

CAN I KNOW GOD PERSONALLY?

Following Jesus for Life

Texts: Jeremiah 9:23-24; Luke 24:13-32; John 17:3; Revelation 3:20

I want to close out this series by asking the question that comes closest to home for all of us. ***Can you or I know God personally?*** I don't mean can we gain more information ABOUT God; I mean, can we truly KNOW God? Can we have a genuine relationship with God, something like the relationship we enjoy with the other important beings in our life?

It may surprise you to hear me say this but, on one level, the answer is NO. Chances are that Jesus isn't going to show up in your living room this afternoon, put his feet up on the couch and watch sports. If He does, please call me over and I'll bring the nachos!! Sometimes I hear people talking as if God was their drinking buddy or Jesus their boyfriend. There's a show on television now called, GOD FRIENDED ME. I like that show, but I don't think God is out there, insecurely trying to earn more "likes."

God is good but he is also GREAT. He is the almighty Creator, the Sovereign Lord, the Holy One whose unshielded glory might vaporize us. He is not to be tamed or trivialized or turned into some kind of lonely heart desperate for our attention. And YET, at another level, the Bible makes it clear that, YES, God wants a personal relationship with human beings. God loves you and wants you to know him.

If there is one major, constantly repeated message in the Old Testament, it is that God wants to restore the close connection he once had with humanity that was lost in Eden. He wants to recover the intimate covenantal relationship he once had with the children of Israel. God wants to bless people everywhere with an experience of Him that is more fulfilling and securing than anything else we might in which we might invest ourselves. We'd be very smart to prioritize trying to build that kind of connection with God.

This is what the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah: **"Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight"**

(Jeremiah 9:23-24) Translation: You can have the intelligence of Elon Musk, the strength of Wonder Woman, and the riches of Jeff Bezos, but if you do not know GOD, you've missed out on life's greatest joy and prize.

This too was the consistent message from the lips and life of Jesus. Knowing God, says Jesus, is like being an ordinary salesman and discovering a pearl of such incredible value that this one discovery utterly transforms your life. Knowing God is like walking across a field and finding a treasure so spectacular that you think nothing of selling

everything you have in order to buy that land (Matthew 13:44-45). Knowing God is the secret to peace, perspective, and purpose in this life. It is the key to forgiveness, fulfillment, and forever-after in the next.

But we can easily miss it. A couple once checked into Princeton, New Jersey's famous, Nassau Inn. Impatient to get up to their room, the husband barked at a white-haired man he took for the bellhop and ordered him to take their bags upstairs. The older gentleman quietly complied. The couple came and went, never realizing that the man who carried their bags, who might have been available for conversation, and perhaps even for supper had they invited him to join them, was none other than Albert Einstein.

How much greater still is the One who took the form of a servant and passed through this Inn? How many people are so distracted or self-involved that they miss what he came to offer? The Apostle John wrote: **God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. (1 John 4:9, NLT). And this is the way to have eternal life - to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth (John 17:3, NLT).** And then, maybe the saddest line in all the Bible: **He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (Jhn 1:11).**

Even if we were aware of what we were missing and wanted to know God, some of us could not. I recognize that what I'm about to say will be upsetting to those of us who can't imagine why God would find anything so objectionable about us that He would not be delighted to spend eternity in our wonderful company. Nevertheless, the Bible teaches that while He does want to know us, we are separated from relationship with God and eternal life by sin.

Sin is a spiritual disease that leaves us curved in upon ourselves, more arrogant and apathetic toward God and others than we can even see. There are three main reasons we cannot see how serious our condition is: (1) We were born with this illness and don't know what it's like to live without it. (2) Everyone else we've ever known has it too. And (3) the disease has affected our moral vision. We compare ourselves with even sicker people and feel we are quite healthy. We evaluate ourselves in the light of certain exceptionally virtuous people and think, maybe I do have a little cold. But compared to the holiness of God, we're like the Walking Dead and don't know it. If we ran into an angel, we might ask: "Why are you drawing back from me?" *"Well, because your face is falling off, and your life is rotting, and you stink."*

We're not alone in this condition. The Bible says that **Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard (Romans 3:23, NLT). The wages** – that means the payment or end result -- **of sin is death (Romans 6:23)**, writes St. Paul. The consequence of our spiritual sickness is a deadened sensitivity to God and others now and an eternal separation from them in the next life. Hell isn't a raging frat party with the heat turned up; it's the cold of cosmic loneliness. It's when God stops trying to

draw you into a personal relationship with himself and just lets you go your own way and according to your own will, forever. It's being left talking to yourself in a little hotel room in your own private Princeton, when you could have had an endless relationship and adventure with a brilliant Being of pure and radiant Love.

But, here's the good news, while **the wages of sin is death, the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:23, NLT)**. God does not want you or me or anyone else to wind up separated from Him. This is why Jesus came. As we've tried to share often in this series, Jesus was no ordinary man. **Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation. (Colossians 1:15, NLT)**. When he went to the Cross, he brought the only moral bank account big enough to cover the price of sin. As the Apostle Peter put it: **Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. (1 Peter 3:18a, NLT)** To describe it differently, Jesus is God's cure for our disease. The blood he poured out on the Cross is the transfusion we need to heal our sin-sickness.

