

KNOWING GOD



*Vital facets of our relationship
with God...*

by David Legge

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Contents

- 1. Trust And Truth - 3**
- 2. Love And Acceptance - 12**
- 3. Understanding His Father-heart - 22**
- 4. Intimacy - 30**
- 5. Fellowship With Christ - 49**
- 6. Beholding And Becoming - 55**

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Knowing God - Chapter 1

"Trust And Truth"

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I want you to turn with me in your Bibles to Exodus chapter 33. As I said to you, I'm going to be here this Sunday, all today, and then two Sundays in May I think, and I decided that I would bring a series to you. I feel that the Lord laid on my heart what you see on the screen there, a series on 'Knowing God'. We're going to take the six sessions, if I can get through it OK, looking at this very deep and diverse subject. Before we read Scripture, I want us to pray, I want you to pray now, would you do that with me? That God would speak to your heart - don't let me do all the praying up here, I want you to pray now that God would speak to you. Let's pray.

Father, we come to You, and as we have been singing: we desire to hear Your voice, we want to be receptive to Your voice. So we ask You, in Jesus' name, that You would come and speak to us now. Come by the Holy Spirit, Lord, and reveal Christ to us in our lives. Lord, we so desperately need You, and we ask that we would be in a receptive place to receive what You have to say to us. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ we ask these things, Amen.

So Exodus 33 verse 7 is the beginning of our reading. This is where Moses has been up the Mount of God, and God is meeting with him. He has received the law, he has gone down the mountain and seen what people have been up to - which has been no good - and then he receives the law again after smashing the tablets. Verse 7 then: *"Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the Lord went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp. So it was, whenever Moses went out to the tabernacle, that all the people rose, and each man stood at his tent door and watched Moses until he had gone into the tabernacle. And it came to pass, when Moses entered the tabernacle, that the pillar of cloud descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle, and the Lord talked with Moses. All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the tabernacle door, and all the people rose and worshiped, each man in his tent door. So the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend. And he would return to the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nun, a young man, did not depart from the tabernacle. Then Moses said to the Lord, 'See, You say to me, 'Bring up this people'. But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight'. Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people'. And He said, 'My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest'. Then he said to Him, 'If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here. For how then will it be known that Your people and I have found grace in Your sight, except You go with us? So we shall be separate, Your people and I, from all the people who are upon the face of the earth'. So the Lord said to Moses, 'I will also do this thing that you have spoken; for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name'. And he said, 'Please, show me Your glory'. Then He said, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before*

you'". This is not what I'm speaking on, but isn't it interesting - in the light of what we've been singing about the goodness of God - that when Moses asked to see God's glory, God's goodness passed before him? Have you ever noticed that? The glory of God is in His goodness. This does anticipate some of what I'm going to share this morning: some of us can't truly say from the depths of our hearts, 'God is good' - and there are reasons for that.

Verse - where did we get to? - verse 19: *"Then He said, 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion'. But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live'. And the Lord said, 'Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen'".*

A.W. Tozer wrote a book years ago that I probably read round about the time I was an assistant here in Portadown, but certainly in my youth. It was a favourite of mine, and still remains to be such - it's called 'The Pursuit of God'. I don't know whether you've read it or not, but I would highly recommend it. In chapter 4 of his book, entitled 'Apprehending God', commenting on Psalm 34 verse 8 'Oh taste and see that the Lord is good', he quotes Canon Holmes of the Church of England, then of India. 'Many years ago', Tozer says, 'he called attention to the inferential character of the average man's faith in God. To most people God is an inference, not a reality. He is a deduction from the evidence which they consider adequate; but He remains personally unknown to the individual. 'He must be', they say, 'therefore we believe He is'".

I want to ask you here today: is God an inference for you? An 'inference', of course, is a conclusion based on the evidence that is available to you or on your reason. Is God merely an inference, or is He a living reality? Now, especially if you're like me and you grew up in a Christian home, an environment where Christ was known and you were sent to church et cetera, God can very much be an inference. He has always been there, and you have assumed He always will be there - but kind of in the background, there's not an awful lot of personal encounter as an individual. Tozer goes on in that chapter to talk about how, for some, they know God through hearsay, but they haven't discovered Him for themselves; or God is an ideal for them - in other words, He's just another name for beauty, or truth, or goodness, or life, or another virtue that you can think of - but there's no personhood in your conception of God, and certainly no personal interaction with Him.

One thing those who hold such notions all have in common is that they do not know God in their personal experience. Perhaps, for some of them, it has never even entered into their mind that it is possible to know God intimately, just like any other person. I think that's why many Christians go through their life being loyal to an ideal, or to a set of life principles that they live by, but they never truly have experienced God as a personal acquaintance. Now, if the Bible has anything to teach us, it teaches us that God can be known. God is a personality. Now, I don't claim to understand the Trinity, but there are actually three Persons in one substance, but they are three personalities. Personalities are not primarily to be studied, personalities are to be known. I'm not saying we shouldn't study them, but our first response ought to be: 'I want to know who this God is! Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'.

Actually, they had a perfect knowledge of each other throughout eternity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit perfectly knew each other in an absolute love relationship. Then they created humankind in their image, so that we could know them also, and know their love. So this book that we have before us today, the Bible, is essentially a book of stories about people getting to know God. So Adam gets to know God, walking with Him in the cool of the day, eating with Him, talking with Him. Noah gets to know God. Abraham is known as 'the friend of God'. Moses, as we've seen, had several incredible, extraordinary encounters with God. Yet here - and, by the way, this is after the burning bush incident, this is after the Red Sea parting, and he's still hungry to get to know this God even more: 'Show me Your glory, I want to know Your ways, I want to know who You are'. We could go on: David, the man after God's own heart, and into the New Testament and so on. But if we believe this book is the revelation of God to our hearts, which it is, that supposes it is revealing Himself, God is revealing Himself primarily through relationships that He has with people.

So, when God revealed Himself at the burning bush to Moses as the 'I AM', and again up here on the Mount as the 'I AM', this was a personal interaction. I mean, God didn't send a fax, or an email, or a theological thesis - and, can I say it reverently, He didn't just give him a book and say 'Read that, and you'll find out all about Me'. He personally encountered Him - yes, He did give the tablets and so on, but it was couched in the context of a personal meeting with the Lord. One of these early seekers, Moses, that we've looked at, here in Exodus 33:13 he says: 'Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way' - that's interesting, because it's through the ways of God that we actually learn about God, we'll see that in a moment - 'show me now Your way that I may know You'. Now some of us, if a burning bush showed up one day (that's probably not contextual to where we're at as a people, you know, he was a shepherd out in the wilderness), but if this burning bush showed up, and supernaturally the bush was not consumed, and God booms in His voice out of the bush and so on, and we see the Red Sea parting etc - we would probably be thinking we know God pretty well, wouldn't we? Yet here's this man, hungry for more of God: 'That I may know You' - he really felt that he didn't know God.

The next verse tells us - Psalm 103:7 - about how God is made known in His ways to Moses, His acts to the children of Israel. So the miraculous, if you like, are the acts of God by which He was known by His people - but Moses had a desire to know God in His ways, because when we know His ways, we get to know His character, what He's really like. We read that Moses talked to God face-to-face - that's intimacy. Yet it seems to be a little contradictory, because later on God tells Moses: 'No one shall see My face and live'. So 'face-to-face' is not literal here, it's figurative, as we will see later on tonight about communion with God, the deepest fellowship that is possible. God is spirit, that means God is invisible - so that's very difficult for us to relate to in the unseen realm. So, we know - fast forward quickly to the New Testament, John 1:14 - 'Jesus Christ became flesh and dwelt among us', the incarnation, 'The Word became flesh' - 'tabernacled' is the Greek word - 'among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth'. So there came a day when God became flesh so that we could see Him, so that we could have a personal interaction with the Living God.

First John 1:1-4 tell us of how the apostles have actually declared this visibility of God, this incarnation: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we

have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life - the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us - that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full'. 'We're telling you what we saw! We had personal interaction with a Person! We saw Him! We touched Him! We heard Him! This is the eternal life that we are telling you about. If you have fellowship with this Life, this Eternal One, your joy will be full'.

If I was to ask you - all you good, Bible believing, evangelical Baptists - 'What is eternal life?'. What would your answer be? 'Oh, you live forever, in heaven or hell', or a better one would be 'No, it's not the living on in hell, eternal life is something that you experience in heaven, but you can have it actually now when you come to know Jesus as your Saviour, and you repent of your sins and believe the gospel'. That's not how John defines eternal life - I'm not saying you're wrong, that may be part of that experience - but in John 17:3 Jesus Himself, when He's praying to His Father in the Great High Priestly prayer, says: 'This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent'. So in 1 John 4, John talks about Jesus being the embodiment, the incarnation of eternal life, which is God - eternal life is the life of God. Our experience of eternal life down here now, before heaven, is meant to be a relationship of knowing God. So 2 Corinthians 4:6 tells us: 'For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'.

When Moses came out of the tent of meeting, it says his face shone - but the shine on his face only lasted for a while, because the Old Covenant is not lasting, it's not permanent. Whereas we get - are you excited about this? - we get to look into the face of Jesus Christ directly, and experience the glory of God with unveiled faces, nothing between us. This is what we are meant experience! To put it another way: New Testament, New Covenant Christianity is meant to be better than the Old Covenant. So, what we experience is meant to be more bells and whistles than what Moses knew. Does that tally? Listen: if Christianity is just about cognitively knowing about an historical figure from the Gospels, then the Holy Spirit wouldn't have needed to have come into the world after the ascension of Jesus. Is that not the case? In John 14:18, Jesus said: 'I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you'. Now, there is the mystery of the Trinity again - but He's saying: 'I'm going away in bodily form, but I'm going to come by My Spirit - I'm not going to leave you like orphans'. In verse 23 of John 14, Jesus said to them: 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him'. Wow! You love Jesus and obey His word, and guess what? The Trinity comes to live with you!

The Bible assumes that we can know God with the same intimacy, knowing God as we can know anyone. In fact, we can know Him deeper than anyone else. Now, I imagine some of you are sitting there saying: 'Huh, well, that's not my experience!'. Be honest now, you're allowed to be honest in church - it doesn't happen an awful lot - but it would be good, right now, for you to listen to that little voice that is saying: 'That is very far away from anything that I've ever known as a Christian'. Let me help you out there, let me ask you a question: do you believe that this is possible? I'm not asking you what you're knowing yourself, your own personal experience; but do you believe (and I know I have thrown out a lot of Scriptures there to think about) but that the

general weight of the Bible is that we are to know God personally, and we can know Him deeply, even more deeply than anyone else - do you believe that that is possible? Don't judge this matter by your own experience, that's what people do. You know, inferential: 'That's not what I see, I'm not living a daily diet of miracles, therefore that's not for me - maybe for Moses, or for Paul, but it's not for me'. Don't do that. Here's why: faith enables your spiritual senses to function, faith. So, if you don't believe this is even possible, guess what? It's going to be improbable.

Hebrews 11:6 tells us: 'Without faith it is impossible to please God, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him'. Now, you're not going to come to God if you don't believe in God, so 'He is' does not have that sense of 'I'm a theist, not an atheist', it is the sense of 'I believe He is active, I believe it's worth coming after Him'. He rewards people who come after Him, because faith pleases Him. If you're not expecting to encounter God in your everyday life, and you don't encounter Him - it's hardly surprising. It figures, doesn't it? Faith enables our spiritual senses to function. Do you remember what Jesus said to the blind man in Matthew 9:29? 'According to your faith, let it be done to you' - according to your faith, let it happen. Experience of God personally comes alive when you reckon upon that reality. Let me repeat that: experience of God personally comes alive when you reckon upon the reality that you can know God!

When I was preparing, or thinking about doing this series, I was sitting in prayer, kind of listening as well as talking - I probably do more listening than talking - and I thought to myself: 'What are the key components of relationships in general?'. You know, human relationships I'm talking about. Of course, some aspects of our relationship with God are very different than human relationships, but there are some striking similarities that we can learn from. I Googled, and some sites gave 7 fundamental elements of good relationships, some gave 10, some gave more - but what I've tried to do is give you a summary of what are understood to be key components to good relationships. Now there's just a smattering of them on the screen just now: trust, honesty - you've got to have honesty if you're going to have a good relationship with people; vulnerability - that's part of opening yourself up because you trust someone; love and acceptance - a sense of belonging and being secure, that's vital; intimacy; respect; understanding; communication; time; cooperation; sharing tasks, sharing goals and interests together; a sense of humour - always helps; and patience, persevering, keeping at it.

Now we're going to see, over this series, how many of these relate to knowing God - but this morning I want to look at two of them: trust and truth. Truth, which essentially is honesty and transparency, which we all need in our close relationships - but also trust, which is just another word for faith. So let's look at these, first of all: trust. Trust is the most precious thing to acquire in a person, yes? Many relationships break down - sometimes, it would appear, unredeemably - because trust has broken. This is actually what God wants from us, it's very basic: God wants us to put faith in Him. So, if you want to know God, and you want to know God better than you know Him now, than you've known Him your whole life, you've got understand that faith pleases Him.

It's the most precious thing to acquire, but it's also the most difficult thing to gain, is a person's trust. This is the reason why we find it difficult trusting other people, because to do that, you've got to release personal control. That word that we saw on the screen

a moment or two ago, you become vulnerable when you learn to trust another - another key component. Now, initially, if you're Christian here today, you first learned to trust when you repented of your sins and you believed the gospel - but, if you're honest, you'd have to say that it often becomes a struggle from that moment, continuing to trust the Lord with your life. All of us want to trust Him with our eternity and make sure we get out of hell and go to heaven, that's easy; but, every moment of every day, to trust Him, that's another thing. The reason why it's difficult is: we want to control our lives, we want to control our circumstances, we want to make sure that we are secure in whatever way possible.

The reason is: we are afraid that if we don't keep control of everything, no one else will. That betrays a lack of trust in God. We are afraid that things will get out of control, so we go frantic in micromanaging and organising our lives and sometimes other people's - because we lack trust in God. Now, it's not true, it's not true, I mean, that if we don't control things, things will be out of control - but that is very often a lie that we have believed. It's a lie that mitigates against faith, and then faith becomes risky. Now, it is risky in the sense that it's often counterintuitive to trust God when we can't see Him and we don't know what He's doing. John Wimber once said that's how you spell 'faith', 'R-I-S-K'.

Sometimes when I'm praying with people, often mums it has to be said, one of the obstacles that some people have in surrendering everything to God is their kids. Maybe I'm hitting on something? They say: 'I really want to give everything over to God, but I'm afraid that if I give everything over to God, what's He going to do with my kids?'. Maybe Abraham and Isaac pops up, or something, you know, with the dagger over him. I don't know, but there is this concept that it's not safe to let go and let God have control. When, in fact, it's the safest place our kids could be, is in God's hands. You might retort back on that: 'Well, hold on a minute, are you saying things can't go wrong when you surrender everything to God?'. Of course they can go wrong, and they often do go wrong for various reasons - not least that we live in a fallen world, you have noticed that, have you? This universe is fallen, accidents can happen, bad stuff takes place, things that - and this might wreck your theology, I don't really care - things that God has not planned. If you think God's planned everything that happens in this world, you've got a greater problem with your theology. God does work all things together for good, but that verse doesn't say everything is good - because it clearly isn't.

Then there's a thing called 'sin', there is a person called 'the devil', and then there are people who God - like us - has given a free will. That's dangerous, because that means: if he can do what he likes, that can hurt me at times - it can please me, it can bless me, but it can hurt me at times. So this is the smelting pot of the world, the cosmos in which we live - so things can happen, even when we do surrender everything over to God, things can happen that harm us. The real snag comes when you feel you can't trust God, because you feel that God let you down - and that's OK. I understand why many people feel that way. Sometimes it is because people representing God, maybe a Christian leader, has hurt them. Mum and Dad, who actually are the ultimate representation of God, humanly speaking, in our lives - they're meant to cover us, they're meant to point us to God, show us the example of love and protection etc - so often Mum and Dad can let us down. Believe me, I'm not going to give trite answers to the problem of evil and suffering in our world today, but what I will say to you is, listen to me: God's shoulders are big enough for even your

questions and your doubts.

The amazing thing about our God is: He actually invites us into knowing Him with all that stuff, with all those questions, dilemmas, and quandaries. He invites you to come and talk it over with Him - and, dare I say this: you can even argue with Him! 'Argue with God? Sure, He's always right, how can you argue with God?'. Well, look, just read your Bible, because people argued with God in the Bible. You know, healthy disagreement and discussion is also a key component of good relationships. You know these people who say: 'Oh, we never had a disagreement'. You're a liar! You've never had a disagreement? You don't have to have a blazing row, but we've all had disagreements - and it's healthy to express those. It's the same in a relationship with God, Isaiah 1:18, the prophet says, God speaking through him: "Come now, and let us reason together" - let's talk about this - 'says the Lord, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow'. In Psalm 142:2, the Psalmist says: 'I pour out my complaint before Him; I declare before Him my trouble'. Have you ever had a blazing row with God?

The book of Job, I took upon myself to read the book of Job recently very slowly - it's staggering. I'm more confused now than I was before I read it. But do you know what really takes me back? It says clearly that Job never sinned with his mouth, neither did he charge God foolishly. You look at some of the stuff Job came off with, that's incredible! Because, much of the time, he was blaming God or pointing in God's face about what was happening in his life, but it says he didn't sin. Now, I'm not saying that it's just a free for all to say anything you want to God without consequence, but what I am saying is: I think we are just a little bit too polite. Do you know something? God does not require you to be polite, but He does require you to be real.

C.S. Lewis famously said: 'The prayer preceding all prayers is 'May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to''. The real I. The important thing is: whatever doubts and questions and queries you have about what's gone on your past, ask the questions, have the debate in His presence rather than away from Him. You may not get all the answers - often we don't - to all the questions, but you may just get to know Him a little bit better when you're with Him. You may begin to understand Him more, and His ways, and what aren't His ways. I cringe sometimes when I hear people say: 'God gave me this, God gave me that, God did this, God killed this person' - be careful. I haven't got all the answers, I assure you of that - and David didn't, when in Psalm 73 he was perplexed about the wicked and how they succeeded, and he was really throwing it in God's face: 'Why are You doing this? You're blessing the bad and You're hurting the good! Why?'. Then it says he was confused until he entered the sanctuary of God, 'then I understood their final destiny'. Now did he get the answer to all his questions? No, he didn't, but he got some perspective in the presence of God.

