

IMPOSSIBLE KNOWLEDGE

Believe the Impossible Series (Part 2)

Text: Isaiah 11:9; John 1:18

One of the popular television programs of our time is a show that is provocatively titled, GOD FRIENDED ME. For those who haven't seen it, the program features an outspoken atheist named, Max, who is contacted through Facebook by someone claiming to be God. Both skeptical and curious about this contact, Miles accepts the friend request and is led by the mysterious entity to go places, befriend people, and do things that ultimately lead to a profoundly greater good than Max could see at the beginning.

As questionable as the theology of all this gets in places, the popularity of this program is revealing, I think. In an age when increasing numbers of people are leaving behind traditional religions, declaring themselves "nones" or merely "spiritual," the truth remains: People still hunger to know and hear from God. The thought that there might be a supremely intelligent and powerful Being who actually sees us... who genuinely cares about how the details and dramas of our lives work out... and, who moves to befriend us, wanting to help us flourish... well this remains one of the deepest human longings amidst the growing secularism and loneliness of our tech-soaked age.

The longing goes further than that. Bryan Wilkerson describes going to see the A-list actor, Matt Damon, in what turned out to be a B-rated movie called, *Hereafter*. In the story, Damon's character has psychic abilities and is able to communicate with the dead. Someone comes to see him and begs him to make contact with a departed loved one. Somehow, Damon makes a connection and, on behalf of the one who's been left behind, begins asking questions: *What's it like there on the other side? Can I come join you there? What should I be doing, now, on this side?*

Wilkerson writes: "As the scene was unfolding, I turned and looked around the theater, which was full, and realized you could hear a pin drop. No one was moving. No one was munching popcorn or sipping soda. Everybody's eyes were fixed on the screen. They were hanging on every word. And it hit me: They wanted to know, too... What's it like on the other side? Will we all get there someday? What should we be doing in the meantime?"¹ They wanted to know so badly that they were willing to believe a B-movie might have the answer.

There is a thirst within all of us for a knowledge of God – to know a God who sees us, cares for us, befriends us, and provides for us even beyond the grave. But some will say that we ought to satisfy ourselves with the popcorn and a Slushie because Knowing God is IMPOSSIBLE? Even if they will admit the possible existence of God, some people maintain we can't ever "know" him. Any Being who could create and encompass the staggering infinity and complexity of even that small portion of the universe we've been able to see with our telescopes and our microscopes is an intelligence and power so exponentially beyond ours that knowing him is like a microbe understanding the mind

of Mozart. It's impossible. Like the proverbial blind men touching an elephant, all we can do is describe a little piece of God. No person or religion can possibly claim to know more than a tiny part of him. It's impossible!

I get the microbe to Mozart metaphor. But I've always been amused by people who use the Elephant analogy, because it strikes me that if you know that what somebody is describing is only part of God, then you must have *some* picture of what the whole Elephant is like. And I think that deep inside most people do. I think that just as 23andMe can identify DNA in you that traces back to the very first human beings, so there is this vestigial part of all of us that is marked by the knowledge of the One from whom we came. There is a part of all of us that longs to find our way home.

The opening chapters of the Bible tell us that, in the beginning, human beings knew God (Gen 2:8, 3:8a). The poetic language of Genesis pictures God walking in the Garden with our first ancestors. They walked and talked with God. They knew who he was, how he felt about them, and what he'd instructed them to do to keep their relationship with him, each other, and the garden itself going strong. There was no fear of tomorrow in Eden. No hiding lest I be found inadequate. No hunger or thirst, despair or death. On the contrary, knowing God and being known by him, our ancestors lived naked and unafraid (Gen 2:25).

I want to pause for a moment on that word "naked," because it is a richly important detail. The Hebrew word "*daath*" -- which gets rendered as the English word "knowledge" -- suggests not simply an intellectual knowing, as in holding certain thoughts ABOUT God or your spouse, but rather an interpenetrating, life-changing intimacy for which the closest physical analogy is intercourse. In fact, when the King James Version of the Bible describes that level of intimacy between human beings it often describes it using the word "knowledge" instead of the word "sex." Thus, we're told in the New Testament that after hearing from an angel that Mary was pregnant **"Joseph knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son; and he called his name JESUS" (Matt 1:25).**

What I'm trying to get at here in what may seem like this little X-rated portion of the message, is that when we talk about having **"the knowledge of God"** (Isaiah 11:9) we aren't just talking about having an intellectual concept of, a nice acquaintance with, or a superficial conversation about God. Knowing God, in the way the Bible means it, is a soul-shuddering, vulnerability exposing, relationship-altering, life-filling encounter. It means having the most glorious partner for living this life (and even beyond this life) that Miles or Matt Damon or any of us could ever have. The more we truly know God, the more we find ourselves bonded to him, wanting to honor and please him, and find him fulfilling us. I have found the knowledge of God to be the greatest source of love, joy, peace, patience, wisdom, and so many other wonderful fruits that I believe nothing is worth pursuing more. When you truly know, it doesn't take all of your challenges away. But knowing God quiets your fears, retunes your priorities, and assures your future. This is why King David wrote most of his Psalms about knowing God. It's why the Apostle Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13:12, exhilarates at the thought that one day we will

fully know God even as we are now fully known by God. The knowledge of God is what made a mere forest we call Eden the garden that history calls Paradise.

