

Knowing the Invisible, Inaudible, Untouchable God: Between the Garden, Galilee, and Glory

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Have you seen the advertisement that promises you a personal relationship with a car? This luxury machine, you are told, will anticipate your every whim and desire. It will get to know you and be your friend.

I hate false advertising. You are promised wonderful experiences and end up being repeatedly disappointed. Sadly, some evangelism is like that. You are promised that when you become a Christian, your problems will be over and you will be filled with joy, love and peace because you have a wonderful, personal relationship with Jesus Christ. But the reality of the Christian life in a fallen world is usually different and many struggle not to become cynical and disillusioned.

At Covenant Seminary our often-expressed desire is that, above everything else, students should not just know about Christ, but should know Him better when they leave than when they came.

Paul said that his greatest longing, above everything else, was to know Christ (Phil. 3:10) and he prayed with passion that the Christians would know Christ better (Eph. 1:17). Jeremiah advised us not to boast in wisdom or wealth but only to boast in the fact that we know God (Jer. 9:23-24). What is this relationship with God? What does it mean to know Him? As soon as we call a relationship with God “personal,” we have a problem: God is immaterial and invisible.

A PROBLEM

How can you have much of a relationship with someone who does not talk when you talk to him, whom you cannot see and have never seen, who leaves stories and letters about himself—written two thousand years ago? No phone conversations—in fact, rather strange one-way conversations—you lift the phone and start talking and no one replies, at least not in an audible voice. No new mail, just tons of very old mail. No faxes or e-mails, no personal appearances. No burning bush, no cloud, no obvious signs or wonders. A bit distant, to say the least. Now compare this with my relationship with my wife, the closest and most intimate that I know. I can see, smell, touch and hear her.

The main analogies used in Scripture of our knowledge of God tease us with anticipation of closeness. We can know God, we are told, in the way a son knows his father, a wife knows her husband, a subject knows his king and a sheep knows his shepherd.¹ But very few sons have not seen their fathers. What wife has not felt her husband’s arms around her? What sheep has not heard his shepherd’s voice?

In a personal relationship what we long for most of all is to see the other person. We find it hard to be satisfied with a relationship when we cannot see him or her. But we have to learn to trust God with none of that. We are promised that one day we will see Him face to face but “now we see but a poor reflection” (1 Cor. 13:12).

We are promised the presence of God, but we cannot see, hear or touch Him. Honesty demands that we admit the frustration. We pray and it seems so one-sided. There is silence to our longings for a voice or a sign. There is distance when we need an arm around our shoulders and a word of encouragement. “How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?” (Ps. 89:46). There is an empty space when we long to see Him walk into a room. In extreme situations of danger and terror, in desperation, people often cry out for help as Isaiah did: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down” and deliver me (Is. 64:1)!

Is this tension and frustration with the apparent absence of God just a sign of immaturity? Often I feel I should be beyond this, but perhaps it could be seen as a mark of growth and maturity—a deep longing to know God even more!

THE HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM

We can go back to the fall of man to find our first clue to the reason for the problem: because of sin, our knowledge of God and our relationship with God is limited for a while. After Adam and Eve sinned and were expelled from the garden, it seems that there was not the same experience of intimacy with God. With the incarnation of Jesus as Emmanuel, “God with us,” the infinite Lord came in physical form to the earth. In Galilee He could be seen, touched, smelled and heard. Before He died, Jesus promised that when He left the apostles they would not be alone. He said, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth...I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (Jn. 14:16-18).

Jesus promises a very real relationship through the Spirit of God, but we have to admit that this is, to say the least, a somewhat mysterious thing because it is so different in quality from our normal human relationships.

HOW DO WE KNOW HIM? LET US COUNT THE WAYS.

Scripture makes it clear that we are the recipients of rich assets for knowing God today. A list of the ways we know God is extensive and encompasses many areas of our lives. We know God through the Holy Spirit’s ministry, Scripture, prayer, creation, God’s actions in history, worship and fellowship. It seems that everywhere we turn as Christians we have a new opportunity for knowing God through these means of grace. Much of the invaluable teaching we receive as Christians helps us appreciate these means of grace more fully. For many, growing older also helps us grow in appreciation for these aspects of the Christian life. We find they are deeper and richer than we previously grasped. Additionally most Christians can point to some special experiences of knowing God’s love and presence in particularly dramatic and tangible ways, but these are not the norm of daily experience.

In order to acknowledge the tension we live in as believers, I would like to address the greater portion of this article to another aspect of the reality of our relationship with God today: that is the longing for more. At times the above means of grace are spoken of and there seems to be little more to say about knowing God than to, perhaps rather lamely, encourage believers to accept a certain distance and lack of intimacy compared with human relationships, to lower their expectations and to be careful about the language they use around young believers lest they promote disappointment and cynicism in reaction to what appears to be false advertising. But we cannot leave it there, for something in us cries out for more. Is this a created longing which is ultimately not able to be satisfied, a cruel joke? Sometimes it feels like that, but there are enough hints in Scripture that my longing is, one day, to be satisfied more fully than I could ever imagine.