Maybe you're here this morning, and one of the reasons why you can move on in knowing God more deeply is because you've been disappointed. Maybe you're even disappointed with God. Can I tell you that healing is actually found in the presence of God - it's like the patient signing the consent form before surgery. It's a risk, yes, but you need to choose to trust the Lord with your pain. Trust is fragile, it can make or break a relationship - but if trust does not grow, the relationship will not grow.

Quickly: trust is also built on truth or transparency. I'll be very quick: honesty and respect and trust are needed in a relationship, isn't that true? Listen: God is not afraid

of your sin or your doubts. He might be holy, but He can't be shocked - He's seen it all before (read the Bible). If your sin isn't big enough to come between you and God - and it's not, that's what the cross is all about, sin has been dealt with, it is finished - what's the problem with you coming to know God? The only thing keeping you away is not your sin, it's your self-deception, it's your fear and your shame. Out of fear, you think you have to hide from God. That's what Adam believed, that's why he was hiding in the Garden. God was looking for him. The truth is, God is lovingly and graciously inviting us into the light with all our stuff - and then He brings us into the blessing of relationship with Him, and we start to deal with that stuff. Yes, we have to be willing, that's what repentance is: a change of mind - but we have to come to Him in truth, we can't do it hiding all this stuff because we're so ashamed.

First John 1:5-7, you know it well: 'This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice 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 Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin'. So truth becomes the foundation of relationship, of trust. We'll only become vulnerable when we know people are honest with us - but we have got to be honest with God, if we want to enter into a deeper relationship with Him. Guess what: truth is not only the foundation of faith, it's the foundation of faithfulness - which is one of the fruit of the Spirit. This works both ways. Do you know - this might sound ridiculous to some of you - God actually wants to learn to trust you. The more you trust Him, the more He will trust you with His gifts. John 15:15, Jesus said: 'No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you'. The Psalmist says: 'He makes known His secrets to those who fear Him'. He wants to trust you. He wants you to trust Him. He wants you to know Him in truth.

I'll finish with this, some of you may have heard this story evangelistically of Charles Blondin. His greatest fame came on September 14th 1860, when he first crossed a tightrope over a quarter of a mile, 11,000 feet, across Niagara Falls - it was 160 feet above the Falls. He went over several times. It sounds ridiculous, but once he did it in a sack, another time he did it on stilts, he did it on a bike, he did it in the dark, he did it blindfolded - and one time he even carried over a stove, and he fried an omelette in the middle of the rope! It's true! A large crowd gathered, as you can imagine, and they were 'Oooing' and 'Aahing' as he crossed over, one dangerous step after another. He even took over a sack of potatoes. Blondin suddenly stopped and addressed the audience: 'Do you believe I can carry a person across in a wheelbarrow?'. They all cheered and yelled excitedly: 'Yes! You're the greatest tightrope walker in the world! We believe!'. 'OK', said Blondin, 'Who wants to go over in the wheelbarrow?'. I don't think anybody went over that first time, but it is reported that later on an old lady did - and that old lady was his mother; because his mother trusted him, she knew him, she knew the truth about what he could do.

We use this evangelistically - 'You can believe the Lord Jesus and be saved'. What about you believing Him? What about you trusting Him? All that stuff in your life - what about you actually letting go? If you want to know God deeper, you've got to let go! You've got to come into the light. You've got to be honest with yourself. You've got to be honest with God - and it might require you being honest with some other people. The good news is: you can know Him, and you can know Him better than anybody

else.

Let's pray. Let's just quieten ourselves for a moment. Can I invite you to respond to the Lord. There may be some people here and you're not actually born-again, you're not a Christian, you've never taken that step to know God at all - why don't you do that now? Just say: 'Oh God, thank You that Jesus did die for me to take away sin. I want to come to You now, I'm not going to be afraid - I didn't know You were this good! I didn't know this could happen! I really want to come to know You now, I want to believe in You now, that You love me and You want me'. Maybe you've walked away from God, because you've been disappointed with church, or disappointed with other Christians, or disappointed with God Himself. Maybe you have a bit of sorting out to do: what is God and what is not God - but do you know that you can actually be real with Him in His presence? You can say these things - what you'd be afraid to say to other people, but you can say them to Him, and you can actually hammer this out in His presence. I hope there's not one person here today who doesn't want to know God more. We'll hear more tonight, but will you take that step and say: 'Lord, I want to know You more. I want to trust You more. I believe, help my unbelief. I want to walk in truth, to walk in light, to be done with obfuscation and deception from You and others. I want to know You, Lord, through Your Son, Jesus Christ'.

Lord, bless everyone here in Your word, and work deep in every heart. Change lives, that's what we want, Lord, change lives for Your glory. Amen.

Knowing God - Chapter 2

"Love And Acceptance"

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Well, evening everybody. Great to be back with you again tonight. You came back, some of you did anyway! And some are here, who weren't here this morning. We started a series on 'Knowing God'. I want you to turn with me to Exodus 33. I look forward to what God's going to do tonight, and indeed in the further two Sundays, four more studies we'll have in May on this subject, which we'll lift up again when May comes.

Exodus 33, that's where we were this morning, and I'm only going to read one verse, which was our main verse earlier. The context is Moses has been up the Mount and he's received the law of God, he comes down, the people are having a kind of pagan orgy, he throws down the tablets, they break, he's to go up the Mount again and get another set. When he's up there, he says to the Lord that he really wants to encounter His presence. Now this is very important: Moses was a presence-orientated person, he prioritized the presence of God in his life. We even read this morning that he said: 'Look, Lord, who's going to lead us into the promised land? If You don't go up there with us, don't lead us there'. So I've said it before, that he'd rather not have the promised land, and have God's presence. Sometimes we can actually settle for our promised lands, blessings, but not actually enjoy the presence of God. He said, 'I'd rather not have the promised land [and be] in Your presence, than the promised land without Your presence'. His heart's cry was to truly know God.

We just take up verse 13 there: *"Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in your sight, show me now Your ways"*. We saw this morning that the ways of God, not just the acts of God, but the ways of God, are the ways that He displays His character, that we might know Him. So we've just been singing that He's good - but, you know, it's not just a statement, He shows us His goodness. *"Show me now Your way that I may know You, and that I may find grace in Your sight"* - favour.

Then, keep a marker there if you would, and then go over with me to 1 Corinthians 13, this great passage on love that we know so well - unfortunately usually only read at weddings. First Corinthians 13 verse 12: *"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know, just as I also am known"*.

Let's pray together and, as I invited you this morning - and I believe, God did speak this morning and touched people's hearts; and I think that this is going to be the same tonight. I don't believe in preaching only. I believe in preaching with signs following the preaching. God does stuff. If we're just preaching and God's not doing stuff, we need to ask what we're actually doing. So I'm looking for God to move tonight, as I believe He did this morning, and touch people's lives, change us, transform us for His glory. That's what we need. Yes? That's what I need! So let's pray and ask Him - just say: 'Lord, would You speak to me tonight, would You touch my heart?'

Father, we thank You that You're a good Father. We thank You that Your goodness has

been displayed in Your Son, the Lord Jesus. We thank You that the Holy Spirit, as we thought about briefly this morning, brings You, Father and Son, to us. Lord, we ask for Your glory, tonight, to be revealed in Your goodness. We thank You that, as You passed by Moses, it was Your goodness You displayed. He asked to see Your glory, and You showed him Your goodness, because Your glory is Your goodness. When we see Jesus hanging on the cross, we see Your glory. He said that this was how You would glorify Him. It's not what we would understand as glory, but Lord - now that we are believers, we see the glory in the gore and the horrific treatment of Your Son at Calvary. But Lord, we pray for a revelation afresh tonight of Him, His love and Your heart towards us. So please touch our lives tonight, we ask, Father, and do something transformative in each of us, in our families, our relationships, and in this church - we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

The Hebrew word for 'know' that we read in verse 13 of Exodus 33, 'that I may know You', is the Hebrew word 'yada'. 'Yada' simply means 'to know' obviously, but 'to learn', or 'perceive'. It can be translated 'to see' or 'to find out'. But the essence of the word 'yada' is 'to know by experience', or 'to be acquainted with'. Quite famously, Genesis 4:1 speaks of Adam knowing Eve, Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain. Sometimes this term 'to know' has been referenced to carnal knowledge or to sexual activity - but it's not actually synonymous with that, it's not the sexual act that this word describes, but it is the deep knowledge involved, the intimacy in the sexual union.

So Moses says, 'Lord, I want to know' - 'yada' - 'You, I want to know You deeply and intimately'. Then the second reading that we had, from Corinthians 13, uses a Greek term 'epiginosko', 'ginosko' is the word we get 'gnosis' from - and, again, it means 'to know', but it is the sense of knowing thoroughly, a complete knowledge that one day we will have when we see Jesus face-to-face. It talks about 'we look in a mirror now dimly', and in ancient times in the Corinthian culture, mirrors were not glass like ours, but they were made of polished metal. That probably would please some of us, we wouldn't be able to see how we really look - but it didn't give a true image what you're looking at. So Paul says that at the moment we see dimly in this mirror, but one day we will look face-to-face, we will know and we will be known. One day we'll see Him as He is.

Revelation talks about seeing His face. Now, generally speaking in Scripture, and we touched on this this morning because it says of Moses in Exodus 33 and verse 11 that he spoke with God face-to-face. But it also says in this chapter that he did not, and could not see God's face, because no man can see God and live. So this is a figurative term - although it might be literal in 1 Corinthians 13 and Revelation - but in other places it's figurative, speaking of this open fellowship that we can actually have with God. So when Moses spoke face-to-face, he was having an intimate communion with God. God actually says in Numbers 12:8: 'I speak to Moses face-to-face'. It was a deep unhindered fellowship.

Now, I want you to note something here - and remember, we're talking about Old Testament. God is the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob. Every generation needed their own encounter with God. You look at all the patriarchs, Moses here, and we spoke of other characters - and this book, the Bible, is a book telling of how God revealed Himself personally to individual people. But each generation had to have their own encounter. So Isaac didn't say, 'Well, my Dad had an encounter with God. In fact, he

was called a friend of God, and He learned to walk by faith. So I'm just going to walk the way he walked. And I'm going to kind of live off the encounters that he had, I'm going to read about them, meditate on them every day in my quiet time, and that will do me'. No, Isaac had to have his own encounters with God, Jacob was the same. Every generation needs their own encounters with God. They didn't simply rely on previous generations. Can I say this to you, and this is a bit of an aside, but this is why Christian movements become monuments; when they're relying on the experience of bygone generations and not having their own. What happens then is, a movement ceases to have momentum, they stop moving, they stand still, they become monuments - and their default then is maintenance. They maintain something that was in a bygone day. But what is spoken of here is, over and over again in scriptural revelation, we see people freshly encountering God, each generation in a fresh new way.

We can have face-to-face knowledge of God now. Didn't we read about that this morning, 2 Corinthians 4:6: 'For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. Second Corinthians 3:18, 'But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord'. Moses in the Tent of Meeting, face-to-face with God, he comes out, his face shines, he has to wear a veil because the glory is fading away of the Old Covenant - but we don't have a veiled face, the veil has been torn in two. It's God inviting us in, but it's also God breaking out. He wants to break out, He wants us to see Him, to behold Him in His glory, and to be changed to be like Him.

The great longing of the human heart has always been to know and be known; to fully know another, and to be fully known by another; to understand another, and to be understood and accepted by others. You remember this morning, I was relaying how in my meditation and prayer in the light of this series, I was asking the question: what are the key components of relationship? I gave you a summary of what some of those things are, I'll not go over them. But this morning, we looked at how it's necessary - to have a relationship with anyone - that there is trust. We saw that trust essentially with God is faith, believing that He is, becoming vulnerable to Him, risking trusting Him, relinquishing control of our own lives (because we are afraid that things will be out of control), and actually placing our full trust in Him. Then we saw also that truth is necessary for that to happen. There needs to be honesty and transparency in relationships, and particularly with God.

Whilst trust is built on truth, trust or faith is also built on love and intimate knowledge of another. That's what we're going to look at tonight. You see someone will not trust and make themselves vulnerable unless they feel safe and secure. Isn't that right? Yes, there's a sense of risk to a degree, there's always risk of pain when we love another person. But the risk is kind of traded off against the measure of safety and security that we know is there. So it's a bit like a child going across a busy road with her hand in Daddy's hand. Obviously the cars are whizzing by, the noise, it is a dangerous place that she's been warned not to go across herself - but she feels safe and secure because her hand is in Daddy's hand. The love is bringing trust.

So for all of us, in our human relationships, but even with God, there is a calculated wager made upon the understanding of how much we are loved. So we can add, in this

series that we're doing, love and understanding to trust and truth as important key components in any relationship - but particularly in our relationship, knowing God. People need to know that they are loved. It's good to be loved, isn't it? But it's not enough. You must know that you are loved. You will never grow in relationship unless you know that you are loved.

Sometimes I pray with people, and it's tragic - this is very common - where someone will say to me: 'Well, I know my father and my mother loved me, I really do. And they provided for me and they gave me everything that I could ever want - there was food on the table, clothes on my back, gave me an education, opportunities in life - but they never really showed it demonstrably. They certainly never said it'. Recently, someone said to me: 'The only time that my father told us that he loved us was when he had been drinking'. Isn't that tragic? Now it's great to be loved, but when we're not told that we're loved, and we don't know that we're loved, it causes all sorts of problems - because love has not properly been expressed. When it's not properly expressed, it cannot be received. Many, many Christians know about the love of God, but they have never truly known the love of God.

So I'm not asking you tonight: do you know how much God loves you? In this sense: do you 'know' how much God loves you? (And I'm pointing to my head now for the purposes of the recording). I'm asking you: do you know in the heart how much God loves you? I'm not talking about a thinking love, I'm talking about a feeling love. Oh, there's that word! Don't get scared! Do you know that the devil didn't invent emotions, God created them and they're good. They can be very fickle at times. They need to be ordered by the Holy Spirit, but He created them for our benefit and our good. We need as Christians - for our development, for our growth in relationship, and to know God deeper - we need to know and feel the love of God in our lives.

So people often say to me also, 'Well, I know God loves me, but I just don't feel it'. I'm talking tonight about the knowing of experience, this 'yada', to know through experience. I'm asking you this evening: do you experience the love of God? I'm not even saying: 'Have you ever experienced the love of God?', and you'll give me a time and a date, and an altar that you came to. I'm asking you now, on this final day of March: do you regularly experience the love of God?

Of course, this is why Paul emphasizes in Romans 5:5 - we heard it around the table this morning from Carl - 'The love of God has been poured in our hearts' - no - 'in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us'. Poured out, a baptism of love from the heart of God to ours. So you see where I'm going with this tonight: to be known is to be loved. So the longing to be known that we all have is essentially the longing to be loved and accepted - and ultimately, that's what everybody's looking for. They're looking for love. Now they could be looking in all the wrong places, and that's usually what happens - but essentially that is the drive that's in everybody to do the craziest things that you could ever imagine, and even press the self-destruct button in their own lives. It's the desire to have meaning, usually love and acceptance.

Jayne Mansfield, during the 1950s and 60s was an actress, a sex symbol and one of the first playboy playmates. This is what she said: 'It is the most wonderful feeling in the world knowing you are loved and wanted'. In Variety magazine it's said about her that her personal life out-rivalled any of the roles that she played on the screen. She married and divorced three times, had five children, she was allegedly intimately

involved with many men - some very high-profile men in government. Now she certainly was wanted - but that's not the same as love.

Some counsellors talk about 'the love tank' that we all have within our hearts. That love tank, from a little child, is designed to be filled by affirmation and security from our parents, etc - but, spiritually speaking, the love of God is what we are meant to experience deep down in our souls. I want to ask how your love tank is tonight? Is it empty? I mean, regarding the love of God, experiencing it, feeling it? Or is it like Paul said, we quoted it earlier: 'the love of God has been poured into my heart by the Holy Spirit' - and the picture is there that you're overflowing with the love of God, you're kind of drunk with His love, you're intoxicated by it!

If that's not the case, what are you filling that love tank with? Where do you look for meaning in your life? I'm talking to people - whether you're a Christian or not is immaterial - because a lot of people look to their job for meaning. What you do every day, bringing in the wage and providing for your family. Your identity is found in what you do, or maybe it is in your family. Family is a good thing and work is a good thing, but maybe it's all about your family or your friendships. Or maybe it's a sporting activity or a hobby that you have? For some people, they try and fill this love tank with sexual activity, with substance abuse, with power or position - and even, dare I say it, some fill it with ministry, what we do for God or who we are. Eventually we hit a crisis! When these substitutes for the love of God fail us, and when we have no experience of God's love, we don't know what to do.

In the Old Testament Jeremiah spoke about this in chapter 2:13: 'My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn themselves cisterns - broken cisterns that can hold no water', a bit of mixed metaphors to what I'm saying about this love tank, but essentially the point is the same: we're going elsewhere to be satisfied, to fill our hearts; when we need to go to the love of God. To know God, you have to experience His 'agape' love, the Greek word for the love of God - and that is an ongoing experience. And it's not automatic when you become a Christian, it's progressive. Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers, Ephesians 3:18-19: that they would 'be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height - to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God'.

Now, in case you hadn't noticed, there are three dimensions in the material universe, but there are four dimensions in that statement of Paul's. In other words, this is a four-dimensional love. This is not natural. This is not material. It is supernatural, and it is spiritual, and it's beyond description and comprehension. It passes knowledge. We used to say 'It's better felt than telt' - and that's true. That's why the Holy Spirit has to reveal it, because it's divine.

Let me tease it out a little bit more in the time that I have: three things about this love that will bring us into a deeper knowledge relationship with God are these: first of all, it's unconditional. That means it's based on grace - and the word 'grace', some of its meaning is it's 'favour', or God gives us what we need to make it. Love needs to be demonstrated in order to be received. Didn't we say that earlier? Romans 5:8: 'God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us'. The unconditional love of Jesus, 'when we were still sinners'. That means when - think about this - when our shirt sleeves were still rolled up, and we were elbow deep

in acts of sin - in acts of sin - God loves us, and Jesus died for us.

