

HOW TO KNOW GOD

Psalm 119

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

A.W. Tozer opens his powerful—and brief—book, “The Knowledge of the Holy”—with this (now famous) line:

“What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

Tozer claims that the most important thing about a person is what comes into their mind when they think about God. What is God like? What does he do? How does he relate to man? In summary: who is God in all that he is? Tozer says that’s the most important thing about a person.

He goes on:

“[If] we were able to extract from any man a complete answer to the question, ‘What comes into your mind when you think about God?’ we might predict with certainty the spiritual future of that man.”

J.I. Packer wrote along a similar theme in his book, “Knowing God”—a book that helped shaped the evangelical world when it was written in 1973. He writes:

“What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God.

When we turn to Scriptures, we find that God places an emphasis on knowing Him:

Je 9:23-24: "Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”"

What does God desire from his people?

Ho 6:6: "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings."

What did Paul strive for in his life? What was his passion?

Php 3:9-10: " that I may know him [Christ] and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,"

What did Jesus equate with eternal life?

John 17:3: “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

What did Peter command his readers?

2 Pe 3:18: "Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

So to know God is not simply to know facts about him. To know God is to know him intimately. To know him savingly. J.I. Packer again writes: “How can we turn our knowledge *about* God into knowledge *of* God?” He answers: by turning “each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation *before* God, leading to prayer and praise *to* God.”

Martin Luther was also a man who wanted to know God. Next year will mark 500 years since the spark of the Reformation. As you probably know, the beginning of the Reformation is traditionally marked by Martin Luther nailing his 95 theses—95 complaints against the Catholic Church—on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. Luther was a one-time German monk and professor whose eyes were opened to the Scriptures, where he learned that salvation is not by works by grace through faith and that the righteousness he needed came from the righteousness God supplied. As God opened his eyes, Luther committed himself to knowing God.

I once read (though I’ve never been able to track down the source) that Luther had most of the NT memorized as well as much of the OT. He preached over 3,000 sermons (if he preached only once per week, that’s over 57 years of sermons). He wrote over 50,000 pages of commentary on the Bible (by comparison, in a given year I write the equivalent of a 500 page book in sermon manuscripts; he wrote 100x that in his lifetime). All this is to say, he was committed to learning the truths of God so that he could know God. In Psalm 119, he says that he discovered three rules for studying theology. By theology he meant knowing God. He says these three rules for learning to know God are found throughout Psalm 119 and by these three rules he came to know God better.

The three rules are: “oratio, meditation, tentatio.” That’s Latin for, roughly, prayer, meditation, and trials. He came to know God better through prayer, meditation, and trials. Obviously Luther’s three-fold *outline* doesn’t carry the weight of Scripture, but his outline does come *from* Scripture and is a faithful observation of Scripture. That outline I have found to be very helpful since I first heard of it about 13 years ago.

So here we are in the middle of summer. The halfway point in the year is coming up this Friday—July 15th. So it seems good to make an assessment of whether we can say we know God better today than we did on January 1st. We should desire to obey what 2 Peter 3:18 says, that I quoted earlier:

"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Our knowledge of God—the intimacy of our relationship with God should increase as our days increase. So how can you know God better? So let’s look at three ways we learn to know God found in Psalm 119.

A Note about Expository Preaching

Now, obviously, we can't cover all of Psalm 119 this morning. We believe in expository preaching here at TCC. We believe all true preaching is expository preaching. But let me remind you that expository preaching doesn't mean verse-by-verse. Expository means to explain. We believe that the preacher's job is to explain the text.

It's Nehemiah 8:8: "They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

That's expository preaching in one verse. Usually that's most effective to explain the Scripture by preaching one verse after another, but you can do exposition topically as well. And that's what we're after this morning. So how can we grow in our knowledge of God?

Three ways: first. . .

I. WE GROW IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THROUGH PRAYER

We don't pray merely for prayer's sake. Yes, God tells us to pray. But there are *purposes* in prayer. And one of the purposes of prayer that we experience is that we come to know God better in prayer. Pray because you want to know God.

Many of the verses in Psalm 119 are prayers. In fact, if you wanted a little challenge this week, you could study this psalm and mark each prayer you find (p with a circle?).

Let's take a look at a few of these prayers that are aimed at helping us know God better. . . Probably the most frequent verse I've prayed related to studying and teaching the Scriptures is Psalm 119:18.

Ps 119:18: "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law."