HUNGER FOR MORE

Yes, thankfully, there is more! Scripture uses marriage imagery, specifically referring to two becoming one flesh, to describe the mystery of our closeness with God. Paul refers to this in Ephesians 5:25-32 when he exhorts husbands to love their wives, “just as Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her to make her holy...and to present her to Himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” This wonderful passage on marriage ends with “the two will become one flesh.’ This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

Could it be that our relationship with God now (this side of Christ’s return) is like the engagement period of a marriage, a time of growing knowledge and intimacy, and a time of anticipation of more? Now, engagement for the Jews was different from our own understanding of engagement. It was as serious a commitment as marriage, the only difference being that the couple did not live or sleep together. The price was paid by the man, in the presence of witnesses, and there was a legal and binding contract. Unfaithfulness while they were engaged was punishable as adultery. This was a deep level of commitment and the firm foundation for a growing relationship. So, in the year of engagement or betrothal the couple would get to know each other by spending time with each other alone and with each other’s family and friends.

Even today the time that engaged couples spend together allows a growing understanding and appreciation of each other’s personality and temperament. The early days of the courtship are usually enjoyable and satisfying, but as time passes in an engagement there is a growing awareness of and longing for the closeness of the consummation of the relationship. Tim Stafford in his book *Knowing the Face of God* writes: To those who have spent their lives hanging around God (I am one of these—a church kid) the freedom and joy of life in Christ may even seem minimal and be taken for granted. Getting tired of the engagement period is natural, for the engagement is not an end in itself...In the same way, our engagement to God is not meant to make us comfortable. It is meant to lead to something better, more complete.²

Stafford writes of a danger common to human relationships and our relationship with God of trying to force premature intimacy. Now it is not possible to force intimacy on God, and He is not going to “jump the gun,” but I confess that, like Stafford, my prayers for a deeper experience of God sometimes become demanding and desperate. I do not deny the fact that most Christians can point to particular times in their lives when they knew the closeness and reality of God in a remarkable and tangible way. However, to expect this level of intimacy as the norm of one’s daily walk with God is misleading and destructive. It leads to a neurotic search for a certain state of mind and to a sense of false guilt, failure or faithlessness when the “high” of the experience eludes us.

FAITH NOT SIGHT

Faith is not a mindless leap in the dark. It is firm belief—based on good evidence—in something that, for the moment, cannot be seen or touched or heard. The writer to the Hebrews says that we live by faith, in hope of what is to come (Heb. 11), not by sight, smell, touch or hearing. The repeated phrase, “by faith” runs, like a refrain, through this chapter on the great heroes of the faith. Some had dramatic experiences of deliverance, others had dramatic experiences of terror and martyrdom. “These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better” (Heb. 11:39, 40a).

There is one more truth that must not be forgotten because it gives such deep comfort as we wait for that day when we will see Him face to face. It is this: He knows us fully even though we do not know Him fully!

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer. 1:5). “I know my sheep and my sheep know me...My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (Jn. 10: 14, 27).

J.I. Packer, in his best-selling and practical book, *Knowing God* writes:

What matters supremely therefore is not in the last analysis the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment therefore when his care falters.

This is momentous knowledge. There is unspeakable comfort—the sort of comfort that energizes, be it said, not enervates—in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love for me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench his determination to bless me.³

It is almost four summers now since I began to wrestle with this question. I read books about knowing God; I talked to people about their experience of relationship with God; I walked the beautiful cliffs and fields of England and as I walked I talked out loud to God (when no human was looking or listening!). Although I did not hear a voice or see a vision, I seemed to hear His Spirit saying within my mind and heart: *I know, my child, that for now this unfulfilled desire to know me fully is frustrating for you, but, for the moment, you are to live by faith—not by seeing or hearing or touching. Live as if I am here, even though you cannot see me, because I am here. I know you through and through and I am with you and I am in you... Nothing, yes, nothing, not even suffering and death, can separate you from my love. And on the other side of death you will be with me for eternity. You will see me face to face, you will hear my voice and feel my arms around you. You will experience my touch of fire as pain when I burn away the impurities and sin in your life, but it is for your good, that you may be more like me. For now, you have not fully received what I have promised. It is not wrong to long, to groan, for more. But wait with patience and eagerness for that day* (Rom. 8:22-25).

1 J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 37.

2 Tim Stafford, *Knowing the Face of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 96-97.

3 Packer, *Knowing God*, 42.

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