but the LORD gave him this 'character reference': "I have found David son of Jesse, **a man after my own heart**; he will do everything I want him to do." (**Acts 13:22**) Wow!

Again, Solomon his son had something of a working relationship with the LORD, especially to start with, but after him the kingdom was divided and the two lines of kings were often (though not always) disobedient to the LORD and his prophets.

With these notable exceptions, the average Jewish believer in the Old Testament had little or no hope of anything more real than following the Law and knowing that the LORD had arranged for their forgiveness by the system of sacrifices as passed on through Moses – plus, of course, the proud knowledge that they were the Chosen People!

But still there were some hints of something deeper . . .

King David looked back and saw the difference between Moses and the people, saying that the LORD had made known his **ways** to Moses but only his **acts** to the sons of Israel (**Psalms 103:7** and see also **Psalms 84:5** and **95:10**). Responders or Spectators?

The response of the heart to the voice or presence of God in **Psalms 27:8** is to 'seek his face' and this is echoed by Solomon as he asks the LORD to make his presence permanently resident in the 'house of the LORD' which he had built. Read his amazing

prayer in **1 Kings 8:12-53** or **2 Chronicles 6:1-42** and the LORD's response in **2 Chronicles 7:12-22**. Again, the LORD reminds Solomon that his people need to 'seek his face', especially when they have gone away from him and are looking for restoration.

This same theme is in **Hosea 6:1-3**. "Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD." In the midst of judgment, the certainty of the LORD's mercy and restoration, our need to respond and a foretaste of his word to Jeremiah more than 100 years later.

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The New Testament takes this further and is full of certainty that not only **can** we know God but that he is **actively looking** for us to do so!

In **John 4**, the well-known account of Jesus meeting the woman at the well, he makes some clear statements about the sort of worshipper that the Father is looking for. Worship, he says, is not a matter of the right place or the right building, but of **knowing God** and worshipping him 'in spirit and in truth'. In other words, not like the Samaritans who were just following a formula in the hope that it might count as worship, nor even like the Jews who had it all 'right' and worked out to the last detail, but a response of our spirit (at the very deepest part of us) and in reality, without pretence. (See **v.19-24**)

In **John 17:3**, as the Lord Jesus pours out his heart very intimately to his Father (with at least one of the disciples listening!), he defines what 'eternal life' means. Not some great theological doctrine but something that we are all able to do: "that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

Does this challenge us? Do we immediately start to feel that we don't match up to this and perhaps we never can? This is deeply personal, between our Father and us on a one-to-one basis and he is not condemning us for our lack of knowledge of him. He is actively looking for worshippers, remember? So he is ready for us to start exactly where we are. No qualifications to meet, no hurdles to jump, no need to compare our progress with anyone else. The Father is looking for worshippers who want to know him and learn to worship with their deepest selves and in total openness and honesty. If that is what we want, then we are the ones he is looking for!

How can we get started? Start talking to him about it. Something as simple as "Father God, I really do want to know you, to be completely open to you, really deep down in the deepest part of me."

We might want to add something about "Please show me the next step" but actually we shall probably know what that is without asking. As we dare to open up, his light shines in and we shall most likely see things we would prefer not to see ourselves, let alone allow anyone else (and perhaps especially God) to even catch a glimpse of.

It would be easy to back away at the thought of him knowing all this about me, but of course he knows it all already. The difficult bit is that I am opening up to him and it's not just a case of **him** knowing, but that he is showing it to me. King David (again!) found the same thing and ended up actually asking the LORD to search his heart fully – it was the only way! (**Psalm 139**, especially **v.23-24**)

This opening up to the Father is not painful for long, though. The whole point is so that the unpleasant bits can be dealt with. Back in **Jeremiah 31**, where we started with the promise of all the LORD's people **knowing** him, there is another promise which makes the whole thing possible: "No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another,

‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For **I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**” Yes, right at the heart of this personal dealing with the Father is the very unwelcome focusing on my shortcomings but also the wonderful promise of forgiveness and a ‘clean slate’. In fact, our knowing the Father depends on this completely, right at the start and at every step as we move forward.