"Law" here means the Scriptures. Here, the psalmist asks God that his spiritual eyes would be open so that he could see wonders in the Scriptures. Now, three simple observations that have been powerful to me.

First, there are wondrous things in the Bible ("that I may behold wondrous things out of your law"). In the Scriptures, there are beauties to behold. Truths to treasure. And all the Scriptures are written by a single Author and these Scriptures bear his mark. The Scriptures reveal God—all that He is and He has done. And they are wonderful.

Second, we can't see these wondrous things unless we have God's help. That's why he cries out, "Open my eyes!" As if to say, "God, if you don't open my eyes, I won't see the wonders!" How many times I have cried out to God while I prepared for a sermon, "Help me to see! Help me to see! Give light! Open my eyes!" Help me, God. They're going to be there! I've got to have something to say that comes from you. These physical eyes sometimes see only black text on white pages and my spiritual eyes only sees tedium and boredom. I'll kill this church, if I get bored with the Bible. Don't presume that when you open your Bible to read, that your spiritual eyes will also be open. Time after time, as I've completed sermons—sometimes 2, 3, 4 a.m. on

Sunday morning—I've given thanks to God: "God, you did it again! I've seen, now I have something to say!" So we need God's help. The theological word for that is illumination. We need our eyes, our hearts illumined by the Spirit to perceive this word.

Third observation (though this is more of an implication): therefore, we must pray. If there are wonderful things in the Bible and we can't see them without God's help, we should then pray. We pray that God would become better known to us in our reading. We pray to know God.

There are other prayers like v. 18 in this psalm:

v. 27: "Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works."

Behind precepts is the Person who made them. Behind the law is the Lawgiver. So, "make me understand" and then "I will meditate on your wondrous works." That's a prayer. God, if you help me to understand, then I can meditate on what you've done. I can know you better.

Or, look at the succession of prayers in. . .

v. 34-37: "Give me understanding, that I may keep your law and observe it with my whole heart. Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it. Incline my heart to your testimonies, and not to selfish gain! Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things; and give me life in your ways."

There are four prayers back-to-back. They all have the same theme: by nature, my mind, my heart, my eyes, my paths will wander away from you. So, God, turn all these to you. We won't come to know God better unless we pray that he helps us know him better.

And we could go on, but I think you see the point. As we pray to God, we become better acquainted with him. Our hearts are knit to his, so to speak, in sweet communion. As we pour out our hearts to him, our intimacy with him grows. We grow in our knowledge of God through prayer.

Secondly. . .

II. WE GROW IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THROUGH MEDITATION

By meditation, Luther meant meditation on the Word. I don't think prayer is a dialogue. In prayer, I pour out my heart to God. In his Word, he pours out his heart to me. Like any close relationship, there must be communication. So there must be prayer and Word.

What do we mean by meditation? Do we mean going to a quiet place and clearing your mind and thinking on nothingness? Never. Sanctification—becoming more like Jesus—and growing in *knowledge* of God doesn't come by emptying yourself, but by filling yourself with the words of God. Meditation simply means to think over a Bible passage. It's like making a good, strong cup of hot black tea. You've got to steep the tea. If you take a mug of hot water and just dip the tea bag in for a moment, the tea will be weak. If you want a strong cup, you leave it in and steep

it and dip it and saturate it. Your mind works the same way with the word. You need to steep your mind in the Bible. Saturate your thinking with Bible.

- You read a bit and think on what it means.
- You reread.
- You compare it to other Scriptures.
- You note word choices.
- If you're able, you look at verbs and prepositions and conjunctions—and even if you can't remember what those are—
- you look at the words and what they mean and how they related to other words.
- You think unhurried.

Ps 119:11: "I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you."

We studied this verse at the beginning of the year in connection with memorization. Memorization is one form of meditation. That's perhaps the main benefit of memorization—it causes you to slow down and think about the verse and repeat it over and over. You won't remember all the Fighter Verses at the end of the year. Hopefully you'll keep remembering some that have become especially meaningful, as you continue to review them. But likely, you'll forget a lot. But the cumulative effect of you memorizing verses week after week will change you. Listen to this one:

v. 93: "I will never forget your precepts, for by them you have given me life."

Life! That's what we're after. And life is found in knowing God through his word. And then, notice this pattern:

v. 24: "Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors."

v. 47: "for I find my delight in your commandments, which I love."

v. 48: "I will lift up my hands toward your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes."

v. 97: " Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day."