So what happened? How'd we get here? How'd humanity go from this picture of people walking NAKED & UNASHAMED with God and become instead like an episode of that reality show, NAKED & AFRAID -- where the characters spend their days trying to cover up, scavenging and arguing and worrying and restlessly running from here to there, all covered in scratches and bug bites? To put it in a nutshell, the Bible says Paradise was lost when Adam and Eve started to care more for knowing something God made – the fruit of that tree over there -- than they cared for knowing God himself (Gen 3:6-7a).

The cataclysmic result of that misplaced focus sent humanity on a descent into a life of pain and toil, competition and murder, arrogant tower-building, outright wickedness, and tribal terror. The stories we read after Genesis chapter 3 might as well have come from today's headlines. On every page we see the consequence of what happens when people live unto themselves, having lost the most important relationship of life – a knowledge of God.

But the amazing thing is that God doesn't give up on restoring that relationship. I met a girl in seventh grade who for some completely irrational reason had a crush on me. I was not a catch, but I took no interest in Pam. She, however, never stopped caring for me. Though she was hurt by my rejection, she kept her eyes on me through the rest of seventh grade. She kept trying to see if I might be open to something more all through eighth grade. And then ninth grade went by. And then tenth grade. And then one day in eleventh grade I was at the swimming pool and said to my best friend: "Who is that woman over there?" "Oh, that's Pam, she's captain of the cheerleaders." I asked her out that day. We dated for most of the rest of high school. In an important way, she prepared me to recognize and embrace the love of my life who is, Amy, my wife."

God has kept his eye on humanity for a lot more than five years. Even after we rejected knowing him, God persevered. He revealed himself again and again to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. He issued to Moses an invitation to know him and go with him to set his people free. He appeared to the wayward children of Israel throughout their wilderness trek and gave them a life-enhancing law to guide them. God made his providence and power known by delivering them from enemies and giving them a home in a Promised Land. And when Israel continued to lose its focus again and again – when it repeatedly preferred the knowledge of idols over knowing God -- still HE did not give up. Again and again, God sent prophets to them, calling his people back into relationship with Him. But they kept ignoring and rejecting the prophets.

Eventually their stubborn preference for all the world's distractions led the Jewish people to make a horrible mess of their country and lives. Given all they had done, it seemed utterly IMPOSSIBLE that God could still be interested in them. But, then the prophet Isaiah came predicting that God was not done seeking to reach his fallen children. God is going to do something new, said Isaiah: **"A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse** [meaning from the almost forgotten family line of King

David]; **from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” (Isa 11:1). The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might... (Isa 11:2)**

As we’ll explore further in weeks ahead, Isaiah foretold the coming of a suffering servant who would reveal God’s presence, plan, and power in a way more personal than at any time since God himself walked through Eden. This time, God would come to people not through a burning bush, or a cloud of smoke, or the voice of a prophet. God would come himself, in the flesh. This Messiah would not just be for Israel. He would be the means by which ALL people are given the opportunity to enter into an intimate, life-changing relationship with God.

On one level, this seems IMPOSSIBLE. It’s as outrageous as the thought that God would friend someone on Facebook, or that Mozart would find a way to reveal himself to a mere microbe, or that the elephant the blindmen keep feeling for would blow off everyone’s blindfolds. But at the First Advent, this is exactly what began. Jesus said: **No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known. (John 1:18) If you really know me, you will know my Father as well. (John 14:7) I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. (John 14:6)** Come learn of me, find life abundant and eternal with me. In my fellowship, you will gain the knowledge of God.

There’s a scene at the close of the movie, *Jerry Maguire*, in which the selfish character played by Tom Cruise walks into a room and says “hello” to Dorothy, a remarkably faithful woman, played by Renée Zellweger. Jerry launches into a rambling speech in which he repents of his numerous stupidities and failings, stumbling over himself in remorse. Jerry knows he is utterly unworthy of her love. There is no good reason why she should forgive him or want a relationship with him. But then Dorothy does something simply amazing. She shushes him and says, “*You had me at ‘Hello.’*”

After all we’ve done or not done -- after all the distractions and idolatries and forbidden fruit we’ve allowed to take priority over Him -- it seems IMPOSSIBLE that God should want to know us or to let us into an intimate knowledge of him. But Jesus is God’s way of saying: I’ve been ready to take you back since you said, “Hello.”

If you’ve gotten lost or fallen away or never really known God, say “Hello” to him today. If you feel you don’t know God very well, stop by one of the tables outside and let us help you find some practices or places where you can develop a more intimate and life-changing knowledge of him. And if you are already deep in that relationship, then please talk with someone this week about what that knowledge means to you. Invite someone to join you here. Let’s all take some steps toward that coming day when **the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Isa 11:9)**

¹ Bryan Wilkerson, “Deep Certainty,” *PreachingToday.com*