“Oh no, we’re not going to be talking about sin again, are we?” Why do we keep coming back to this? NOT because it is God’s favourite subject – it isn’t – but because it keeps getting in the way. Which is why he has made it a priority to deal with it.

The Father’s provision is so simple and straightforward; it is **we** who too often make a meal of it and give ourselves a hard time.

When we have told God that we really do want to know him, and then that shaft of light pours into our consciousness and we begin to see some of the rubbish in our lives that is getting in the way, at that point we have two options. **Either** we will shut down, pretend not to see and try to run away, **or** we will allow the light to shine right in and let the Father work his miracle of forgiveness and restoration; like King David, asking him to really search our lives for anything and everything that may be wrong. Instead of running away from the light, we begin to embrace it and want to live in it.

When we allow the light of God to shine into our lives like this, it does away with the fear of being found out. If he knows it all already – and still loves me! – then there really is nothing to fear. Amazing!

John the apostle put it simply and clearly:

This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

The light of God. If we choose not to live in it, to hide and pretend that we don’t need forgiveness, then we are trying to fool ourselves and not being straightforward and a real relationship with the Father is not possible. On the other hand, if we agree with his diagnosis and admit our failure (‘confess’), then the problem is dealt with and we **can** have a relationship with him – AND with others who do the same!

Please do remember that the New Testament word translated as ‘sin’ doesn’t mean some dramatic wrongdoing; it simply means ‘missing the target’. So, if we sometimes think of ourselves as failures, that is **exactly** what this is all about!

This is just the beginning, and it goes on getting better! Experiencing the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ is truly liberating and is the starting point for more experience of the grace of God, more steps on the way of getting to know God . . .

Remember that promise to Jeremiah? “. . . they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Knowing God is for every single believer in Jesus, not for some special ones – we are ALL special ones! When John wrote to believers, some were spiritual ‘babies’, some were spiritual adolescents and some were older. Each of them had their own ‘level’ of knowing the Father, but they all knew him. (See **1 John 2:12-14**)

Paul writes to the Galatian believers who are getting tied up with deadly religious laws: *“when you did not know God, you were slaves to those who by nature are not gods. But now that you know God – or rather are known by God – how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable forces?”* (**Galatians 4:8,9**) It’s a two-way process; yes, we are getting to know God but he is also getting to know us.

“Yes”, you say, “but God knows everything anyway.” This is different: God knowing us as we have started to respond to him. It’s personal. The German language has two words for ‘know’. One means to know facts; the other means to know people. This is the second one. The Father does not gatecrash into our lives; he has given us freedom and control of our own lives, amazingly even the right to refuse him. He waits for us to respond to him and allow him in, allowing him to know us and us to know him. (See **Revelation 3:20**)

There is not time or space here to spell it all out, but it is by getting to know our Father and the Lord Jesus that we make spiritual progress. Peter gives us a taste of the process in **2 Peter 1:2-4**, showing that *“His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.”* Did you see that? By getting to know him, by taking hold of his promises to us in Jesus, we can actually share in God’s nature! What a promise! See the same process in **2 Corinthians 3:18** and the crowning of it in **1 John 3:2**. *“We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”*

Paul was many years ‘on the road’ as a believer in the Lord Jesus, but his goal remained firm to the end of his life: *“I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.”* (**Philippians 3:10-12**)

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If we might think that all this talk of ‘knowing God’ is just high-sounding spiritual chatter, then we should take note of some of the saddest words in the New Testament, in **Matthew 7:21-23**. Jesus says that, on the day when he comes into his kingdom, there will be many who have called him Lord, have apparently done miracles in his name, given prophecies in his name and even thrown out evil spirits in his name. We might think that these are spiritual giants and will be given places of honour in the kingdom of God. On the contrary! Jesus’s words to them are chilling: *“I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”*

“This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”

“Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD”

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