

Five Secrets of Knowing God

Maybe you have heard it said about someone, “To know him is to love him.” What do people mean when they say that? They mean, such a person is so attractive in personality, so winsome, that once you get to know him, you will love him. Of course, you can’t say that about everybody.

But there is one person that you can truly say it of: God Himself. To know God, as a person, is to come to love Him. No one who truly knows God does not love Him. To know Him is to know someone who is irresistibly lovely. He is altogether lovely, there is no part of him that is repulsive to a holy heart. “Let all our employment be to know God: the more one knows Him, the more one desires to know Him. And as knowledge is commonly the measure of love, the deeper and more extensive our knowledge shall be, the greater will be our love: and if our love of God were great, we should love Him equally in pains and pleasures.” - Samuel Rutherford, *Letters*

We have often reminded everyone at NCBC that our greatest priority is to love God. But we cannot simply talk about loving God. Loving the idea of loving God is not the same things as loving God.

To say that God is your ultimate love when you do not know him may be sheer sentimentalism. To sing songs which claim intimate devotion, dependence, or delight in God, when you know little of him, may be feigned love.

Loving God is all a matter of *response*. We love God as a response to seeing and understanding who He is. We come to know Him and then we love Him. Worship is an appropriate, corresponding response to who God is. Who God is, what he has done, what he has said, and what he has promised form the basis of our love for him. Unless God chooses to reveal himself, human worship devolves into blind idolatry. In other words, central to the pursuit of loving God is knowing God.

What else in life do we love without some knowledge? No one trusts in something unless he has some understanding or assumption of its trustworthiness. People are committed to causes, or people they have come to experience, as desirable. And no one delights in something he knows nothing about.

Some Christians think that the life of faith is one of loving a God we do not know. This is fundamentally wrong. Faith is emphatically *not* loving a God we do not know; faith is loving a God we do not *see* with our physical eyes.

That the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honour, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen, you love.

Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, (1 Peter 1:7-8)

We can love the unseen; we can never love the unknown. Believing is not an act of treating the untrue as true, or imagining the unreal to be real. Faith is a reaction to revelation. We love God because he reveals himself to us and in seeing him, we come to love him.

But how do we know God? I want to give you five secrets to knowing God. They are not all related, some are quite different to one another. But if you understand these five, you will understand how to approach your pursuit of God. You will understand what to do and what not to do if you want to know God, so as to love God. Many of these truths come out of John 17, the high priestly prayer of

Christ.

1) We know God as a person.

John 17:3 ³ *"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent"*

The Lord Jesus addresses His Father as a person. He praises Him, observes things, comments on things, asks for things, as you do to a person. And in verse 3, He says the essence of eternal life is knowledge of God. According to Jesus, a person is spiritually alive when he has come to know God and His Son.

Knowing God is knowing a person. Many people miss this first and fundamental point, and so they miss all the rest. What kind of knowing is knowing a person?

Knowing about chemical reactions is not the same kind of knowledge as knowing your spouse. One kind of knowledge is *empirical* knowledge: knowledge we gain about the physical world through investigation with instruments or the observation of our senses. The other is *personal* knowledge: discovering a person through a relationship of trust, love and honour. If a man were to try to know his prospective wife through empirical means, it would not only fail to bring him the kind of knowledge he needs, it would be demeaning to her. If he hired a private investigator to track her movements, carried a clipboard around and wrote down observations about her daily habits, went through her private correspondence, and interviewed other people about her, she would not be flattered, but insulted. A person is not an object to be studied and measured. A person is to be known through a voluntary relationship.

To treat the knowledge of God like an experiment in a test-tube will certainly fail to bring any meaningful knowledge of him. God does not reveal himself to those who regard him as a specimen to be dissected. All the atheists who wish God to show up on their instrumentation will only be confirmed in their disbelief. If I do not have to 'prove' my existence to people by submitting to a science experiment, how much less should God?