Now that's very hard for us to take in. Many Christians live according to law rather than love. The idea of a code of do's or don'ts, rather than a heart-relationship with God. Now that is a conditional way to relate to God, but it's not actually New Testament Christianity - to live by law, rather than love; to live by rules, rather than relationship. Now that can be affected by the way we're brought up. Maybe that's the way Mum and Dad were with us, that we, you know, we had to toe the line in order to be received and accepted. We had to achieve in academia, or sport, or whatever - but this whole idea of unconditional love is counterintuitive to our whole society and culture in general. Take our education system. That's not the way it works: 'You get an unconditional A-star. In fact, you get eleven of them, there you go, just have them!'. Wouldn't that be great? It's not the way the sporting arena works, is it? Achievement is the goal - and it's not, sadly, the way religious systems operate; even Christianity, even evangelical Christianity. It's often a performance-based mentality: 'If I do well, and keep away from the bad stuff, God will be pleased with me and I will know Him better. But if I'm a bad boy or a bad girl, God will be cross and I'll not get near Him, and I'll not be blessed'.

I want you, if you have such a mentality, you've grown up in it, you've inherited it, I don't know where it's come from - but there's this spiritual perfectionism in you - that you think you have to be 100% perfect and stay away from sin completely, otherwise God doesn't want anything to do with you; I want you tonight to be set free in the love of God, because that's the wrong message! People say: 'Oh, what are you preaching then, a free-for-all, we can go and do whatever we like? Are there are no rules anymore?'. Listen: when you know how loved you are, guess what happens? You love back! We love because He first loved us. Do you see when you know how loved you are, and you love back, you don't want to hurt anybody that you love. In fact, you want to please them. You want to bless them, honour them, respect them. You see, that's relationship. So different, isn't it, from rules and law?

This is an unconditional love. We're in the midst of sin - and I have a story, I don't know whether I should share it or not, because it's pretty near the knuckle; but I'm going to share it anyway. Sure, you've booked me for May, I have to come back! There was a young lad struggling with Internet pornography, and he couldn't break this habit that he had. The person that was counselling him told him - I don't know what you think of this - but told him that he needed to realize the love of God was unconditional, and he needed to realize that - even in the midst of the sin that he was committing - God still loved Him. You say: 'Oh, hold on a minute'. Let me tell you what happened. He was sitting in front of the computer in his pet sin, and all of a sudden he was reminded of what his counsellor said. In that moment, he felt the loving arms of Father God supernaturally come around him in that moment. He felt the love of God, he turned off the computer and he wept - because he began to understand that the love was unconditional. Can I tell you: that's the only way you're going to be holy. It's the only way you're going to be holy. You can't be holy by pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps. It's a supernatural encounter with the love of God that will cause you to love something and Someone more than you love your sin. It's the only way: unconditional love.

Then secondly, it's love that dispels fear. Fear in a relationship is not good. Would you agree? You will not want to come near to someone you fear. First John 4:18 tells us:

'There is no fear in love; but perfect love drives out fear' - because fear has to do with punishment. In other words, that's the Old Testament stuff that needed to be meted out on Jesus when He died on the cross, but He has died. It is finished! He is risen! There's a new message, and that message is that you can be forgiven and don't need to fear anything - and the one who fears is not made perfect in love.

So the antithesis of that is: perfect love comes when you don't fear, because you understand God's love. You've heard the saying, it's 'KDF', everybody's talking about 'KDF', 'Knowledge Dispels Fear'. Well, it's true in this regard, when you have a true knowledge of God, and you have a true knowledge particularly of the unconditional love of God, it will drive out fear. Now right away, I know how people work - because I am a people. I was thinking, often, the way maybe some of you are thinking: 'But is there not the fear of the Lord? The fear of the Lord brings wisdom'. That's right, and that's a good fear. But can I tell you: that's very different from being afraid of God. The fear of the Lord is not being afraid of God. It's like the difference between the fear of a rollercoaster ride, and the fear of an axe murder - they are different fears, aren't they? The rollercoaster is an exhilarating, exciting danger, OK? So you know it's a bit risky, you're up very high, you're going very fast - but you're safe. You get the goose-bumps, white knuckles, shivers - but it's different than the fear of an axe murder, which is debilitating, fragmenting, a fear that leads to hurt and pain. I like this slide, I hope you appreciate it as well. Sometimes that's the way we feel when God's leading and directing us. We have a kind of fear, but we're very safe, we're very safe.

Can I ask you what kind of fear you have of God? Seriously, this goes really to the heart of some issues. Some of us had Bible-thumping, monstrous fathers. We were scared of them. Christians, maybe, operated in the church in some way. He put - what a travesty of language - the fear of God into us. That wasn't the fear of God. Some of us need delivered and healed from those bad experiences, or a bad example that we had, or bad teaching that tells us that we should be kind of hiding from God, that He just can't wait to drop us into hell, because He gets His kicks that way. Listen to me: you cannot have a relationship with someone you're afraid of.

Adam - and I spoke about it this morning - when Adam hid from God in the Garden after sin, what happened? Who was the prime mover at that moment? God. He comes looking for Adam, and He's calling out: 'Adam, where are you?'. As if He didn't know where he was, of course He knew where he was, He wanted Adam to know that He was calling him, to know that he could come to Him. By the way, this is before the cross - and I know the cross was before the foundation of the world, we'll not get into that - but the point of the matter is this: what was it stopping Adam coming to God? You hear it from his own mouth: 'I was afraid, and I hid'. That's the first time we find the word 'fear' in the Bible. Adam, afraid of God because he thought he'd blew it.

You could be afraid of God here tonight. You need to know that there's unconditional love; there is a love that dispels all fear; a love that took Jesus to die on a means of execution, the most bloodiest, gory death that you could imagine. But forget about that: God was causing Jesus to suffer for your sins, and Jesus went willingly to bear your sin - why? So that you could know this perfect love, and all fear could be gone.

The third thing is: this love brings security. Preservation is a basic human instinct, isn't it? We all seek safety, protection. But you know, I think the church has tended to emphasize the need for eternal security. You know what I'm getting at: going to

heaven when you die, know that you're saved - we believe all that, of course. Yet, with all our emphasis on eternal security, there's an awful lot of insecure Christians about! Isn't that right? They don't know who they are, they don't know what God thinks of them. It's alright having everything stitched up for eternity - but what about now? I mean if God is so great and His love is so wonderful, why is it that we've got these identity crises? I wonder is it, at times, the way we have preached the gospel? Is it the case that, because we've emphasized the end game, merely to escape hell, rather than telling people: 'Look, there is a loving Heavenly Father, who sent His Son, and He loves us and He wants to know us!' - that's the emphasis, the heart of God.

It's not that the other is wrong, but so often it has been preached without the love of God. The message is: it's good news, just in case you didn't know. It's good. Good news about a good God. Ephesians 1:6 says that the safe place that we can come to when we realize that we've messed up and our sins have hurt God, and those sins were laid on Jesus - when we realize that, and we come and we believe in Him and His love and His sacrifice - Ephesians 1:6 says we become accepted in the Beloved. That means we are now accepted by God in Jesus, and that just blows my mind - that, when God looks at me, He doesn't see what I used to be, He sees Jesus, even now.

It's not that He's blind, or He's forgetful. It's that He has chosen not to deal with me according to my sins, He's chosen to deal with me according to what Jesus did on the cross. The problem is, many Christians have not accepted themselves as being accepted in the Beloved. This isn't pop psychology, OK, just in case you think this, but you do have to accept yourself. I mean, you do. I'm not talking about your sin. We all need to change, the only One doesn't need to change is God, right? So we all need to change - but we need to accept who God has made us, but especially in this New Covenant, we need to accept who we are in Jesus Christ and what He says about us.

I quoted earlier, Paul said, 'We love because He first loved us'. So when we realize the love of God, that makes us love Him back, and love others, in fact. Didn't Jesus teach us, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'? 'But you're a depraved human being, you're a worm, there's nothing good in you at all, and you shouldn't even think any good about yourself' - that's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches that not only are you made in the image of God, but you've been given a new nature, the divine nature, and you're something special. It's all about Jesus, it's all because of Him - but if you're ever going to love your neighbour, let alone love your enemy, you've got to start loving yourself and appreciating who you are in Jesus, you're accepted in the Beloved.

So this love is a place of security, a safe place of acceptance; where you can - as we saw it this morning - even warts and all, even the sin, and even the baggage, you can come into relationship with God and He will help you. It's all about grace rather than performance. Can I let you into a wee secret? If you have a performance-based relationship with God, vertically - right? So you're trying to live up to certain standards to be acceptable with Him, you will have a performance-based relationship horizontally with everybody around you. That's why you've got people in church, and 'If you don't measure up to my standard, I won't accept you'. Who do you think you are?

The reason why they're behaving like that is because that's the relationship they have with God. But if you have a grace-based relationship with God, an unconditional love relationship with God, a love that dispels fear, and a love that brings total and absolute security; you will have that type of relationship with people horizontally, you'll love

them, and accept them, no matter about what they do or what they might seem to be - you'll just love them.

Do you remember the prodigal son? I love that story. I could preach on that story for the rest of my life, and there would still be something new you could bring out of it - it's amazing. But I've got a lot of time for the young fellow, because before he even left the house he had more of an appreciation about what was in his father's house than the elder brother who never left the house. Do you know why I know that? Because when he was in the far country, and he was drunk and prostituting himself, and feeding pigs and trying to eat their food, and all his friends had left him, and he'd hit rock-bottom, what does he say? 'I will go to my father's house where there is bread and enough to spare'. There was something in that young man that knew, if he got up and went home, there was a chance that he would be received again. He thought it would be as a servant, but when he got home he was received as a son. I'll tell you better than that: his father put the robe around him, and the robe was put on him before he had a bath! You can work that one out, but he was accepted and received home, and his father wouldn't even let him get the speech out. He interrupts him. He's been practicing this speech: 'I have sinned against you and heaven, and am no more worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your hired servants'. He doesn't even get the speech about the hired servant - the father interrupts him. Imagine God interrupting you! 'Shush'. 'Get the fatted calf! Get the best robe! Put shoes on his feet! Get a ring! My son that was dead is alive again, my son that was lost is found'.

He knew the father's heart even when he was in the far country. Maybe you're here tonight in the far country - but you're seeing, as I preach to you, into the Father's heart again. You're seeing this four-dimensional love. I pray that God would just open your eyes - but not just somebody in the far country. Remember the elder brother? He was in the father's house, but he had never seen in the father's heart. You can be in Christian evangelical religion for years, and you don't know God. You don't know God, and you don't know His love.

The great theological mastermind, Dr. Seuss, once said: 'You know you're in love when you can't fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams'. That's Christianity: better than your dreams. That's what this love is like. Let's pray.

Now, let's take a moment. Is there anyone here tonight, and you've never known the love of God. You know you're a sinner, and you know it's not going to go well with you the way you are in life or death, and you need Jesus. But you didn't realise the good news was this good, and you didn't realise God was that good. So many people go out of church feeling worse than they came in, most of them are Christians. But the good news is good: Jesus is here tonight by the Holy Spirit, the One that died for you, and He is risen, and He will receive you if you come to Him - no strings attached, just come to Him. Admit you've got it wrong, and give it all to Him, and this love will be known by you.

But if you're a Christian here tonight, and you've not known this love - well, I encourage you on the back of what I said this morning: you need to start trusting God with your life. You need to surrender to Him. You need to bring everything into the light - not to get scolded, but to get healed and fixed and saved. Then you need to open yourself up to the love of God. Maybe you need to forgive people who didn't love you the way they should have, and they've given you a bad view of God. I don't know,

but I believe God has touched lives here tonight. I believe the Holy Spirit is moving in people's hearts.

Just while heads are bowed and eyes closed - and I don't know whether this is the done thing or not, but if you've really sensed the touch of God upon your life tonight, just while heads are bowed and eyes closed (let's respect people's privacy before God), would you be willing to raise your hand and say: 'I want to know this love. I want to know this way. I want to know God like this'. Just where you're sitting, would you be willing to say - that can be a big thing you know, it doesn't, in one sense, change much, but it can be a decision where you're drawing a line, you're saying: 'Yes Lord, I want this. I need this'. Whatever your circumstance, just where you're sitting, would you just raise your hand to say: 'Lord, here I am. Fill my empty tank with Your love. I need fear dispelled from my life, Lord, here I am. I need to feel safe and accepted and secured. I need to hear those words of affirmation that You spoke over Jesus: 'This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased''. Is there anybody, just where you're sitting, I'm not going to single you out or embarrass you, don't worry.

Lord, I thank You for Your love. Thank You for Your grace, Your favour. Lord, You're just amazing. You're just wonderful. Words fail me, Lord, I just don't know what to say except: Thank You. Thank You for this love. Thank You for this life. Thank You that we can come face-to-face with You, and truly know You in the depths. One day we'll see You, Lord Jesus, but, Lord, there's an awful lot more that we can have revealed to us by Your Spirit here and now. I say, Lord: would You now lead people by the hand into that relationship with You? Whether they've never embarked upon faith before, this might be their night - but, Lord, for this company of believers, O Lord, pour out a baptism of unconditional love. Let us be intoxicated, as the Shulamite says in the Song of Songs: 'I'm sick with love'. Let us be beside ourselves at the reckless prodigal love of Abba Father. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Knowing God - Chapter 3

"Understanding His Father-heart"

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Well, good morning everyone, it's really great to be back with you again in Thomas Street, and it's good to renew fellowship with you again. Thank you for the welcome. If you weren't here the last time, I apologise because I'm jumping in right in the middle of a series. We began a series when I was with you on 'Knowing God', we began looking at how we can actually know God as a Person. Now, I know that sounds obvious, perhaps, to some, but on a practical level it isn't obvious to many Christians, sometimes folks who have been Christians for years upon years. We can actually know God as well as we know our nearest and our dearest - in fact, we can know God better than we know anyone else. That is truly a revelation, and we started looking on the first day of this series, morning and evening, at how - just like any other relationship - we need trust and we need truth, we need to be able to trust God and sense that trust, and there needs to be transparency in our relationship with Him. Then in the evening we looked at how there also needs to be an awareness of love and acceptance - and I'm not going to repeat any of that, get the recordings if you can.

Let's just pray before we come to what we will consider this morning and then later on this evening. I want to encourage you, if you would, to pray yourself right now, that God would speak to you - OK? Just say: 'Lord, please would You meet with me now, would You speak to me', and He really can do wonders in just the time that we have left through His word and through the Holy Spirit. So, why not open your heart to Him now?

Father, we come to You, and we thank You that we can call You 'Our Father', 'Abba Father'. We come to You through Jesus Christ, Your Son, the Lord Jesus who died for us, rose again, bore away our sins, and who is now with us by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. So, we welcome You, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to be with us now, to minister to us, to help us. We need You, and we ask specifically for a revelation of Your heart for us - who do You want to be for us now, Lord? So, come, we pray, help us now as we open Your word. In Jesus' mighty name we pray, Amen.

I want you to turn to John chapter 14, please, John 14 then and verse 7. Jesus is speaking: *"If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him". Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us'. Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"*

You'll remember, I hope, if you were with us, I began explaining how there are essential components that are key to relationships that we have as humans, and actually they kind of cross over and correspond to the relationship we have with God. Now, obviously that relationship with Him that we have is vastly different in aspects than human-to-human relationships, and yet there are parallels that I think are very instructive when we consider how we can know God in a very intimate way. I'll not go

through them all on the screen, but I've already mentioned trust and truth, love and acceptance, and up there is also 'understanding'. It's vital that, if we're going to know someone deeply and personally, that we understand them, that we understand who they are, that we understand how they are towards us, how they feel about us. So, to truly know someone, you have to understand them. We know that's a process, and it takes many many years for us. But what I want to bring to you this morning is that to truly know God - and I hope that's your desire - you have to understand God as Father. You have to have a grip of the Father-heart of God, and how He is toward us as Father to His children.

Let's just park that for a moment or two, and we will look at it in great depth throughout the proceedings this morning. But I want to challenge you that the most important thing about you is actually what you think about God. The great question is: what is God like? It's the question that has obsessed theologians, philosophers, intellectuals, and the ordinary simple man or woman throughout human history. But what you think about God is the most important thing about you, because what you think about God actually affects you and how you think about yourself. Let me repeat that: what you think about God affects how you think about yourself. So, it's obvious then that it's vital to get God right, because it affects absolutely everything.

Here's a principle that you do well to remember as you look about the world where there is such a plethora of belief and gods, deities: you become like the God you worship. That's why your conception of God is vital, if you get that right, because you will actually be affected by what you think about God, you will actually be transformed into the image of the god that you adore. I don't know whether you can read that Psalm terribly well there on the screen, but basically it's talking about idols, and how the pagans worship them, and how they have eyes but cannot see, ears but they can't hear, and hands but they can't move - Psalm 115:3-8. At the very end of the Psalm it says that those that worship them become like them, isn't that interesting? There is an impotence that comes to us when we worship a god that is lesser than the True and the Living.

Of course, there is so much confusion abroad, isn't there, as I've alluded to, in regards to: who is God? What is He like? What does He require of us? But could I suggest to you that, in the church, confusion is abroad. What is our God really like? What does He think of us? Well, let me make it very simple for everyone here today: if you want to know what God is like, you need to know that Jesus came to reveal the Father's heart. I mean, that just summarises it all! The disciples had this kind of dilemma as well: they were listening to Jesus' parables, they were watching His great signs and wonders and works, and Philip is exasperated and he says: 'Look, if You just show us God, just show us the Father and that will be sufficient, we'll be satisfied! Show us God!'. Jesus says: 'Have I been so long with you, and you don't know this, Philip? To see Me is to see the Father. Look at Me...' - and if I can just elaborate on what Jesus was meaning: 'I am the perfect and absolute complete revelation of God. If you want to know exactly what God is like, look at Me'.

I don't think there are many people who would look at Jesus and be disappointed with how God is. Even people who don't follow Him in our world, tend to like Him to an extent. He is how the Father is. He is how God is. I know some of you may have quandaries and confusion about the Old Testament and the way God is portrayed, and we need to leave that for another day - but just know this: that Jesus is where you need to look.

Many counsellors believe that the majority of a child's identity is formed through the father-child relationship. I would add to that that our idea of God is actually formulated largely from the father-child relationship. Someone said Jesus was the Man He was because of the Father He had. He was the perfect Son with the perfect Father. The Father-heart of God, knowing and understanding that God is our true Father, is actually the answer for the age in which we live. In fact, just as a bit of a digression, Malachi chapter 4 verse 6 promises that in the end times this is something that God is going to do: He is going to turn father's hearts back to their children, and children's hearts back to their fathers, 'lest I come and strike the earth with a curse', the verse says. So, wherever a father's heart is turned toward anything other than his children, a curse ensues not only upon the family, but upon the land - isn't that interesting?