And God raised Jesus from the dead as a sign that his sacrifice on our behalf was accepted. The resurrection was God's confirmation that in Christ's blood was the power for new life we all need. The book of Acts teaches that **During the forty days after he suffered and died, he appeared to the apostles... and he proved to them in many ways that he was actually alive (Acts 1:3a)**. **For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)**

What I'm trying to say – what the Bible and Christians all through the centuries have been trying to communicate -- is that because of Jesus, We can now enjoy a personal relationship with God. Sin no longer needs to stand between us and God. The barrier that disease has been can be wiped away. Maybe you are someone who is ready to pursue a newfound connection with God. Let me suggest how you can find it. First, admit to yourself and God that you suffer from sin-sickness and you know you can't save yourself. Then, secondly, dare to believe that Jesus' death on the cross made forgiveness possible for you. His gift was enough. No matter who you are or what you've done, if you put your trust in Christ, you are forgiven of your sins. Then, finally, choose to follow Jesus for life. Jesus doesn't simply want to save you FROM sin; he wants to save you FOR a whole new kind of life – a wonderful adventure in which he will be your companion and guide, and the Holy Spirit will help you come to know Jesus in a deepening way.

Let me be bold to say, however, that living into that kind of new life involves some deliberate desire to discover God's person and his purposes. In other words, while we can never EARN our salvation and don't have to – Jesus did that for us – growing in our knowledge of God takes some personal EFFORT. There are a variety of practical steps

we can take to know God better and I want to call out just a few of them as ideas for you to practice as you go from here.

In the passage from Luke's Gospel that I read at the start of my message, we meet two people who have set out on the road from the events of Good Friday and Easter, wishing that they had a deeper experience of God in their lives. While they are walking, **Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him (Luke 24:15-16)**. They were in the presence of the very One they were most seeking, but fully recognize it. Nonetheless, the men began pouring out their hopes, fears, frustrations, and desires to the Presence with them and listening to what the Presence says. I want to encourage you to do the same.

There's a term for this. It's called "conversational prayer." If you want to know God personally, talk to and listen for him as you travel your life's road. I do this in my car all the time. I turn off the radio and talk out loud to him. Last Saturday, I set aside some time to write down my thoughts and feelings in a little journal, as if God was actually right there with me. I believe He was. I then spent an hour in silence, listening and jotting down what I believe his Holy Spirit was saying to me in return about these things on my mind. You've got a car. You can find an hour. You can probably borrow some pen and paper. Come use the church building as a personal retreat. Engage in some conversational prayer this week and get to know God more personally.

The gospel writer, Luke, says that as the two men travelled along the road to Emmaus, **[The Stranger] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning [the Messiah] (Luke 24:27)**. Later on, they would exclaim, **Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us? (Luke 24:32)**. I can't tell you how often, when reading the Bible, the words of Scripture start blazing within me. I've taken to listening to two or three chapters of the Bible at a time on my phone. The free *YouVersion* app you can get on your phone actually reads Scripture to you. Other times, I'll just read one of the stories in the life of Jesus slowly. Then I'll read it again to see if a word or phrase becomes luminous for me. Then I'll read it one more time and ask God to tell me what the application of that phrase might be in my life. I am staggered by how often, when listening or reading the Bible in this way, God speaks to me. He names something I need to know or gives me an instruction I benefit from following. If you want to know God more personally, then read or listen to the Bible regularly.

My last suggestion comes from the end of the story Luke tells about the three travelers on the road to Emmaus. As you may remember, they've stopped at an inn and are sharing a meal. The text says, **When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized HIM (Luke 24:30-31)**.

A few months ago, I was gathered with three other guys in one of the small groups that are a core component of my own spiritual journey. One of the men had just divulged some deep personal anguish, and gave me permission this week to share this story with you. Our friend concluded his heart-breaking tale by crying out through tears, "*I feel SO alone in this! God, where are you!?*" It was one of those moments of such utter vulnerability and longing that it could have been met with the silence of hung heads. But with nary a beat, a couple of us blurted out, almost simultaneously: "*Right here. God is right here in this circle. We are in his presence with you.*"

Do you want to know God more personally? Then get yourself a Christian small group like that. Talk to one of our staff and we'll help you create or connect with one. Because Jesus has given us a very specific promise: **For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them (Matthew 18:20).**

Let me summarize in closing: God loves you. He loves you enough to cross eternity to find you, to go out into a storm to rescue you, to descend into a ditch to help you, to climb up on a cross to redeem you. Out of his great love, God wants you to know the unparalleled wisdom and strength and wealth of a relationship with Him. He has made it possible for you to come without fear to him by wiping away your sins on the cross. Now there are some steps you can take to deepen a relationship with Him. Engage God more often in conversational prayer. Read or listen to the Bible regularly. Participate in public worship, but also in a Christian small group. And God will be with you, at this place in your road, and to the very end.

Let's pray together...

God, we thank you that you want a relationship with us, have made a way for that to happen, and invite us to come unto you. And so, step by step, we come. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Benediction

Jesus said: **Behold! Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me (Revelation 3:20).**