Knowing logical theorems is not at all like knowing your child. One kind of knowledge is *rational* knowledge: knowledge we gain by logical deduction. The other is *personal* knowledge: knowing a person within an established attitude of trust, love, and honour. To attempt to know someone by merely reasoning from certain premises to certain conclusions will certainly be little more than a sterile relationship. People are not known this way. They are known by being in their presence, speaking to them, and experiencing life together. While apologists may establish the probability of God's existence through rational or evidential means, they cannot *prove* his existence. This is simply not how we know other persons.

Here we see why many never come to know him at all, or progress very little in knowing him.

Proverbs 1:7 makes it clear:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, But fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The beginning of all knowledge is an approach to God of reverence and awe. This hardly tries to "prove" God through rationalism or empiricism, it *assumes* him, and approaches with the appropriate affection: reverential awe. A New Testament parallel is:

Hebrews 11:6:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

This is Paul's point in Romans 1. God is unavoidable and perceived by all through creation and conscience. Avoidance of this hard-wired knowledge is a form of deception – suppressing truth inconvenient to oneself. No further knowledge can occur if one is building on a lie.

If the beginning of knowledge is assuming God is a three-personal being to be honoured, what will happen if this is not in place? What will happen if a person comes to God expecting him to prove himself? Surely he will fail to gain any further knowledge. An error in the first line will make the whole sum wrong. God will not be gawked at, peered at, probed or investigated, any more than any other person with a shred of dignity would. To the extent that you treat God as an object, you diminish your capacity to know him as a subject.

If we are to love God, we must beware of trying to know God in any other way than as a person. Certainly, logic and reason play their valuable part in coming to know God. Experience performs a vital role in knowing God. However, these are tools that assist us in knowing the personal being who is God, not the route we take to get to him.

2) We know God because he reveals himself.

John 17:2 ² *"as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.*

John 17:6 *"I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word.*

John 17:9-12 *"I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. ¹⁰ "And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them. ¹¹ "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. ¹² "While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.*

In this prayer Jesus clearly speaks about some he is praying for. Jesus says they belonged to the Father, and He gave them to the Son. The Father had clearly chosen them, made them His own possession, and then shared them with the Son.

What does this tell us? God has a sovereign plan to reveal Himself to whom he wants, when He wants.

The prophet Isaiah calls God a 'God who hides himself'. God has chosen to seem invisible to some, and conspicuously obvious to others. Sin makes what is plain seem hidden. Against this background of man's wilful suppression of truth, God chooses to reveal himself in a special way at his own discretion. Given that we all begin life pretending that he has no claim over us, how much he reveals of himself to different people is purely His decision. Considering our depraved state where none naturally seeks after God (Rom 3:10), we can be certain that none would ever know Him if he did not initiate this self-disclosure.

Jesus once rejoiced in the mystery and beauty of God's plan of self-disclosure to humans, who shut their ears and eyes to the knowledge of him.

At that time Jesus answered and said:

"I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes. Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him".. (Matthew 11:25-27)

As a race, we have made it clear again and again how much we would like to know God. From Adam to Noah; from the Flood to the Golden Calf; from the apostasy of Israel to the rejection of Jesus, to the present rejection of God for supposedly scientific reasons, man keeps voting to suppress the knowledge of God. God is fully within his rights to decide to whom he will reveal more of himself. He does not owe us anything. Should he hide himself from the whole race, he would not be unjust. It is we who have treated him unjustly.

Against this background, we see that knowing God is a God-granted privilege. In our sinful state, we do not naturally come to him. To know God is a merciful act of God. He has been spurned and rejected by us times without number. If we know him, it is because he has pursued us, refused our refusals, rejected our rejections and removed the blindness that kept us from seeing his beauty. We should treat knowing God as a deep and precious privilege.

Knowing God is not like knowing history or geography. It is not as if the knowledge of God is just sitting in a library where you can, at your convenience, go and start researching God. While people can learn all about God and people can gain knowledge about the things of God, knowing God is a gift which God sovereignly gives. Jesus told Simon Peter that his knowledge of his Messiahship was evidence of having been blessed, or favoured, by God.

Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 16:16-17)

We should never treat the knowledge of God in a proud, cavalier way. However hard we might study, however diligent we might be in searching, it is the Lord who gives knowledge and understanding (Proverbs 2:1-6). We must always humble ourselves beneath this reality. We must plead with him to reveal himself to us, to enlighten our hearts (Eph 1:18), and to enable us to understand.