Some of you can remember the 1960s - not me, of course! There was during that era what has come to be known as the sexual revolution, 'free love', supposedly. During that period, I believe there was a moral and spiritual meltdown. There was the rise of feminism, and I'm not suggesting absolutely everything that came with that was bad - but fatherhood, and indeed masculinity in general, was not very popular during this period and ever since. Our present age is suffering the fallout of this meltdown, because we - if ever there has been one - are the fatherless generation. Without doubt, it is the social crisis of our nation and indeed our world. The nuclear family is in trouble.

Britain has the highest divorce rate in the European Union, according to a survey in August 2014. In the United States, divorce statistics are little different among Christians than they are among non-believers. Fatherlessness is the crisis of our age. The Centre for Social Justice reported in 2013 - this is a UK-wide report - that in some areas (I mean geographical areas, neighbourhoods), fatherlessness has reached such high levels that there are virtual (and I'm quoting) 'men deserts' - wildernesses where there are no positive male role models or influences. It was reported in the Guardian in 2017 that almost half of all children born today will not be living with both parents by the time they are fifteen - almost half of all children! Three million children are growing up today with only their mothers. The report went on to say, I'm quoting again, 'The absence of fathers is linked to higher rates of teenage crime, pregnancy, and disadvantage'.

By the way, these statistics that I'm giving you, and all these quotes, are secular - they are not from some Christian ministry, they are secular and available on the Internet. The Institute for the Study of Civil Society (CIVITAS), says: 'Children without fathers are eight times more likely to go to prison, five times more likely to commit suicide, twenty times more likely to have behavioural problems, twenty times more likely to become rapists, thirty-two times more likely to become runaways, ten times more likely to abuse chemical substances, nine times more likely to drop out of high school, and a tenth as likely to get As in school'. The Centre for Social Justice warned that the UK is experiencing 'a tsunami of family breakdown'. I believe much of the identity crisis in our society, indeed gender confusion, actually stems from a lack of fathers - I'm not going to go into that this morning, but I believe that a lot of people are just looking for their Dad, looking for the affection of their fathers.

Jack Frost, in his interesting book 'Experiencing the Father's Embrace', says: 'Before every major revival, there has been a social crisis in the land. Then God brings a fresh outpouring of His grace, and begins to meet the needs of the social crisis. He has

chosen this season in church history to reveal His affectionate Father's-heart'. Now what I'm sharing with you just now is not, in any shape or form, to make a single parent, a single mother feel uncomfortable here today. If your father has been absent, deserted, or your parents divorced, I want you to understand: this is a message of hope for you today, not condemnation, and not guilt - because you have got a head start in fact! Because if anybody needs to hear it - we all need to hear it - but you need the healing of your heart through the Father-heart of God. You need to know that whatever you've lost out in life's terms, you can receive from the abundant love and affection of your Heavenly Father.

A great deal of our social, moral, and sexual problems today can be traced to fatherlessness. The answer is knowing God as Father through how Jesus revealed Him. So if you want to know God more, you've got to know Him as Father. Turn with me to Galatians chapter 4, please. Galatians 4, and we will read a few verses from verse 4: 'But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons', or children 'And because you are sons', or children, 'God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!'. Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ'. What Galatians 4 is saying is that we were slaves, but now we are sons, we are children of God. This has taken place by adoption through Christ's redemption.

Now, let's pause for a moment. I want to ask you the question, going back to your conception of God and your understanding of Him, or lack thereof: have we got God all wrong? What is our conception of Him? Or, to put it another way, in the context of Galatians 4: have we got our idea of God from Moses or from Jesus? Now, I'm not saying Moses had a different God, but there was a partial revelation of God in the Old Testament. We have got the complete revelation in Jesus - and Galatians tells us that the law of God, the first five books of the Old Testament, were like a schoolmaster, a tutor, a coach, to lead us to Christ. Now what we have is far better. We're not slaves, we are sons and daughters! We now have the Spirit of God's Son living within us, and we are crying out: 'Abba Father!'

James Montgomery Boice, in his commentary on Galatians, in his footnotes references an academic work by a man called J. Jeremias, and the title of the work is 'The Central Message of the New Testament'. There is an essay within that great tome and it's just entitled 'Abba'. The inference is that the central message of the New Testament Gospel is this understanding of God as our 'Abba Father'. He actually points out in that chapter three things: no one ever used this term for God. Now, they may have called God 'the Father of the nation', 'the Father of Israel', but no one would ever have had the audacity to call God 'My Father' personally. A second point he makes is that Jesus, it would seem, always addressed God as 'Abba Father' when He prayed. But thirdly, and most audaciously, He taught his disciples to pray to God in this manner - which was scandalous to those who were hearing Him! 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name'. So, right away, He's laying as a foundation for the disciples that our whole prayer life and approach to God, our knowing God, is based on this intimacy of understanding that God is our Abba Father. Do you know that?

It's staggering, how intimate we are expected to be with God as our Father. You know, 'Abba', though it became used in Hebrew, is essentially also an Aramaic word. 'Abba' and 'Imma' are the Aramaic baby-speak words for 'Mama, Dada'. 'Imma', Mama;

'Abba', Dada. Now this is where people get all panicky, you know? 'Oh, make sure we're not getting irreverent here'. Look, forget about all that just for a moment: this is the Bible, God's word. Whatever your tradition is, or whatever your sensibilities, need to be subservient to this book - and Jesus teaches us to call God and approach Him 'Abba Father', as if a little toddler was climbing up on Daddy's knee, that's the way you meant to come to your Heavenly Father.

Now, if that's overfamiliar for you, you're not familiar enough with God - because that is the relationship that God has given to us through Jesus. Just as one of the most important earthly relationships that we'll ever have is with our earthly Dads, so knowing God as our Heavenly Father is one of the most vital aspects to truly knowing Him as He is toward us. So, are you having a Father-child relationship with your Heavenly Father, or are you stuck in slavery - do you behave like a slave?

Turn with me to Luke chapter 15, I got you to turn here the last time I was with you, this is such an important parable. You could spend your whole life expounding it, no matter how many times I look at it, I usually see something different, something new. We'll not read the whole passage - you know, the young fellow, there's an older guy, the elder brother, he stays at home, but the young guy has asked for his inheritance. It's split between the two of them, he goes away into the far country and wastes it in prodigal living - prostitutes, alcohol, partying, all therest - hits rock bottom, realises there is bread in his father's house and to spare, so he journeys home. But before he journeys home, he kind of looks in the mirror and practices a speech to make when he sees his Dad, you know, to get it right. Here we have it in verse 18: 'I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants''. So, he's basically saying: 'All I can really expect to happen for me now - because I've made such a blunder, and I've sullied the family name, and I've wasted my inheritance - is just to be made a hired servant, a slave'.

But he travels home, and we'll not go into all the details, but the father sees him a long way off - he's been watching for him obviously - and the father runs to him, to meet him. Then if you look down you see what actually happens, verse 20: 'And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said' - OK, so here's the spiel - "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son'. But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him". The father interrupts him in mid-flow in his rehearsed speech and doesn't let him get out the words 'make me like one of your hired servants', because he is a son, and he is now treating him like a son, dressing him like a son, feeding him like a son.

I wonder do we see the Father as He really is? When you make your blunders, as we all do - I occasionally sin as well, more than occasionally, unfortunately - but how do we behave? 'Oh, God, I can't come to Him now after what I've done, you know, I'm going to leave it a day or two before I pray'. We mightn't do that, I hope we don't, but that's often how we feel, isn't it? Because we don't really understand how He is toward us: He does not deal with us according to our sins or reward us after our iniquities - it's grace now, not law, grace! When you understand the Father relationship that we have, as sons and daughters, we start to behave more like the prodigal - at least he knew to come home - rather than the elder brother. Look at him, look at verse 28 - so the party is thrown for this young reprobate, and in verse 28 the elder brother is angry,

would not go into the house: 'I'm not going in there! What's going on in there?'. 'Therefore his father came out and pleaded with him. So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you" - look at the language - "Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends". Now, who talks to their Dad like that? 'All these years I've been serving you, I've never broken any of your commandments'. The elder brother had a slave-master mentality with his father, the elder brother had an employee-employer arrangement with his father. He was in the father's house, but he hadn't seen into the father's heart - yet the guy that burned his bridges and made a mess, he understood more, because at least he came home and he knew there was bread in his father's house.

Religious people relate to God like the elder brother. The elder brother was really the Pharisee. We stop at the prodigal, but actually this was the sucker punch to the ones listening to Jesus, He's saying: 'This is you guys. You don't do all the dirty stuff, but you've never understood God'. You see, the Pharisees, they knew their Bible, but they didn't know their God when He turned up in human flesh. Isn't that interesting? They were incarcerated in legalism and laws, rather than love; in rules, rather than relationship. Some of us have many biblical concepts of God, but we are still not personally intimate with Him because we don't understand or enjoy Him as our Abba Father!

Why is it that we might have a problem grasping that God is our Abba Father? Well, let me give you at least two reasons. It could be that we have had wrong teaching, or maybe unbalanced teaching about God - harsh, legalistic, cold and demanding teaching that has made us afraid of God in the wrong way. The fear of God is true, and it is the start of wisdom, but the fear of God is not being afraid of God. I think I touched on that the last time. You can't get to know anybody that you are afraid of, you'll never come near them.

Maybe we have to look at some of the things we've imbibed and been taught. If we get the impression that God can't wait to drop us into hell some day - that's not the heart of God. Don't get me wrong, there is a hell, there is a judgement day coming - there is one day, but there have been thousands and thousands of years of grace. That's why Jesus came and suffered hell on the cross, because God doesn't want us, anybody, to go there - the heart of God is to save! He's not going to put our arm up our back to get us there, we've got to make a choice - but wrong teaching of God can be a real problem here, because we don't see God as 'Abba', we see Him as a cruel, harsh taskmaster; someone who is distant from us, maybe even disinterested.

But what can really add problems to this is the bad example, the wrong examples we may have been given by our earthly fathers. Bad teaching is one thing, but wrong example can really solidify our concept of God - because our parents, fathers in particular, but both parents are meant to cover us, spiritually protect us as well as physically, and they're actually meant to be signposts pointing towards God, but so often they are pointing in the other direction, away from God. If you've had an absentee father, or a deserting father, or a detached father, or a passive father, an aggressive, angry, harsh father, a perfectionist father, a religious hypocrite of a father - we could go on and on and on, couldn't we? This can be one of the biggest obstacles to people knowing God as their Abba Father, and I'll tell you why: have you ever played the word association game? Someone says a word, and you speak out the first

word that comes into your mind without thinking about it too much. So: microwave-oven; toothbrush-toothpaste; couch-chair; David Legge... No, don't answer that one! But, you understand: 'father' is not a neutral word. When you say 'father' to people, even if it's 'Father God', all sorts of things can be conjured up. What's the association with your father? Very different thoughts come to very different people. All of us have had biological fathers, but not everybody has had a Dad.

Years ago, when I read 'Father' in the Bible, I just substituted it with 'God', I just thought it was the word for 'God' - but I never got anything from it emotionally or spiritually until I had this revelation of God being my Abba, my Heavenly Dada. Like a baby, I can come to Him at any time, and crawl up on His lap, and know that I am accepted, and I am loved, and I am protected.

God becomes our Abba Father, and I want to ask you today: do you know Him as that? Do you call him that? Do you know how this has actually happened? Romans 8:15 says: 'For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father''. Adoption! It has happened through adoption. There are two ways you can have kids: you can have them naturally - and when that happens, you get what you get, yes? No choice. But adoption means you see what you're getting, and you get a full history of the child, warts and all - that's the way God has made us His children! He knows everything about you, He knows who you are. He made you, He formed you, He knows your full history - the good, the bad, and the ugly - there are no surprises. The miracle of this is: knowing you as you really are, He wants you! He wants you! He wants you not as a slave or a servant, He wants you as His child. Not only does He want you in His family, He pursues you!

The problem is: not only do we not know who God is as our Father, we don't really know who we are. We are living like slaves and orphans with a begging bowl. Look at Romans 8:15-17: 'For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father''. The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs - heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified with Him'.

Now, when you were adopted in Bible times, there were a few problems. There was often a long period of adjustment for at least two reasons. First of all, when a child was adopted from slavery to sonship, they often had the mindset of a slave. Do you understand? They kept thinking like slaves. So you kept getting up at the same time, you kept doing the same chores, you kept expecting the same reprimand, you kept waiting after the family to get your food. You're not forced any more to do the things you used to have to do, and that's often the way we are as children of God - we've got the slave mentality. Even regarding sin - and you need to know: sin shall no longer have dominion over you. You've believed a lie believing that you have to continually obey it and its desires and passions - it's a lie! You're actually free! You're not a slave any more, you're a child of God!

But after a slave mentality, there was also the slave poverty - not enjoying what's yours. You know - now, I hope you're not foolish enough to give your child your credit card, but in theory everything that is yours is theirs. In a slave house it was unthinkable just to walk up to the fridge and lift something out to eat, or to ask Daddy for some money. Yet this was what was coming in an inheritance that they never

knew. I want to ask you: what keeps you back from living in your inheritance as a child of God? The verse we read: if we are children, then heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ - do you know what that means? 'Heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ', the two sons in the parable of the prodigal - we often miss this - the inheritance was split between both of them. The elder brother got his cut as well as the younger one who wasted it, and yet he didn't do anything with his! He didn't enjoy what was his.

We are joint heirs with Jesus, that means God's will has been split between Jesus and us. God makes no difference between Jesus and me; His only begotten Son and I have the same destiny, the same inheritance. That means you are in the will with the Son of God, what is coming to Jesus is coming to you! Often we think about ourselves the way our fathers talked about us, isn't that true? Or the way some other authority figure, a teacher, or even a Christian leader spoke over us. We need to stop listening to those lies, and we need to start hearing what God thinks about us, how He feels about us. You see, it's even better in the New Covenant, because not only are we adopted and we are in the will, but 2 Peter 1:4 says we are protectors of the divine nature. The verses that we read in Romans tell us that we have the Spirit of God's Son within us. Now, no matter how long you're adopted in society today, you will never ever become a biological son or daughter - but in the kingdom of God, in the New Covenant we actually get to become people with the DNA (it's not the true term), but the nature of God - we get it!

So, I want to ask you: are you living as a slave or a son? Do you know that God is your true Abba Father? Do you call Him 'Abba Father'? Do you know He longs to hear you call Him 'Abba Father'? Maybe you'll start doing that today. I'll never forget the first time I called Him 'Abba Father' - from my background, when I put it into English, I thought I was nearly sinning! Some of you here today perhaps need healed from father wounds, earthly fathers, or a parent wound - that's why you find trust and intimacy hard with God. Maybe you need to forgive an offending parent, you need to confess your own sin in how you have reacted toward that. Maybe you have to repent of substitutes? You know, this is the reason why we sin a lot, the way we sin, we're trying to fill the void, the 'love tank' I showed you the last time which needs to be filled by Father's love - we're just looking for our Father. We need to repent of substitutes, ungodly coping mechanisms and reactions, and we need to embrace, by faith, our true Heavenly Father who is just like Jesus.

Let's pray: Father, I just pray for everybody here today. None of us is a perfect father or a perfect parent, and none of us - even those of us who have had exemplary parents, have not had perfect parents. We are here to honour our fathers and our mothers as Your Word says - but, Lord, we are not here to stick our heads in the sand either, ignorant of how we may have been affected adversely by the parental relationship, or other relationships from other authority figures. Lord, give us the grace to forgive our parents and others. Lord, open our eyes to see You, Father, Abba, Dada in heaven through the filter of Jesus, Your Son. Holy Spirit, show us the Father, heal our wounds and fill our emptiness by His unconditional love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Knowing God - Chapter 4

"Intimacy"

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Good evening everybody! Great to be back with you tonight, and wonderful to share fellowship again this morning. I do trust that we will know the Lord's help and blessing tonight as we come to His word. Let's pray together, and I would just ask you to pray as well that God would speak to you tonight. So, would you do that? Just say: 'Lord, please speak to me. Come near'. We're talking about knowing God, and we want to experience Him tonight as we approach Him in prayer. So let's pray together.

After this morning, we thank You, Lord, that we can call You 'Our Father', 'Abba Father'. Whilst You are in heaven, and hallowed is Your name, we thank You that the transcendence of our God - though You are above and beyond our conception - does not inhibit our ability to be intimate with You as children with our heavenly Abba. So we ask that, Lord, we would not be found engaging in words only, but actually in the demonstration and power of the Gospel we will experience Your presence with us tonight, that You will draw very near, Lord, and touch our lives. We long to know You, to know Your ways, to know You as You really are, and to know who we are in You. So we welcome the Holy Spirit to come and minister to all our hearts, whatever our needs might be, and draw us to Yourself. In Jesus' mighty name we pray, Amen.

If you've been listening to this series so far - I started it in March and continued this morning - we've been looking at characteristics, if you like, key components to good relationships. We have been paralleling that with our relationship with God. Now, I hasten to add, as I emphasised this morning and previously, our relationship with God is very different than our relationship to other people on several levels, vital ones - but there are similarities that are striking; and, in fact, I believe, very instructive and helpful as we seek to cultivate deeper relationships and a deeper knowledge with the Lord.

When I was here in March, we looked at 'Trust and Truth', we also looked at 'Love and Acceptance'. This morning we considered 'Understanding', and particularly the understanding of who God is to us, and who Christ has revealed Him to be as our Heavenly Father and our Abba Father - and what that means for us, to become sons and daughters of God, inheritors with Jesus Christ. I'll not go into all that again, but do get the recordings if you can. It's very important to know who the God is that we are coming to, and that we are sons and daughters and not slaves.

But tonight I want us to consider - and I suppose it's going a little bit deeper into what we have already explored - it's one word on that screen at the moment: 'Intimacy', or as some people have broken it up 'Into-Me-See', which is essentially what intimacy is. Let's read a couple of Scriptures first of all, I want you to turn to the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. If you don't know where that is, find the book of Psalms - it's a pretty big one - then Ecclesiastes, and then Song of Solomon is right after that. We're going to go straight to chapter 8, and then we'll be going to the book of Revelation.