He delights (!), loves (!) God's commandments, statutes, law. That doesn't sound natural. How do you suppose that happened? It's not natural, it's supernatural. He loves God's commandments because through prayer and meditation he's met God himself. The aim of meditation is to get the truth from the page to your mind and down into your heart. And when it's planted there, life blooms.

Several years ago, I began calling my devotional times in the Word, my vision times. And the reason comes from this quote from George Mueller, a Christian evangelist in the 1800s who is famous for caring for 10,000 orphans in England and establishing 117 schools for over 120,000 children—and he never asked anyone for money. Here's what he writes about his devotional times:

“I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished. For I might seek to set the truth before the unconverted, I might seek to benefit believers, I might seek to relieve the distressed, I might in other ways seek to behave myself as it becomes a child of God in this world; and yet, not being happy in the Lord, and not being nourished and strengthened in my inner man day by day, all this might not be attended to in a right spirit.”

So what was his aim of reading and meditating on the word? To have his soul happy in the Lord. Or, to see and to savor (that’s why I called it vision time).

John Piper tweeted a few years ago: “The test of authentic morning devotions is: Do you feel good that you had them or that you heard him.” We read and meditate on the word for a purpose: to know God. If you don’t know God more at the end of it, didn’t you miss the point? So, in order to know God more, we pray and we meditate on the Word.

Finally. . .

III. WE GROW IN OUR KNOWLEDGE OF GOD THROUGH TRIALS

This is a hard way to know God because none of us like trials. But the psalmist teaches us the goodness of trials.

v. 67-68: "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word. You are good and do good; teach me your statutes."

v. 71: "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."

Trials and testing make us depend on God more. They make us treasure the Scriptures more. It forces upon us knowledge of the Holy One.

Martin Luther comments: “[Testing] teaches you not only to know and understand, but also to experience how right, how true, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting God’s word is: it is wisdom supreme. This is why you observe that in the psalm. . . David so often complains of all sorts of enemies. . . For as soon as God’s Word becomes known through you, the devil will afflict you, [and] will make a real [theologian] out of you.”

To paraphrase one Puritan, “God’s house of affliction is his school of instruction.” (Thomas Brooks) Another Puritan, Stephen Charnock, wrote, “We often learn more of God under the rod that strikes us, than under the staff that comforts us.”

John Piper, in his decades of ministry, says: “Have you ever heard anybody say, “While walking on the primrose path of sunshine I discovered the deepest and most lasting fellowship with Jesus””? Piper answers his own question: “Never.”

We learn more of God when we are afflicted.

This is what the psalmist says:

v. 71: "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes."

The great preacher Charles Spurgeon knew suffering. And in his suffering, he knew God. He suffered at times from nearly debilitating depression. Of those difficult times he writes: "It would be a very sharp and trying experience to me to think that I have an affliction which God never sent me, that the bitter cup was never filled by his hand, that my trials were never measured out by him, nor sent to me by his arrangement of their weight and quantity."

In other words, he believes his trials are sent from God. And he wouldn't want it any other way. If they come from God, he also knows that they come from his Good, Gracious, Loving Father. And that his promises will be true. He also reflects on whether he grew in faith more in easy times or in troubles times:

"I am afraid that all the grace that I have got of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours, might almost lie on a penny. But the good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable. . . Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the best book in a minister's library."

There is a man who knows that trials have been golden chariots that ushered him to the house of the Lord. He would have not known the Great Physician so well if he had not been so sick. So we must not begrudge suffering. Pain can turn out to be a servant to you, to help you draw near to God. And if that pain in this life, whatever it is, draws you into a saving relationship with Jesus, you will one day count it worth it.

One of my favorite poems goes like this:

"I stood a beggar of God before His royal throne
And begged him for one priceless gift, which I could call my own.
I took the gift from out His hand, but as I would depart
I cried, "But Lord this is a thorn and it has pierced my heart.
This is a strange, a hurtful gift, which You have given me."
He said, "My child, I give good gifts and gave My best to thee."
I took it home and though at first the cruel thorn hurt sore,
As long years passed I learned at last to love it more and more.
I learned He never gives a thorn without this added grace,
He takes the thorn to pin aside the veil which hides His face."

You're present affliction will turn out to be a gift, if you trust him. Like one severely nearsighted, the testing will become for you spectacles that once put on will allow you to see God more clearly. And if it turns you to a deeper trust in the Lord, you will count it worth it.

CONCLUSION

Recap: So through prayer, meditation on the word, and trials we come to know God better. So, are you ready to run a race of faith to close out the back half of this year? Make it your aim—in whatever condition you're in—to know God better. This is God's will for you.