Song of Songs chapter 8 verse 6:

*"Set me as a seal upon your heart,
As a seal upon your arm;
For love is as strong as death,
Jealousy as cruel as the grave;
Its flames are flames of fire,
A most vehement flame.*

*Many waters cannot quench love,
Nor can the floods drown it.
If a man would give for love
All the wealth of his house,
It would be utterly despised".*

Then over to Revelation chapter 3 verse 20, this is quite a well-known verse. It's often used evangelistically, I'm not saying that that is wrong, but it's not its primary contextual meaning. It's a letter that is written to a church in Laodicea, and it's the closing remarks of the Lord Jesus to believing Christians. Revelation 3:20: *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him",* or her, *"and dine with him, and he with Me".*

In Exodus chapter 33 in verse 13, we read back in March something that Moses prayed to God. His heart's desire was: 'Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight'. I don't know whether you remember or not, but I pointed out at that particular occasion that the Hebrew word for 'know' there, 'that I might know You', is the word 'yada'. We would transliterate it 'y-a-d-a', 'yada'. It's right throughout that chapter 33 of Exodus, and it has several meanings, you could translate it several ways: 'to know', 'to learn', it means 'to perceive and see', 'to find out or discover', particularly 'to know by experience', personal experiential knowledge, or 'to be acquainted with'. But it's also used famously in Genesis 4 verse 1 of sexual knowledge, 'Adam knew Eve, his wife', 'Adam yada Eve, his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain'. Sometimes that can frighten you off that word a little bit, but it's not actually synonymous with sexual union, it speaks to something even deeper than a sexual act - it's talking of intimate knowledge that is involved in the one flesh union. It's not the physicality, it's the deep intimacy.

We highlighted that all of us as human beings have a desire to know and be known, and so it's not surprising that the deepest human relationship probably known is that of marriage. The Holy Spirit takes marriage and uses it as an analogy of our relationship with God. So, in the beginning, when man is created - and the world is perfect, by the way - God realises that (He, of course, intended it this way) Adam is alone, and it's not good that he is alone. In fact, we could say that Adam was incomplete without Eve; just the way we are incomplete without God.

Then we move on, and we are fast-forwarding very much into the period of Exodus, and you've got Moses climbing Mount Sinai to meet with God and to receive the Ten Commandments; but it was the Covenant that God was making with the children of Israel - and that has been likened in the Old Testament to a marriage, that there is a marriage covenant being entered by God, as the covenant-keeping Jehovah, with His

bride, His wife, if you like, Israel.

Fast-forward again, and you come to the prophet Hosea. The prophet Hosea was a prophet to the northern kingdom of Israel, who were now following pagan ways. They had set up their own altar, they were worshipping golden calves - but the Lord was still pursuing them. Why? Because He was married to them. To illustrate this, He got Hosea the prophet - and this is a high task or order for any prophet - to actually live out (and you find this often within Scripture, that particularly the Old Testament prophets had to live out, to a degree, the message that they were preaching). In Hosea 1 verse 2 it says: 'The Lord began to speak to Hosea, and the Lord said to Hosea: 'Go, take yourself a wife of harlotry and children of harlotry, for the land has committed great harlotry by departing from the Lord''. Imagine that! God told His prophet to go and marry a prostitute! It's in the Bible! You should read the Bible, it's very interesting! Imagine if one of your Youth Group came to you and said: 'The Lord has been speaking to me'; 'Oh? What's He saying?', 'Oh, He's told me to go and marry a prostitute'. This is here - why is it here? What actually happens in the story is: he does this, he marries a prostitute and he has children to her. Then she is unfaithful to him, goes away and prostitutes herself again, ends up in slavery; and Hosea is called by God to then go to the slave market, and buy her back, and marry her all over again - why? Because God wanted to illustrate to His own people: 'This is what you're doing to Me! I am married to you, you are My wife, but you are prostituting yourself with false gods and false ways, and you're breaking My heart!'. It's serious stuff, isn't it?

Then fast-forwarding right to the very end of the story, we come to the book of the Revelation, where the church of Jesus, the New Testament Church is described as the Bride of Christ. In fact, Paul in Ephesians, when he talks about the marriage relationship and the various responsibilities that husbands have to wives and vice versa, he says in chapter 5 and verse 32: 'This is a great mystery' - we would all say 'Amen' to that - 'but I speak concerning Christ and the church'. So there is a representation, there is something very sacred in marriage that typifies the relationship that Jesus has to the Bride of Christ, the Church. That's why, by the way, the devil hates marriage.

If I could go back a little, rewind, there is a wonderful book that we read from at the very beginning of my message, the Song of Songs or the Song of Solomon. The language within it depicts the divine romance, the intimacy that God's people can have with their God. I know it is a literal story of, probably, Solomon the King with the Shulamite bride, whoever she was - so it is literal, it is a love story, it's graphic at times, but it depicts the deep intimacy that we can have with our God. Some of the verses you will be familiar with: 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your love is better than wine', 'He brought me to his banqueting house, and his banner over me was love', 'My beloved is mine, and I am his', 'You are all fair, my love, and there is no spot in you', 'I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me', but we read: 'Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is as strong as death, jealousy is cruel as the grave; its flames are flames of fire, a most vehement flame. Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised'.

Now, I don't know whether the men are starting to break out in a sweat here - because often men have a bit of a problem with this concept of the divine romance. In their relationship with God, they find it awkward at times - and we'll not go into the

reasons why that is. But I want you understand that we're not talking about physical or sexual love in any way here, but the intimacy that at times is portrayed in that way, but we're talking about the passion that we can have in a fiery, red-hot love for our God that surpasses any human affection. Actually what it is - and you've got to remember this: that everything we have in creation here, whether it's the relationship, by the way, of a father to a child that we were talking about this morning. I used to think that God called Himself 'Father' because we knew what fathers were because we have them down here, it's actually the opposite. God created fathers down here because He is one, to show us what He is like - that's the way it was meant to work. In the same way, we have loving intimacy and passion down here on earth, because there is the greatest of all loves that was known for all eternity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. That is the greatest love of all, the love in the triune Godhead, the deepest communion that was ever known has been known by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus was talking about when He came to the church at Ephesus, another church that was written to in the book of Revelation, and He said to them: 'You have lost your first love'; that's why He then came to Laodicea with similar issues, and He says to them: 'Look, I'm outside the door here, I'm rapping on the outside to get inside of My church! If anyone can hear Me, if anybody inside can hear Me and opens the door of their heart, I'll come into them' - He didn't say He would come into the whole church, He'd come into them and commune with them, have intimate relationship with them.

So Jesus is meant to be the Bridegroom of our hearts. There is to be a divine romance. It's not just to know we are loved, and to love God in some nebulous form; but actually the deepest, intimate communion that is possible is not between a husband and a wife, but between God and His children. Now, for some of you this might be hard to swallow, but the fact of the matter is: this is the way it has been. Even John Wesley got into trouble - you know that beautiful hymn 'Jesu', Lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly'; he got into all sorts of bother there. You think people get into trouble for modern hymns, he was in trouble for that one - because it just seemed too delicate: 'Jesus, Lover of my soul, let me to Thy bosom fly'.

So I'm asking you tonight, unashamedly: how in love are you with Jesus? How in love are you? It's all about love. Jesus was asked on one occasion what the greatest commandment was, and many of you will know the answer, Jesus' reply: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind; this is the first and the greatest commandment'. That's everything! Love Him with everything you've got, 100%!

Do you know what happens when people's love grows cold? Well, one of two things can happen: they either settle for the familiar without the passion, the status quo, they just stick together for the kids; or they part - isn't that right? They either settle for what they've got, or they part. That's basically what happens to Christians and churches: they either settle for what they've got - dead religion, without the passion - or they backslide, and part from the Lord altogether.

By the way, I should say that dead religion can look extremely passionate. That sounds a contradiction, but dead religion can be passionate about all the wrong things. Do you remember how Paul, in 1 Corinthians 13 said: 'Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, but have not love, I have become a sounding brass or a clanging cymbal'. Listen to this: 'Though I have the gift of prophecy' - would you like the gift of

prophecy? - 'understand all mysteries' - have the gift of wisdom - 'and knowledge' - the gift of knowledge - 'and though I have all faith' - faith that could remove mountains - 'but have not love, I am nothing. Though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor' - very charitable - 'though I give my body to be burned' - a martyr - 'but have not love, it profits me nothing'. So you can do all those things: you can be a prophet, you can be a guru, you can be the most knowledgeable person on the earth, a faith-filled person that speaks and mountains move, you can give your body to be burned at the stake, and feed all the poor of the world, and be passionate for all that stuff - and not actually have the agape love of God. Isn't that incredible? Just in love with the wrong things.

A certain preacher said: 'The Gospel gets perverted when people who are not in love interpret the Scriptures'. I think that's profound! The Gospel gets perverted when people who are not in love interpret the Scriptures. You know, 'agape love' for God comes from God. Only God can love God, it's that tri-unity of love that existed with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in eternity - I think that's probably the first love Jesus was talking about to Ephesus when He said 'You've lost first love'. We've actually been called to share in that love. Jesus said in John 15:9: 'As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love'. Wow. That just blows my mind, just let that sink in for a moment: as the Father loved Jesus, Jesus loves us - that's the Father's love through Jesus - and He says 'Abide in My love', the word means 'remain' in My love. You remain in it because it's already there, and I want you to understand this: this is not something you need to strive for as a child of God, all we heard about this morning, it's a given, you've already got it. The question is: how do you remain in an intimacy with God?

Listen: if you really want to know God more, you're going to have to become more intimate with Him. I want to give you three things tonight that will help you into a deeper intimacy with God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They're very simple: one, communication; two, time; and three, commitment. Let's look first of all at communication. It's obvious, isn't it, that communication is vital in every relationship - but how much more with God? Early on in the disciples' relationship with Jesus, they asked Him: 'Lord, teach us to pray as John taught his disciples' - and He teaches them: 'Our Father', Father first and then all the rest.

If most of us are honest, we tend to only call upon God with any intensity when there is a crisis. Is that too harsh? After our sin life, our prayer life is probably what we are most embarrassed about - yes? So let's take a survey, alright? No, I'll not do that! But imagine if we did that, eh? 'Oh, I need to go to the toilet now'. How long did you pray today? How long did you pray this week? Imagine having a friend who only sought you when they were in trouble, but the rest of the time they didn't want to know you - how would you feel? Used. We so often use God, don't we? We come to Him when we are in desperation, but if things are going well maybe we don't as much.

The Observer newspaper in January of last year reported a survey, very interesting, that said one in five adults in the UK pray, despite not being religious. That was very encouraging, I thought. The article actually says that it is an instinctive response to crisis. It went on to say others prayed as they engaged in household chores, or walking, or other activities - but just under half who prayed said they believed God heard them. So one in five adults in the UK prayed, but under half of them actually believed God was listening. Now, the positive I took out of that is: they might get a big

surprise, because God might answer them! Another positive was: there obviously is that instinctiveness within all of us, as creatures of the Creator, to cry out to Him when we are in need. But the negative I took out of it is: why would you pray if you didn't believe God was there, or heard you? It's less likely to get an answer, by the way, if you're praying like that - because, as we said in our first study, 'He who comes to God must believe that He is'; He responds particularly to faith.

But as we consider that survey of people who don't consider themselves religious, we need to ask ourselves: well, are we really much different? Do we really only press in to God when we are in desperation? We who claim to have a personal relationship with Jesus, and are trying to get everybody else into that. Why is it that we struggle so with prayer? Let me suggest to you: the reason we struggle is a lack of motivation. That's why we are so bored - I'd love to take a show of hands right now, I really would - but who would admit to saying: 'I get really bored with prayer'? I know some of you may think this is very inappropriate, to be real in church - but we need to actually diagnose what the problems are here, because prayer should be the most exciting thing in the universe: to interact face-to-face with the Almighty God! So, if it's boring, something is wrong my side - yes?

Why do we find it boring? Well, let me ask you a counter-question: why does a young girl not need motivation to pursue her boyfriend, or vice versa? Why do they not lack motivation? They are falling in love. You see, we seldom approach prayer as a love relationship, rather it's more like a chore or a duty. Now, of course, don't misunderstand me: prayer has to be worked at, like any other relationship - but there has to be a loving relationship at the foundation of it or it won't work, it won't last, there will be no longevity! Just going back to what we looked at this morning, one of the reasons why we lack motivation in prayer is because we don't really understand who He is, we haven't got a glimpse of His glory, we don't realise what a Good Father He is. If we did, we'd just want to be in His company all the time.

Let me give you a couple of practical tips for communication that will deepen your intimacy and maybe dispel your boredom. Prayer is not a monologue. By that I mean: prayer is not you talking all the time, but prayer, in fact, is a dialogue where you interact with God. I have found over my quite a number of years now seeking the Lord, that actually the listening in my prayer life is probably more important, and certainly takes up more of my time than the talking. That's probably why God gave me two ears and one mouth. You see, the deepest level of communication is actually not speech, the deepest level of communication is communion. Communion is literally, if you look up the dictionary definition of 'communion', it's an act of sharing. Communion with God is when you're sharing His thoughts, you're sharing His heart. It's a deep communion that is beyond words, beyond at times even thoughts - you're connecting. As the Psalmist said: 'Deep is calling unto deep'.

It's like an earthy relationship to an extent, particularly marriage. You can just sit with your lover and not talk - that's very common, maybe, for some of you! But I mean in a positive light: you sit and you don't talk, just content to be with each other. You can even second-guess each other after a while, because you know how the other thinks and what they feel about certain things. You can even be actually physically apart on different continents, but still be in communion, still be in connection - and I'm not talking about WhatsApp, or Facetime; I'm talking about the heart, you're still one.

Can I encourage you to approach prayer like that? I used to be obsessed with looking at the clock, or praying down a list. I'm not saying, as you'll see in a moment, that time is unimportant, or it doesn't matter that we leave out praying specifically for important people and things - we need to do those things; but the priority in prayer must be connection and communion. Otherwise you can do all that other stuff and it will get nowhere. Brother Lawrence wrote a book called 'Practising the Presence of God', he was a monk - a wonderful book, I highly recommend it. He said: 'There is no sweeter manner of living in the world than continuous communion with God'. The story is famous: he wasn't a great preacher, but it's famous because he would wash dishes, he would cut carrots in the kitchen, and he would till the garden; and all throughout it all, he did it all for the glory of God, and he practised God's presence with him. He was as near God when he was washing the dishes as he was when he was doing his prayers.

By the way, ministry is not the most important thing in your life - what I mean is, service - it's not, it's communion. Do you see when you're in communion with God, I mean when you're connected with God - you might not be consciously praying, but when you're one spirit with Jesus Christ and you know it, you'll end up ministering whether you like it or not. It will be the overflow of your walk with God.

Here's another tip: you need a plan for prayer, communication. Someone once said: 'If you aim at nothing you will hit it'. You need a plan, but you also need variety. You've heard the saying: 'Variety is the spice of life' - it's not in the Bible, but it's true nevertheless. Predictability breeds boredom. Sometimes our devotional times are so predictable that we grow tired with them, and we often need to shake things up a little, try something different, change things. Go out a walk, change the place where you are, go a drive to a lake, do something different, use a different translation - I don't know. Keeping a journal is another thing that's good for listening to what God is actually saying, write down the thoughts that God is giving to you. But here's one vital tip that will keep you in communion with God, and that's - as old people used to say years ago - 'Keep short accounts with God'. When you fall into sin, confess your sins, repent quickly, and get back into communion. This is where intimacy starts: communication.

But secondly, flowing out from that: time is also crucial. Spending time alone in any relationship is important. The Lord Jesus instructed us: 'When you pray, go into your closet, go into your room and shut your door, and speak to your Father in secret; and He will hear you in secret, and He will reward you openly'. Time is vital. Jesus also said in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6 verse 21: 'For where your treasure is, there your heart will also be'. What's your treasure? It's your money. So where your treasure is, there your heart also is. So what He's saying is: what you spend your money on shows where your heart is. So, what are you spending your money on? Well, equally, what you spend your time on - more so, I think, even, than equal, more so - what you spend your time on shows where your heart is.

You see, time is the most precious commodity, because you can't recoup time once it's spent. You can make money again, but you can't get time back. So let me ask you: when was the last time you spent some extended time with Jesus? When was the last time you spent some extended time with Jesus? 'Ach, now, quality is more than quantity, isn't that right? It's not about the length!'. Well, that's true in a way: it's not the length of your prayers that matters, but the weight of your prayers - and the

weight of your prayers is measured by God in faith. It's not how long you pray, however quality and quantity are not always opposites. Did you hear me? Sometimes quality and quantity are partners, they work together. In fact, sometimes the quality of something actually comes in its quantity. - yes?

Gloria Gaither some of you will remember - you are maybe secret fans of her music - she says: 'I hear people say 'It's not the quantity of time that's important, it's the quality'. Well, technically that may be true, but quality doesn't happen in a hurry' - that's it! Quality doesn't happen in a hurry. We live in an instant age, instant spirituality - a lot of the churches even that I'm moving in now, there is that instantaneous desire to just be zapped by God and everything gets fixed. Now God can whack you, but a lot of people are just trying to avoid and obfuscate from the graft of investing in a relationship. This is not some quick fix just to get some ticket to heaven and escape hell, this is the God who created you and wants to know you, and wants you to get to know Him!

So I think we need to simplify our lives to give more time to intimacy with God. The Bible does not teach us to tithe our time. Some believe that the New Testament doesn't even teach us to tithe our money, because the principle in the New Testament is to give everything - tithing is not a bad place to start, mind you. But imagine if the Bible did teach us to tithe our time? That's quite a bit of time every day, isn't it? Of course, it doesn't, but why not start here? I don't know whether you can read that or not, it's Hudson Taylor, the great pioneer missionary - he said: 'Whatever is your best time in the day, give that to communion with God'. What's your best time? For me it's the morning, I think for most people it's the morning - even people who don't think it's the morning, it probably is the morning. But for some people it just isn't, for some people it's another time during the day, or it's even in the evening - I don't know. But why is it, you know, like the children of Israel in the Old Testament, we give the damaged lambs to God, the runt of the litter, the worst of the day, our last thoughts, the fag-end of the 24 hours, when we need to give Him our best? By the way, he didn't say: 'your daily reading and your prayer list' - not that those are wrong, but communion is connection. It's all about connecting. George Mueller said he would stay with God in the morning until his heart was filled with the joy and happiness of the Lord - he wouldn't come out of the closet until that happened, that was his barometer of knowing that he could go on his daily work, connecting with God.

So, to be intimate needs to be communication which is communion; there needs to be time; and finally: there needs to be commitment. Intimacy between a man and a woman is meant to be in the context of commitment, isn't that right? God gave provision for this in marriage. We live in a promiscuous age, don't we? Which is simply: people want the intimacy of marriage without the commitment, yes? Likewise, we expect, at times as Christians, all the blessing of intimacy with God without the commitment. Many wonder, and I talk to people quite regularly, and they say: 'I've become a Christian, but why isn't this better than it is? You know, I'm not experiencing what other people seem to experience. I read this stuff in the Bible, I read stuff in biographies and Christian history, I'm hearing things that are going on all over the world or maybe just even down the street, or my friends are experiencing - where is everything I was promised?'. Well, it's all there, and it's all yours to have - but it's not mechanical, it's relational. It's not mechanical, it's relational. That's why we have to be very careful in giving people prayers, and saying: 'Just pray that, and a little talk with Jesus will make it right'. It can happen, but make sure it's not mechanical, it's

relational.

Imagine giving that book to the couple that are getting married this week, 'Making Marriage Work for Dummies' - an A-Z of rules, or principles, or quick fixes of how to make a marriage work. It doesn't work like that. Of course, there is wisdom, there are ideas and principles - but all the rough edges, they are all broken off through relationship, as one another are honed by each other. Very often when people say: 'I've been a Christian for so many years, and it never gets better, and I don't experience what other people experience, what I'm promised'; other people say 'Oh, I tried that, and it didn't work' - it's usually because you have withheld something of yourself from God.

As we come to this Table tonight, we give thanks to the Lord because God has not withheld any of Himself from us. He has fully committed Himself to us. There is a Hebrew word, 'hesed', and it means 'steadfast love, lovingkindness, covenant loyalty'. It speaks to how not only has God's covenant been graven on two tablets of stone that came down from that Mount of marriage with Moses at Sinai, but actually our names have been engraven in covenant on the palms of Jesus' hands when He was crucified on the cross. This is His lovingkindness, this is what He did for us - He withheld nothing: 'He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?'. He has given us all things, but here's - if you like, it's not a snag, but it is a condition - the more you want out of this, the more you have to give yourself to it.

Many of us want the blessings without the commitment. There was a man years ago I knew in East Belfast - do you remember when you had to put money in the meter, some of you, for electric, did you do that round here? 50p in the meter? No? He used to say to me: 'You only get out what you put in'. Now, of course, it's all of grace, it's all of divine favour, it's energising power from God - we know all that! It all comes from God, but the point is this: if you want everything out of this life that God has put into your account, you've got to draw it, and you draw it by saying: 'Here I am again today, Lord! It's me, all of me, the whole heap, You've got it all. I haven't got everything fixed, I'm still struggling in these areas; but, Lord, I surrender myself to You'. That's why Paul said in Romans 12: 'I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God' - in other words, because of everything he has written in that book of Romans about justification, sanctification, all the blessings that God has given us in Christ - 'Because of all this, I'm begging you to present your bodies' - and that doesn't just mean your body, by presenting your body you're giving everything that's in the body, so that's soul and spirit as well. You see, if God has your body, He has everything else, that's for sure. 'Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service' - it's your expected worship. 'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God'. People are running around saying: 'What's the will of God for my life?'. This is the will of God for your life! If you actually do this, and plough your whole self into surrendering and sacrificing your life for God, to love Him with every fibre of your being in the flame of divine love, you'll not have a problem finding out what the will of God is.

Intimacy is key to knowing God. Some people want to know God the way others know God, but they're not prepared to die, and they're not prepared to plough and sow the way they have - it's the only way. Communication, time, and commitment. Here's a

promise for you as I finish: draw near to God, and He will - He will - draw near to you. Let's pray.

Could I just take a moment before I pray to challenge anybody here: you've never come to faith in Jesus, or maybe you're one of these people who has said in the past 'Oh, I tried that, and it didn't work'. Wait till I tell you: you didn't try it, you definitely didn't try it, because it does work! Whatever 'it' is! It's a 'Him', it's Jesus. You need to come to Him, and fully surrender yourself to Him tonight and say: 'Here I am, Lord. There is no no-go areas in my life. Take over, take over, have Your way, Lord, be Lord'. When you come to Him, and turn from your sins, and confess to Him that you need Him, and ask Him to come into your life tonight and cleanse you and set you free from those things that bind you - that's what He died for and rose again for.

But maybe you're a Christian for - I don't know - donkey's years; but you've been playing the status quo of a middle-aged or old married couple that are just existing for convenience, and you're not truly pursuing a divine romance with the Bridegroom of your heart? You're not falling in love with Him over and over and over and over again. You're not seeing Him in more beauty and more glory. You're no nearer to Him than you were this time last year, maybe you're further away. I'm not saying all this to condemn you - please know my heart. I'm saying to you: He's standing here tonight by His Spirit, and He just wants to embrace you, and He wants to show you everything in His heart towards you - but you must come to Him, and you must commune with Him. You must open the door of your heart as you hear it rapped tonight, you must open the door of your heart and let Him in. You must spend time with Him, and you must commit to this - not in a legalistic way, but in the way that you've committed to your loved ones to be there. You say: 'Jesus, I want to be there with You'. Whilst it might be hard from time to time - I'm telling you: if you stick it out, He will break in upon you like you've never imagined.

Lord, whatever people need from You tonight, would You provide it? Lord Jesus, You're the One we need, You are our Beloved. We are sick with love. You are the Lover of our hearts, You are the Darling of our souls, You are the Altogether Lovely One. Every superlative, even in Scripture, falls redundant to actually depict what You're really like. We can't wait for that day when we will see You as You are. But in the meantime, Lord, would You give us glimpses of Your glory? As people in this place determine in their heart to draw near to You, honour Your word: draw near to them. Even as we now break bread, draw near, Lord. Show us Your glory. Amen.

Knowing God - Chapter 5

"Fellowship With Christ"

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Good morning everyone! It's good to be with you again in Thomas Street today and for the last couple of weeks. It has been a real blessing to renew fellowship with you and share what God has laid on my heart to bring to you. So thank you for the welcome, the invitation to be here, and I anticipate blessing from the Lord again today as we seek Him. I want you to turn with me to Philippians chapter 3 - and just before we read the Scripture (we're going to start reading from verse 2), let's pray. I want you to pray - would you? - for yourself, that God would speak to you. We want to hear from God. Anthony has exhorted us to question why we are here, and we just want to take a moment and say: 'Lord, please, it's me again!' - remember that old Gospel song 'Me, O me, dear Lord, standing in the need of prayer'? We just want to, sort of, say: 'Lord, here I am, and I would like to hear from You today. I really need to hear from You, and I want to experience Your touch upon my life'. God loves those prayers. So really, what we are doing just now is: we are cupping our ear to hear what God has to say.

So let's pray: Father, we thank You for what a good, good Father You are. We thought about that last Sunday morning. We thank You for Your exceptional, indescribable, four-dimensional love that You have lavished on us. We thank You for revealing Your Father-heart to us in Jesus, Your Son. We thank You, Lord, that we just can't get over Him, and we never will. It will take us eon upon eon in eternity to explore the greatness of His love toward us. So, Father, we ask, by Your Holy Spirit, that You will come again, and that You will reveal, open our hearts, and show Jesus to us again. Give us a greater capacity to receive Him, and to desire and follow Him - for, Holy Spirit, we know only You can create that in our hearts. So we invite You to come now and minister to each of us now, for the glory of Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

OK, this series that I have been doing with you, of course, is entitled 'Knowing God'. I've been talking a little bit about how there are key components in any relationship, human relationships, that are mirrored in our relationship with God. Now, I do need to point out that our relationship with God is very different in many capacities; but there are similarities which are striking and which are very informative and helpful to us as we seek to cultivate a closer walk with God. I'll not repeat the ones that we've gone over already, but we're going to read now from verse 2 of chapter 3 - and you can try and guess what the key component might be here in our desire to know God:

"Beware of dogs" - that's not the natural, literal Jack Russell type, but the spiritual type - "beware of evil workers, beware of the mutilation! For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh, though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss

for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish" - the actual Greek word there is 'dung' - "that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith". This is our verse that we're going to focus on mainly this morning: "that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead".

I think we would all agree that Paul was a man who knew God. Paul, we would describe as being 'a spiritual giant', and if we were to ask the question: what makes spiritual giants? I wonder what your answer might be? For many in evangelical Christianity, they would answer: 'Well, great learning' - you know, I hear people use the term 'He's very knowledgeable in the Scriptures'. The idea is that that makes a person a giant in the faith. Now, there is no doubt about it, you'll not get to great stature and maturity in Christ if you are ignorant of Scripture, but I don't think that is what actually makes giants. Others will say: 'Pedigree'. Paul talks a little bit about that, doesn't he? Who our fathers are, our grandfathers, or maybe our denominational stock, or our theological bent. Others will say: 'No, it's experience, it's what you've done for the Lord, what you've gone through' - but we have to say 'No', categorically, to all those suggestions as to how spiritual giants are made, in the light of this passage of Scripture. Because Paul, especially from verses 4 through to 6, talks about learning, pedigree, and his experience in faith - and yet he concludes that it's all 'dung'. We could use other words for that, but basically he's expressing that in comparison to the great riches that there are in knowing Christ, they are all dung.

What makes a spiritual giant? Spiritual giants have big appetites. We said that Paul was a man we would describe as having known Christ, and yet he still has this insatiability to know Him more. He's got a big appetite to know Jesus in an even deeper way. Of course, appetite is the difference between babies and adults, and we see that this is the same in the spiritual sense. We look at great men of God - not just Paul, but Moses; you remember I started, and I've kept referencing Moses and his desire to know God, particularly from Exodus 33 - but think about it in relation to appetite now as I read these verses again to you: 'Now, therefore', Moses said, 'I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight', and he said, 'Please show me Your glory'. Do you hear the rumble of the spiritual tummy there?

The Sons of Korah wrote that amazing Psalm that many of us are familiar with and we sing from time to time, Psalm 42: 'As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. when shall I come and appear before God?'. David, of course, is the Psalmist we are most familiar with, and he is described as 'the man after God's own heart'. He penned the words in Psalm 63: 'O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water. So I have looked for You in the sanctuary, to see Your power and Your glory. My soul follows close behind You' - in other words, 'I'm chasing after You, Lord!' - 'Your right hand upholds me'.

All of this expression of appetite and desire describes what our Lord came on the scene and taught in Matthew 5:6, when He said: 'Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled'. The blessedness is not in the hunger and

thirst, the blessedness is: if you've got a good appetite, God has got plenty of stuff to feed you with - that's the blessing! You'll get filled! The blessing is not in the hunger and thirst, it's in the fullness.

When baby birds are old enough to feed, do you know what they do? They open their mouths and the parent birds come and feed. So, by opening their mouths, they are expressing their desire, their appetite. God is not in the business of force-feeding Christians. He doesn't force open your mouth and push food down your throat, God feeds in response to appetite. When we were bringing up babies, there was a bit of a debate on whether you should feed them with a schedule or feed them on demand, when they wanted fed. Well, I don't know which was right by the way - but the way God feeds His children is demand-feeding. He feeds according to our appetite, that's the way God works - because giants are not born, giants are made.

Ask Paul, 'What made you a man of God?', and he will reply - we read these verses, but this is a paraphrase of them, let me read it to you: 'My desire previously was to be found acceptable when tested by the Mosaic law, but now the consuming passion of my life is a Person, to know Him intimately, experientially and continuously! When I found the superior worth there was in knowing Christ, He became the goal of my life, He became the passion of my life - to know Him became the impelling, compelling, propelling force in my life' - that is knowing Him! So, what makes giants? Desire or hunger or passion - it's vital, and if you want to know God more, you need to have this. Now, you may not have it right now - that's OK - but then you need to ask God for it: 'Give me this, Lord'.

Napoleon Hill was an American self-help author before self-help books were popular, actually around 1937 he wrote a book entitled 'Think and Grow Rich' - if only it was as easy as that! It became one of the top ten best self-help books of all time, 'Think and Grow Rich'. This is what he said: 'The starting point of all achievement is desire. Keep this constantly in mind: weak desire brings weak results. Just as a small fire makes a small amount of heat, to achieve anything you need a burning desire'. Now, I know that's business, but nevertheless it translates into every facet of life. If you're going to achieve anything, and if you're going to know God more than you know God this Sunday morning, you need desire.

Now, we spoke last week about how to know God is to have communion with God. Communion, not in the sense of 'Holy Communion', but it literally means 'an act of sharing', commonality with the Lord. We also used the word 'fellowship', which means 'shared interests'. Paul couches his desire to know Christ here in our verse 10 in the context of sharing, fellowshiping with Jesus in three particular areas - three things that we need to have in common with Him if we're going to know Him better: the power of His resurrection, the fellowship of His suffering, and being conformed to His death.

So let's look at each of these - first of all he says: 'That I might know Him and the power of His resurrection'. A paraphrase puts it: 'I want to know Him in a personal, intimate way, and I want the resurrection power that is available to me from Him to be operating daily in my life. I want the power that brought Him to resurrection to be working in me' - wow! So, the big question is: is it? Is it what? Is it working in you? Is what working in you? Is the power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead working in you day by day?

Well, the good news is: it is in you if you're a born-again child of God. It has to be, you can't be born-again without the Holy Spirit and the power of God - but that's not the issue here. The issue is not 'Is it in you?', the issue is: is it working in you, outworking from you? A lot of evangelical Christians just assume it is, but that's a big assumption - and you know what that makes you. In Ephesians chapter 1, Paul prays specifically for the power of the resurrection to be in the lives of those Ephesian believers. He knows the Holy Spirit is in them, but the working of that power has to be demonstrated and manifested for it to be effective. In Ephesians 1, he prays this marvellous prayer: 'That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him', knowing the Lord, 'that the eyes of your understanding', that's your inner eyes, 'may be enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints' - that's what we talked about last Sunday night, not having a poverty mindset - 'and what is the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church'.

So, Paul prays specifically for Christians, that they may experientially know the power of the resurrection in their life. He reminds the Ephesians of what God's power did for Christ. First of all, verse 20, it raised Him from the dead; then it set Him at the right hand of the Father in glory; it has also subjected everything in the universe to the authority of Jesus Christ; and constituted Jesus Christ as the Head of the Church, verse 22. That great power is available to us by the Holy Spirit - wow! Romans 8:11, what a wonderful verse, the same power that raised Christ from the dead is living in you! My question is: do you believe that?

It's a good question, because some of you wouldn't look the way you look when I'm looking down at you if you did believe it! Sorry about that, but honestly: would it not make a difference in our lives if we believed the dynamic, beyond atomic power that made the corpse of the Son of God come to life again - not just to live like He lived before, or anyone lived before, but to live in the power of an endless life? Lazarus died again, the widow of Nain's son died again, Jairus' daughter died again, Dorcas died again; but Jesus will never die again! That same power is in us, within us - but obviously, in the context of what we are saying here today from Paul, there needs to be a desire to know it working and manifesting in our lives. Desire and appetite for that needs to be there. Jesus cited this in John 7 when He said: 'On the last day, that great day of the feast, He stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts" - there it is again - "let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart" - his innermost being - "will flow rivers of living water'. But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified'.

Of course, He did get glorified, and the Spirit was poured out at Pentecost - but Jesus is inferring that there needs to be a thirst, a desire, an appetite to experience the outworking of this in your life. To put it another way: there is always more. So, if you're sitting there in the gathering today thinking: 'I'm not a bad Christian, and I've

experienced a good bit. I walk on the clean side of the street, and I've had a few experiences with God - and I'm satisfied with that' - you need to waken up! You need to waken up! You're actually dead if you're thinking that! Do you know there's no such thing as being static in the Christian life? You're either going forward, or you're going backward, you can never be standing still. So, if you think you're standing still, you are going backwards. There has to be this ongoing desire that Paul had, because there is always more.

I was reading this week in my daily readings, John 3, and an amazing phrase within it - we know 'For God so loved the world' - but an amazing phrase is where it says that 'God does not give the Spirit by measure'. Do you know what that means? He's not in heaven pouring out the Holy Spirit, and saying - putting the power of God's Spirit in a jug - and saying: 'Right, that's allocated to David Legge, that's all he's getting and no more'. That's not the way He behaved towards Jesus, and that's not the way He behaves to anybody. The Holy Spirit is a Person, we know, but His power is not measured out or meted out - there is always more! So, no matter what I've experienced of God, guess what: there's much much more, and I'm going after it! But you've got to have an appetite for that, a desire.

Even in those passages to do with spiritual gifts in Corinthians, Paul encourages them to earnestly desire the best gifts: 'Pursue love and desire spiritual gifts'. So, there has to be that appetite for more. If you want to know the Lord, and you want to know the power of His resurrection, being effective in your life and touching others - you need to desire it. The good news is, if you desire it, He promises: 'If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!', Luke 11:13. When was the last time that you asked for more of the Holy Spirit's power in your life? When was the last time? When was the last time you pursued it? When was the last time you positioned yourself in a posture to receive it?

Paul wanted more, isn't that staggering? Paul wanted more! He wanted to fellowship with Jesus in the power that raised Him from the dead - phew! What would that do to Portadown? What would that do to Portadown, if all the Christians that are walking about today were actually walking about in the power of the resurrection? The second thing he wanted to fellowship with Jesus in was the fellowship of His sufferings. We'll move quickly through this - no, only joking! But that's the way we feel, isn't it? I mentioned inheritance to you last week, didn't I? How whatever comes to Jesus comes to us, because we are joint heirs with Him - but we didn't emphasise the end of verse 17 of Romans 8, which we read: 'if children, then heirs - heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together'. It's unfortunate, but it's not all the wealth and the blessing that we get in the inheritance in Christ, it's also the suffering. It's part of being inheritors and heirs.

The context of this verse, of course, is the book of Philippians - which is called, ironically, 'The Epistle of Joy', and Paul is writing it from prison in Rome. He is locked up for his faith, and he is encouraging Christians: 'Rejoice, again I say rejoice; cheer up, Christians!'. Now, I want you to notice: his desire is to fellowship with Jesus in His sufferings. It doesn't say 'We fellowship with Jesus in our sufferings'. Isn't that right? I think we get that wrong sometimes: 'Oh, I'm so tired today, oh, I have a sore head - and this has all gone wrong in my family and my business', and we think this is having fellowship with Jesus in His sufferings. That's our sufferings. Fellowship with His

sufferings is what Paul describes when he says: 'Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ'. He is describing how he is suffering for identifying with Jesus.

Consider Jesus' sufferings for a moment, and then consider whether you would like to fellowship with Him. It includes aspersions cast upon your birth, and your character and identity - because that's what they said about Jesus: 'He's illegitimate' - there are words for that as well, and that's what they called Him. They doubted who He was, they attacked Him in His character and identity - have you ever had that happen to you? I have, it's wonderful! Then the Lord was tempted by Satan himself - I don't think that has ever happened to me, I mean Satan doing it. He can only be one place at the one time, but I've had plenty of temptation in my life, and plenty of warfare; because there is a demonic realm - and it's not pleasant, but that's fellowship in His sufferings; because it happened to Him, it's going to happen to me. Denial by friends - have you ever had that? The one who ate bread with you lifts up his heel and betrays you? What about betrayal by an associate? Misunderstanding by the majority of people who get you wrong, being hated by the privileged class and the religious establishment - it's all right when you fall out of favour with people out in the world, that's to be expected, yes; but what about when the church turns against you, or brothers and sisters turn against you. Jesus suffered a broken heart while He was living because of the brokenness of humanity - that's part of fellowship in the sufferings of Jesus. You see, the holier you become, the nearer Christ and the more knowledge of Him that you get, there's that modern song that talks about 'Break my heart with what breaks Yours' - that's what start to happen! You start to feel what God feels, see things how God sees them

Tim Keller, if you can see that, it says: 'Look at Jesus. He is always weeping, a man of sorrows. Do you know why? Because He is perfect. When you are not absorbed in yourself, you can feel the sadness of the world'. Now we're not meant to be crushed by what's going on in the world, there is only one Saviour who bore away the sins of the world and it's not you or me - but we are meant to be touched by it, we are meant to feel it. In fact, Colossians 1:24, it's a strange verse, says: 'I now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ, for the sake of His body, which is the church'. What is lacking in the sufferings of Jesus? We would say it's finished, nothing is lacking - but there is something lacking. We are not 2000 years ago standing at Golgotha actually seeing what Jesus suffered for us - so what is lacking is a presentation now, a manifestation of Christ's suffering love for the world - that's what we're meant to fill up the deficit of. People need to see in us that we are taking our stand with Jesus, even when we suffer for it.

Of course, at last, the agonies of His death on the cross - His greatest of all suffering - and Paul wanted to fellowship in that. Now, who wants to pray: 'That I would know Him, and the power of His resurrection' - Amen - 'and the fellowship of His sufferings?'. It's dangerous to pray, unless you're really willing to accept the fullest implications of it. Yet, if you enter into this, there is the richness of fellowship with Jesus that is unsurpassed. Jesus did say, didn't He: 'In the world you shall suffer persecutions'. Let's not forget He said: 'I have overcome the world, be of good cheer' - but He said: 'If they hated Me, they're going to hate you. If they hate the Master, what will the servant suffer?'. Yet He also said: 'Count it all joy when you enter into different testings'. Another passage, 1 Peter 4:16: 'If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter'. Now please note, it says 'If anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed', not 'as a pain-in-the-neck, let him not

be ashamed'. There are an awful lot of Christians who are just pains-in-the-neck, they are obnoxious, they are hateful, they are rude, they are dogmatic, they are very cheeky, and they put more people off the Gospel. We're not saying to suffer persecution for that, but actually graciously taking a stand for truth - we're meant to rejoice in that, and we need grace for that, don't we?

But, you see, what Paul is talking about is that love always longs to bear another's pain. So the heart of the apostle's intensity, longing to suffer for Christ, is because he wants to be a part of the heart of Jesus, in fellowship with Him. Tim Keller puts it well again when he says: 'Jesus Christ did not suffer so that you would not suffer' - Jesus never promised that we wouldn't suffer - 'He suffered so that when you suffer, you'll become more like Him. The Gospel does not promise you better life circumstances' - although they may come - 'it promises you a better life', in the midst of those circumstances and after them.

To know Him, the power of His resurrection, fellowship with His sufferings - and finally: being conformed to His death. It's a little bit confusing initially, because you think: 'Well, have we not been talking about that? What's the difference between suffering and death for Jesus?'. Well, here's the difference: there is no suffering after death. Do you get me? The dead person is one for whom suffering has ceased to hurt. So, someone who is fond of dwelling on their suffering has not died. Do you see the difference now? Just as Christ's resurrection power is in me - do we agree with that? - when we are born again, but it must be worked out of me through appetite, desire, and pursuit; well, in the same regard, I hope you know this New Testament truth: when you come to Jesus, you have already died with Christ, yes? David Legge died with Jesus on the cross; but I must reckon it so - that's what Romans 6 is all about. I must believe that, and consider that all my flesh is dead with Him. Then, day by day, I must daily die to the things that hinder His life in me. So, in the choices that I make, I must consider myself dead to the flesh, dead to sin. It's already true because of what Jesus did, but I must believe it and outwork it.

When I practically die to my selfishness, die to sin, guess what happens? His power will be manifested in me! Jesus taught this in John 12:24: 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain'. Now I heard that verse for years, and it was always pitched in a very negative way - but it's not negative. I know death is not something that we celebrate, but the best thing for David Legge's flesh and David Legge's selfishness is that it dies! Newsflash: God does not want to make you better, He wants to kill you. He wants to kill you - and He did, when Jesus died on the cross - why? Because He knows that until you're dead, the power of Jesus' life cannot live through you - and the wonderful positivity of this verse is that when you get out of the way and realise that you're dead and buried, and stop digging yourself up and trying to breathe new life into you, doing CPR on a corpse - you're dead, Jesus put you to death on the cross - now it's time for you to allow that resurrection power of Jesus to live out of you! That's what we were singing: 'It's not I, but Christ in me'. Galatians 2:20: 'It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me'. This is Christianity, and it's not what a lot of us are living! It's not my life, it's not a better life for me, it's Jesus' life in me!

It goes full-circle. This is the Christian experience, OK: because of the resurrection of

Jesus - Jesus died, He was buried, He rose again - but if I want to know the power of His resurrection, I have got to identify with His sufferings, I have got to die in Christ and reckon myself so; and then the power of the resurrection will be manifested from my life. That's what Paul said in verse 11: 'if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead'. So this is already true, alright? You have died with Christ, if you're a child of God, His resurrection life is living in you - but how is it practically? A number of us are like Nero, who, when he was pursued by his enemies, he stabbed himself in a score of places - but he was very careful not to stab himself in a fatal part. That's sometimes how we die, we are selective in the things that we surrender to the Lord. But Paul is saying: 'Instead of being conformed to this world, instead of being conformed to established religion, I want to be conformed to the death of Jesus Christ' - because the place of victory, the place of rest is when we are really dead; that means we're not even conscious of the suffering any more, but we're dead to everything and alive to Christ! Conscious only of Christ, conscious only of resurrection life.

The old missionaries, pioneer missionaries, were going to the mission field, and they took vans of coffins behind them into the field. On one occasion, one of them was asked: 'Are you not afraid to die? In all likelihood some of you will die, are you not afraid to die?'. Do you know what the reply that came back was? 'No, because I'm already dead'. All the apostles were already dead to themselves, but alive to Jesus Christ - that's why all of them, bar John, were martyred, all of them. But this is good news! Because resurrection life is both the source and the result of our death in Christ. What am I saying? This is very deep, listen: we can only truly suffer and die with Christ or for Christ, not by mere willpower or stern, cold, dead surrender - we'll never do it until we've entered into His resurrection life. That's why Paul starts with the power of the resurrection, then the fellowship of His sufferings, then being conformed unto His death, and then resurrection happens again - so it's a full circle from resurrection power to resurrection power.

Some of you here this morning, you want to know God more - and that's commendable - but you need to stop trying to be a Christian, you need to stop all that you're doing in mere willpower alone, and you need to come and die out to self, die out to your sin, and surrender to the resurrection power of Jesus and ask Him to come and start living in you. This is why Abraham could go up to Mount Moriah and sacrifice, or at least attempt to sacrifice Isaac - do you know why? Because of the power of a resurrection which he knew God had. We read in Hebrews 11:19 that he concluded that God was able to raise him up even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. In Genesis 22 in the story it says Abraham said to the young men: 'Stay here with the donkey, the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you' - he believed that God is a God that raises the dead, that's what made him able to suffer and sacrifice the one in whom all the promises of God were.

Maybe the reason why you can't really go deeper with God, maybe one of the reasons why you can't let go of some of those selfish or sinful things that are hindering you knowing the Lord in a deeper way, is because you don't really know the power of God. It's not by might, nor by power; it's by My Spirit, says the Lord. A.T. Pierson asked George Mueller - you know George Mueller who was that great man of faith, and opened orphanages, and clothed hundreds of thousands of orphans with faith alone. He asked Mueller: 'What is the secret of your great work, and the wonderful things that God has done through you?'. Mueller looked up for a moment, and then he lowered his head lower and lower, until it was almost between his knees, and he was silent a

moment or two - and then he said: 'Many years ago there came a day in my life when George Mueller died. As a young man, I had a great many ambitions, but there came a day when I died in all those things. I said: 'Henceforth, Lord Jesus, not my will, but Thine' - and from that day, God began to work in and through me'.

Do you want to know the Lord more? You've got to fellowship in the power of His resurrection; you've got to suffer with Him; and you've got to die to yourself and to sin - and I'm telling you: that is the best life, it's the greatest life, it's the most victorious life; but some of you need a funeral. You've never had that funeral, you're trying to do it - that's the majority of Christianity, as well as evangelical Christianity: DIY religion. Would you say today: 'Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God' - wait a minute, don't start shuffling now - 'All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood'. Do you want to know power? Then you'll know power. Let's pray.

Let's still our hearts before the Lord now. I believe the Lord has been doing a deep work in people's lives. It's up to you to respond. I'm not asking you for a public response, I'm saying to you: you need to do something about this. Why not, just where you are right now in this service, come to the foot of the cross of Jesus and say: 'Lord, You died for me, and You died as me there. I've been trying at this thing, I've been struggling at this, wondering why it has not worked. I have been trying to do it, and I need to die out, I need to see myself on that cross - my sin and my good deeds all nailed to that cross, and then I need You to take me to the empty tomb, and show me that that power that raised You from the dead is in me. You took it from the tomb, and You put it in me. I ask You to live in me, Lord Jesus. I surrender all to You now. I ask for Your Holy Spirit to completely fill me. I ask for everything that You desire for me, in Jesus' name'.

Lord, I just pray that You will really meet people today in a transformative way; that this will not be perceived as a negative message, but actually the most positive good news that there is. What is it? Lord, that I don't need to do this, because I can't do it - I'm free in the liberty of the Gospel to die, and to let You live through me. Lord, we really want to know You, and the greatest way we could ever know You is to encounter this power. Lord, I pray that those who have never been born-again will be born-again - you just cry out to the Lord and ask Him to save you this morning; if you're backslidden, come back to Him, and do it the right way this time: not your flesh, but His power. But all of us need to know there is more, so much more - will you hunger and thirst after that? Will you ask Him for it? Will you pursue it?

Lord, bless, with the superabundance of every blessing in heavenly places in Jesus Christ today. We give You thanks that it's all because of Calvary and the resurrection, and may that weigh heavily and yet joyfully upon us as we remember Jesus around His Table. Amen.

Knowing God - Chapter 6

"Beholding And Becoming"

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Evening everyone! Thank you to Anthony for his kind words. It's been great to be here these weeks, and share with you, and I thank the Lord and praise Him for anything that has been of benefit to you. I want you to turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 3, 2 Corinthians 3, in this concluding message of this series 'Knowing God'. Now, of course, you could go on forever - because the whole Bible is about knowing God, isn't it? So these have just been a selective few portions of Scripture related to this subject. We're going to read from verse 7 of 2 Corinthians chapter 3.

Let's just pray before we read. Father, we thank You that You are a great God. Lord, that statement - 'God is great' - seems so redundant, in the sense that just one statement like that falls short of actually portraying what You are like. There are no words, Lord. We thank You for the holy, inspired words of Scripture - and yet, language alone cannot grasp or convey the greatness of who You are. Yet, we acknowledge it, Lord, in our simplicity: great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised. We praise You tonight, we praise the Lord Jesus, we praise the Holy Spirit. We pray that You will come to us this evening. We truly want to know You. We pray, as Paul said and we thought about this morning, 'That I might know You, that I might know You'. Lord, we want to know You more, deep within our hearts we want to know You. So come and help us now as we read Your word, and speak to us with great power, we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Let me just say before we read: I have been paralleling human relationships in their deepest form with our relationship with God, and the one we are looking at tonight is 'Beholding and Becoming'. There is a theory that if you live with people, you become like them. When you grow old with someone, you can often not just grow near them but transform each other - hopefully for good - and some would say even become like each other. That's what we're thinking about tonight: as we behold the Lord, how we can become like Him.

So let's read from verse 7, then, to the end of the chapter - and I'm going to pause at places, and explain certain things. *"But if the ministry of death"* - that's a strange phrase - *"written and engraved on stones, was glorious"*. Let me just pause there, if you go to the preceding verse, verse 6, it speaks of us as being 'ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life'. So the 'ministry of death' that is being spoken of here is the letter of the law, the old covenant, the Old Testament, if you like. Look at verse 7 again: *"If the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones"* - the tablets Moses was given on Mount Sinai - *"if it was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses"* - the actual phrase there is that they couldn't gaze, they couldn't keep their eyes fixed on him - *"because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away"*.

Exodus 34 is where we have this story, and it tells us that when Moses came down the Mount of God with the tablets of stone, his skin shone, the skin of his face shone. Literally, the Hebrew means 'it shot forth beams'. This is interesting, because the Latin Vulgate translation of the Scriptures actually translates this as 'Moses had horns', that's because the Hebrew word that means 'beam' or 'shine', 'shot forth beams', is related to the Hebrew word for 'horns' - but that's how they literally translated it. There were actually works of art in the Middle Ages, including one by Michelangelo, a sculpture depicting Moses with horns, literal horns - you can Google it and see for yourself. The idea is that his face shone with these beams, shafts of light, as he came down the mountain.

Look at verse 8 now - so if this is the old covenant, the ministry of death: *"how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious. Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech - unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty"* - freedom. This is the verse that we're going to focus most on tonight: *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord"*.

I don't know whether you've ever done an exam question - I'm sure you have - that said 'compare and contrast'. What we have here is a comparing and a contrasting of the old covenant with the new covenant. The reference is, as I said already, to Exodus 34, where Moses has gone up the Mount of God, Sinai, to receive the law, the tablets of stone - but when he comes down, he has spent so much time in the immediate presence of God that his face is shining. This is staggering! Actually, what we read is that he came down, and the people could not fix their eyes on him. The sense is - you know how you shouldn't, and you really aren't meant to be able to look straight into the face of the sun? We've all seen the sun - occasionally in Northern Ireland! We know what the sun looks like, but we generally look beside it, don't we? We don't look directly at it. That's the sense here: the people couldn't look directly at Moses' face, because it was so bright. He didn't know his face shone. It's interesting, he didn't pray 'Lord, give me a shining face', he prayed 'Lord, that I might know You, that I might know Your ways'. When we know God, and get to know Him more, our faces shine without us even realising it.

But I want you to see what happens here, because it's often misunderstood - you can see this, if you care to look at it, in Exodus 34. He came down with a shining face, he didn't know, and it says the people were afraid to come near to him. He called to him the leaders, and he told them all the commandments that the Lord had spoken to him. So, he speaks with his face shining - OK? He doesn't cover his face at this point, but after he has told them everything that God told him, he then covers his face - a veil on his face - and then when he goes back in to talk to God again, he takes the veil off.

Now, why did he cover his face? Well, you might say 'It's because they couldn't look at the glory'. Well, there is an element of that, they couldn't gaze directly at it - but the fact of the matter is: when he was speaking to them the laws of God, he had the veil off. Actually, Paul gives us the answer to this question, why he wore a veil. He tells us that the reason is, verse 10, that the glory was passing away. Verse 11: 'For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious'. Look at verse 13, the second half: they 'could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away'.

Now, stay with me here. Moses wore the veil over his face not to shelter the glory from the people, but actually to save them from the awful reality that that glory was starting to diminish. The longer he was out of the presence of God, it was disappearing. He had to go back in to see God for to get it again. But verse 11, if you look at it, shows us that that was glorious, but what remains is much more glorious - what's that? The new covenant! Now, just pause for a moment or two. Do you see this guy, and what he experienced in the face and all that? That's old covenant, that's Old Testament. I'm not despising it in any shape or form; but that's something that has now gone, it has passed, because there is something better! There is something that has superseded it, something has replaced it - it's the new covenant, it's the good news of the Gospel of the kingdom in Jesus. So that must mean, surely, that it's more glorious - that's what we read, isn't it? It's more glorious, it's more awe-inspiring, it's more supernatural - and this aspect is what we really want to see in verse 11: it remains. It remains, it doesn't pass away.

The Greek word for 'remain' is 'meno' - it sounds a wee bit like it, 'remain', 'meno'. It means 'to stay', 'to abide', 'to dwell'. Now, this is one of the differences - compare and contrast - between the old and the new covenant. The old covenant in the Old Testament was a visitational culture. That simply means that God came and visited His people, He would come upon people and they would do great exploits - like Samson, et cetera, and Gideon. But the New Testament is a habitational culture - in other words, God comes to remain, God comes to stay, to dwell; not just to visit, but to abide. That's what the word 'meno' means: to abide. We get it all throughout John chapter 15, about the vine and the branch, abiding in the vine. We are meant to be abiding in Christ, Christ is meant to be abiding in us - that is the Christ-life we were talking about this morning: that we die out to ourselves with Christ on the cross, we are dead and buried, my life is over as far as it is in a selfish sinful capacity, and the true me comes to life in Jesus Christ - the Christ-life. This is unique! This is marvellous! Because it stays, it doesn't pass away! It stays with us!

In John chapter 1 verse 32, it says: 'John bore witness, saying, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him'' - that's that word 'meno' again, 'He remained'. The dove came down, speaking of the Holy Spirit, and stayed on Jesus. It's not a visitational culture any more, where the Spirit comes and then goes - that's why Samson could slay people in the power of the Lord, and then jump into bed with a prostitute a few hours later. This is different, and the wonderful thing is: as the dove remained on Jesus because of His absolute perfection as the Son of God; we now, in Christ - we are in Christ, if we are believers, Christ is in us - and as we abide in Jesus, He abides in us; we live under an open heaven. We remain in that state.

Now, though this is our inheritance through Jesus, there are means to live in the good of it. It remains, but you must remain in it - isn't that right? He abides in us, but we

must abide in Him. We must dwell under His shadow. If transformation is the goal of discipleship, this is how transformation takes place. Here's the key verse, I believe, in this passage, where we can experience this as an ongoing thing - verse 18: 'But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord'.

Now, look at this verse: 'we all' - isn't that marvellous? Do you know what the Greek word 'all' means? It means 'all'. Yes, everybody, all of you. This is not for patriarchs, it's not for prophets, it's not for some super Christian heroes that you read about in missionary biographies: this is for everyone! 'We all, with unveiled face' - that means there's nothing between now. When the veil was rent in two from top to bottom in the Temple, when Jesus died, people say it was so that we could come in to experience God's presence - I rather like to think it's more than that, it's actually that God was now able to come out and get everybody; but there is no veil between. There's an old hymn we used to sing: 'Nothing between my soul and the Saviour'. There's nothing between, no veiled face, no veil between us and the Holy of Holies. We can come into the immediate presence of God, God can come out to us and have fellowship. We can behold in a mirror the glory of the Lord.

John 1 verse 1 is familiar, I'm sure, to a lot of us: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. That's the Trinity - I talked about the love relationship that there was in the Trinity, and is in the Trinity, that we have been invited to share in: first love. The word for 'with God' is the Greek word 'pros'. 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word' - Jesus, Logos - 'was with God, and the Word was God' - it literally means 'face-to-face'. The Word of God was face-to-face with God, the Son was face-to-face with the Father, and He was also God.

When you come to John chapter 14 - this is probably my favourite verse in the whole of Scripture - verse 23, we find this word 'pros' again, you might want to look at it. John 14 verse 23: 'Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to' - there's the word 'pros' - 'We will come to him and make Our home with him'. So Jesus is saying: 'If you love Me, and keep My word, My Father is really going to love you for that; and We are going to come' - 'We', plural, the Trinity - 'by the power of the Holy Spirit, We're going to come to' - 'pros' - 'face-to-face with you, and make Our home, Our habitation. We're going to come and remain and stay with you'. That's Christianity: God comes to stay.

Isn't that wonderful? Literally 'face-to-face'. Now, you might say: 'Well, it says that the Lord spoke to Moses face-to-face, as a man speaks to his friend, Exodus 33:11'. That's true, but it wasn't remaining - remember the veil? It only lasted a while, the glory departed. But here is something that is totally and utterly transformational in a permanent sense, because we are beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord. We are being changed into the image of God Himself in Jesus Christ. What was Moses' prayer? I've gone over and over it these sessions, in Exodus 33: 'Please show me Your glory' - but then, what happens is: God makes all His goodness to pass before Moses, He proclaims the Lord before Him, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion'. But He said, 'You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live'. And the Lord said, 'Here is a place by Me, and you shall stand on the rock. So it shall be, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand while I pass by. Then I will

take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen". Do you know why that is? Because God is a spoilsport - no! God wants face-to-face fellowship. I'll tell you why it couldn't happen: you would be fried to a crisp - that's what would have happened to Moses. He would have been incinerated by the goodness of God - because, in our bodies (that's why, when we're going up to meet Jesus very soon, we shall be changed; because we couldn't see Him in all of His glory if we weren't changed). So God has to cover over Moses in the cleft of the cliff, and He passes by him, and He takes His hand off so that he can see some glory passing His back parts. But the point is this: we now have something that even Moses couldn't get, and that is a face-to-face relationship with God in the face of Jesus Christ. Does that not excite you?

This is what God always wanted. Look at chapter 4 of 2 Corinthians there, verse 6 - 2 Corinthians 4, just the next chapter, verse 6: 'For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ'. So, one of the secrets of getting to know God is beholding Jesus; and through beholding, we experience the becoming like Him.

So let's think about those two things: beholding and becoming. We've lost the art of beholding Jesus Christ, beholding the glory of the Lord in His face. By the way, this is the reason why there was the introduction of the Law in the Old Testament. Many people don't know this: the people would not behold the face of God. God actually wanted face-to-face communion with Israel - now, they couldn't have an absolutely, as I've said to you, because they would be destroyed; and they can't have it the way we have it, because Jesus had not died and rose again - but 'face-to-face' is a metaphor for 'direct communion'. That's what God wanted, He wanted them to hear His voice, and He wanted to interact with them - but they were afraid of that. They were afraid, because there was fire in His voice. We read in Deuteronomy 5:4-5: 'The Lord talked with you face to face on the mountain from the midst of the fire. I stood', Moses said, 'between the Lord and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the Lord; for you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up the mountain'.

This is interesting. The Lord said: 'Don't go near the mountain or touch it, or you'll die' - but that was like a test. 'Who's got' - this morning - 'appetite? Who's got the desire to die out, even to know God?'. That was the test - and Moses had it, so he goes up. All the people are afraid of the fire that in His voice, when God is wanting them to have face-to-face interaction with Him. So, He had to give them Law. They were much more comfortable with rules than relationship. Many evangelical Christians are more comfortable with boundaries than beholding the face of Jesus. If that's you, you're more comfortable with being told what not to do and what to do, and just following some kind of rote ethic, you've got the wrong covenant - you're still in the old. We get to behold, as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord - that's what we get to do.

So, how is your beholding going? I'm not talking about praying, I'm not talking about reading Scripture or studying - those things are good - but I'm talking about gazing upon God in the face of Jesus Christ. How is that going for you? Thomas Gardiner says this insightfully: 'We have lost the mystery of meditating on God - the awe of God's presence, the take-your-breath-away gasp of beholding His glory. We have Him all figured out'. Do you know, we are the most biblically informed generation there has ever been? With the Internet and all the resources that we have - and yet, like the

Pharisees, we know our Bibles, but we don't recognise our God when He shows up in a way that we don't expect Him. He showed up in human flesh, and they didn't recognise Him, though they knew their Bibles back to front. The trouble is, if we don't think we have Him all worked out, as Thomas Gardiner says, we are trying to work Him out!

But the Father seeks worshippers, not theologians - and I'm not against them, but He seeks worshippers. A.W. Tozer once said in his mighty classic 'The Pursuit of God': 'We need prophets, not scribes - for the scribe tells us what he has read, the prophet tells us what he has seen'. I remember years ago hearing Leonard Ravenhill talk about - he knew A.W. Tozer - and how he went into his study one day, and there was a set of overalls hanging behind the door. He asked him what these were for, and Tozer told him that he adorned these every day, and lay on the floor of his study on his belly, prostrate, worshipping the greatness of God - he just lay there. Probably one of my most cherished books in my library is one compiled by A.W. Tozer, and it's called 'The Christian Book of Mystical Verse' - it's a book of poetry. One of the poems within it is 'My God, How Wonderful Thou Art' - it might be in one of your hymn books, I don't know - by F.W. Faber. Listen to the verses in this hymn, just think about the words:

'How wonderful, how beautiful,
The sight of Thee must be,
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power,
And awesome purity!

Only to sit and think of God,
Oh, what a joy it is!
To think the thought, to breathe the Name;
Earth has no higher bliss' - do you believe that?

'Father of Jesus, love Divine,
What rapture it will be,
Prostrate before Thy throne to lie,
And gaze, and gaze on Thee!'

But, guess what? You don't have to wait to Heaven, you can behold in a mirror the glory of the Lord in the face of Jesus Christ. Do you know, the throne of God is very interesting, when you read in Revelation 4 about 'a glassy sea, an emerald rainbow', and then 'the throne of God'. But we read about four living creatures that surround the throne of God. They are quite bizarre, each has six wings, and it says that they are 'full of eyes around and within', covered in eyeballs - it's a bit freaky to be honest! All these eyes looking in different directions! It says that they rest neither day nor night, crying 'Holy, Holy, Holy Is the Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come'.

Now, sometimes with our limited view of Heaven, we think to ourselves, you know: 'What's it really going to be like? Is it going to be like church in eternal mode?'. God help us if it is! What will it be? Will we be sitting on a cloud twanging a harp? Will we be singing hymns continually? Listen, these are eternal creatures covered in eyes, and this is what's going on here: they are getting glimpses of the glory of God, aspects of His Personhood that they have never seen before - and they are in eternity! They are gasping in incredulity, in utter surprise: 'Holy, Holy, Holy', as they see something new about God. It's not a monotonous existence in Heaven, it's actually a constant state of exasperation at the glory and the wonder of God - and we have got a head-start,

because our eyes can behold the glory of God in Jesus.

So, how is your beholding? It would be better maybe to ask the question: how much time do you spend beholding Him? I'm not asking how much time you pray, or how much time you read; I'm asking how much time do you actually look upon Christ? You can do this in your spirit - I'm sure people are thinking: 'It's all right for you, you do nothing all day, and we have to go to work! You can sit and pray all day!'. But, you know, I told you about Brother Lawrence last week, you know, when he was washing the dishes, when he was digging up the carrots, he was practising the presence of God and beholding the face of Jesus. We are called to be ministering to the Lord on a constant basis. We are so used to coming to God and asking for what we need, using Him, as I said last week. We're meant to be ministering to Him, we are meant to be waiting on the Lord - and waiting on the Lord is not waiting like a queue for a train or a plane; it's not that type of waiting, it's like a waiter or a waitress: serving.

I believe in revival, I read about it and I preach about it, I expect it - but revival never comes from talking about revival, it comes from beholding the face of Jesus and becoming like Him. That's what we need, we need a new Jesus movement - I believe it - a 'Beholding His Face' movement, a community that is being transformed by beholding Jesus. Not just individual transformation, but transformation of a community by beholding Jesus. Do you remember I said to you, I think it was my first study, that this is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob - do you know what that means? It wasn't good enough that my Granda encountered the Lord, or my Great-Granda encountered the Lord, it had to be every generation had their encounter: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had their meetings with God, they saw the glory of God - why? Because it was essential for the momentum to continue to the next generation and the next, otherwise that momentum ceased, and the movement became a monument - that is what is happening to most denominations in Christendom. Because of the lack of current encounters with God, they are becoming monumental to a bygone day, and a people who once knew their God. We need to be beholding Him, we need young people who have beheld Christ, who have encountered the glory of the Lord - they will change the world!

Beholding means becoming - becoming what? Becoming like Jesus. You remember I shared with you - was it last week? - you become like what you behold, you become like the God you worship. Do you remember Psalm 115:8: 'Those who make them', idols, 'become like them; so does everyone who trusts in them'? So, you become like the one or the thing that you behold, and what the world needs - what does the world need? The world needs to see Jesus in us, that's what's going to solve the problem. Mahatma Gandhi was asked why he rejected being a follower of Christ, when he quoted Jesus so much - he often quoted the Sermon on the Mount. He replied: 'Oh, I don't reject your Christ, I love your Christ; it's just that so many of your Christians are so unlike your Christ' - ouch! 'It's not that I reject your Christ, it's that so many of your Christians are so unlike your Christ'.

Now, listen to me: holiness is not taught or learned, it is absorbed in the presence of God. If you remember nothing of what I've shared with you tonight, remember this: you will only become holy by beholding the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Our dwelling within His presence, and His dwelling within us is: as by the Spirit of the Lord, we are changed from glory to glory, into the same image. The more we behold Him, the more we become like Him. We as Christians are obsessed with formulae - you

know, 'How To', 'Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it, and it will work'. Patterns. Listen: we need disciplines in our life, but delight must precede discipline; resurrection - as I said this morning - must precede the suffering and the dying to bring resurrection again. That which is of the flesh is flesh, that which is of the Spirit is spirit - and so much of what we do in Christianity today is just flesh. It might look like good flesh, but it's flesh. Even our efforts at holiness: that's why we are so defeated, because holiness is not learned or taught, holiness is taken in; it's absorbed in a relationship. The more we behold Jesus, the more we become like Him. It's like osmosis, if you know what that is in biology - a substance diffused across a membrane, it seeps into the soul, holiness; it seeps like water into a dry sponge in our hearts.

If you like, holiness is not taught, it's caught. You can't achieve it, you absorb it. It comes in those moments when, like those cherubim with all the eyes, you are bowled over in shock and awe by the vision of the majesty of God in the face of the Son of God. That's why you need to pause for a moment in your life - you know, your busy life, or your busy Christian service - you need to pause, and you need to behold Jesus. If you want to know God, He is revealed in His Son, but you must behold Him - and the miracle is: you will become like Him.

Ron Boyd-MacMillan met Wang Mingdao. Wang Mingdao was the father figure in the persecuted church in China, and he spent years in solitary confinement. The first time he met him, Wang Mingdao asked Ron Boyd-MacMillan suddenly: 'Young man, how do you walk with God?'. He listed off a set of disciplines such as Bible study, prayer; to which the man mischievously retorted: 'Wrong answer! To walk with God you must walk at walking pace'. 'Frankly', Ron Boyd-MacMillan said, 'I had no idea what he was talking about, and I let it go as the ramblings of a slightly senile old man in his late eighties. The next time I visited, I said 'I will never be put in a cell like you, so how can your faith have an impact on mine?'. He seemed nonplussed, and then he started asking me a series of questions. 'When you go back home, how many books do you have to read this coming month? How many letters do you have to write? How many people do you have to see? How many articles do you have to produce? How many sermons must you preach?'. He kept up the questions, and I answered each time, and after about 15 of these I was beginning to feel panicked at the amount of work that was ahead of me. He seemed to sense this, and we sat in silence, and suddenly an insight burst into my consciousness with scalding ferocity: I need to build myself a cell! I shared this with Wang Mingdao, and he grew very excited, and he explained: 'When I was put in jail I was devastated. I was 60 years old, at the peak of my powers. I was a well-known evangelist and wished to hold crusades all over China. I was an author, I wanted to write more books. I was a preacher, I wanted to study my Bible and write more sermons. But instead of serving God in all these ways, I found myself sitting alone in a dark cell. I could not use the time to write more books - they deprived me of pen and paper. I could not study my Bible and produce more sermons, they had taken it all away. I had no one even to witness to as the jailer, for years, just pushed my meals through a hatch. Everything that had given me meaning as a Christian worker had been taken away from me, and I had nothing to do'. He stopped, his eyes moistened again: 'Nothing to do, except get to know God. For 20 years that was the greatest relationship I have ever known - but the cell was the means'. His parting advice was: 'I was pushed into a cell, but you will have to push yourself into one. You have no time to know God. You need to build yourself a cell so that you can do for yourself what persecution did for me: simplify your life to know God". Wow!

The cell was the means. He was pushed into a cell, but you will have to push yourself into one. You have no time to get to know God. That's my story so often, I know it's yours. Here's the question: if your passion, hunger, and desire is enough, you will be radical, you will be drastic, you will be severe on that which mitigates against you knowing God. Let's pray.

Let's take a moment or two. Can I just say in the stillness: some of you have been very kind in your remarks about the ministry these weeks, and one of the most common things that's being said is, 'It's very challenging'. That's encouraging in one sense, but I hope that you are challenged by the goodness of God. I hope that you're not going away feeling more burdened - and I know that there is the conviction of the Spirit, but it's not condemnation. I hope it's the goodness of God that is challenging you. In other words, 'Look at what there is for me, look at what Jesus wants to give me, look at the life that I can have on Him - and I'm living so far short of that' - that's the challenge I want you to go away with, a positive one. It's true: there's more. You know, it's just staggering that we're going to spend eternity - people say: 'I'll know everything in Heaven' - poppycock! You won't know everything in Heaven, you'd be God if you knew everything in Heaven. You will be getting to know everything in Heaven, and you will be getting to know the great I AM in Heaven - and all eternity is not going to be enough. You're going to spend your eons away: 'Wow! Wow! Oh, I didn't know that about God! Look at that!' - but it's meant to start here in the face of Jesus.

Maybe you're not even a Christian, and I want to challenge you - there's enough in what I've shared these days for you to get saved, so just get saved. Get it sorted, come to Jesus and begin this life. He died for you, you just have to put faith in Him, repent of your sin, and believe this - and get into the program, get into the relationship, get into this life. If you've wandered away from the Lord, it's maybe because you hadn't the real thing to start with, or you weren't really plugged into the true power source, the Holy Spirit. Come on, come on back to the Lord tonight and get plugged in. Maybe you've been a Christian forty or fifty years, and you're defeated and you're discouraged because it has been in the flesh. Well, let me challenge you this week: would you take a few minutes out of each day this week, and would you sit in quietness - certainly read the Scriptures, and certainly pray to the Lord; but please, above all things, do something for me: behold Jesus. Turn your eyes on Him, and you will be changed.

Lord, I thank You for Your Son. I think of the disciples who were up that Transfiguration Mount, and the glory burst out. Even there, Lord - we love Peter, we bless him, but he was wanting to build memorials to Elijah and Moses and Jesus; but, Lord, it has to be Jesus only. It has to be You, Lord Jesus, only; the centre of it all, the pre-eminent One, Lord and Christ. May that be the case in our lives, that we don't build monuments to anyone else or anything else; but, Lord Jesus, that our eyes are not focused on our theologies, or our practices, but our eyes are firmly fixed on You - because that alone will change us. Holy Spirit, come, because You are the One instrumental in doing this. Holy Spirit, come and change us from glory to glory into the same image of Jesus. We thank You - and this just blows our minds - we thank You that one day You're going to make us like Him. Wow, we're going to be like Him. Father, all You want is people all over the universe like Your Son, and You're going to do it, and You're going to do it with me - with all my struggles, with all my foibles, with all my weaknesses and temptations - thank You, Lord Jesus, that Your death and Your

resurrection has completed my redemption; and one day even this vile body will be transformed. Hallelujah! We bless You, we praise You. I pray, Lord, that people will not go away tonight condemned, for where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty and freedom. It is for freedom that we have been liberated. I pray that freedom will ring from all of our souls tonight, as we step into the life in the Spirit, as we step into abiding in Christ, as we step into our open Heaven, as we step into fullness in Christ. Thank You for it all, in the glorious name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

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