3) We know God through the Trinity.

John 17:5 ⁵ *"And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.*

John 17:20-24 **John 17:20** ²⁰ *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. ²² "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: ²³ "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me. ²⁴ "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.*

In this prayer, Jesus invokes the mysterious and glorious relationships in the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And what Jesus says is that the relationship He has had with His Father is now to be shared with His people. The Father and the Son are united, and the love they have for one another is not simply a feeling, but a third Person, the Holy Spirit and each of the three Person

indwells the others. Jesus says this will now, in a way become part of the experience of believers. They will be indwelt, they will behold Christ's glory, they will share in the love of Father for Son and Son for Father by the indwelling Spirit.

Knowing God results from an action of the three Persons of the Trinity. Since the Incarnation of Christ, believers now understand that knowledge of God takes place through all three Persons of the Godhead. The unspeakably beautiful doctrine of the Trinity lies at the very heart of knowing God.

The Father, the author and initiator within the Godhead, has chosen to reveal himself in his Son. Jesus, God the Son, is the ultimate expression of God the Father to man. Since no man can see the essence of God and live, the invisible God has now been revealed in Jesus Christ.

No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (John 1:18)

All of God's glory is seen and reflected in the face of Christ. This is why he is called *the Word* in John 1:1. As words communicate ideas, all of God that can be communicated to human minds is found in Jesus Christ.

The Son has always been the radiance of the Father's glory (Heb 1:3), but in the Incarnation, He has expressed the glory of God to man in unprecedented ways. In becoming the God-Man, we have seen the transcendent God made imminent. Someone said, Jesus translated the glory of God into a language we can understand." What was unknowable to human minds has now been expressed in human form.

This incredible expounding of God's glory through the person of the Son was limited to a particular time and place. The Son could only come in human history at a particular time, and appear in one place. This apparent limitation is what introduces the work of the Third Person of the Trinity. With Christ's ascension, the Spirit now comes to do a far greater work (Jo 14:12). His primary work in this age is that of revealing the person and work of the glorified Son, and he is able to do this for any heart, in any place, at any time (Jo 15:26). Put simply, the Spirit reveals the Son, who in turn reveals the Father.

The Father has chosen to make his Son the focal point of salvation and worship, according to Ephesians 1:10-12, Philippians 2:9-10 and Colossians 1:16-20. God is working all things towards the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ. God the Father is delighted to have all attention point to Jesus as his 'image bearer', because it will ultimately redound back to him. The Spirit works toward the Father's goal of exalting Christ, in whom all the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily (Col 2:9)

To know God, we must cooperate with the Spirit's work of showing us the glory of Christ. In so doing, we know the glory of the whole Godhead. The Spirit's primary way of revealing Christ in this age has been to inspire the Scriptures (2 Pet 1:21), indwell believers (1 Cor 6:19) and then illuminate hearts to understand God's mind in Christ (1 Cor 2:1-14). When we look to know God in the way he has appointed, we will find the Spirit-inspired, and Spirit-illuminated Scriptures are entirely sufficient to this end (2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:3). To know God will be a process of seeking God in his Word, in total reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

4) We know God progressively.

John 17:17 ⁷ "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.

When Jesus prays this, He asks the Father to do a work that will take place over time. Sanctification through the truth is a process that takes many years.

Knowing God does not come to us in one massive flash of revelation. Indeed, when men encountered God and received a flood of revelation, the sight usually overwhelmed them, and left them weak and near-disabled. Instead, God has set it up so that knowing him is a process of incrementally growing in knowledge, as we live our lives in relationship with him. Our relationship is supposed to be one of an ever-deepening knowledge of God.

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 3:18)

God has chosen to make a progressive relationship the means by which he keeps growing our knowledge of him. As we live in an obedient relationship with him, we come to see how beautiful he is, and our love for him grows.

In the process of obeying him, we come to learn by experience how reliable, desirable and delightful he is. Through experiencing His Word in our lives, we come to depend on him ultimately, devote ourselves to him ultimately, and delight in him ultimately.

I am not saying that we know God in private experience apart from His Word. Rather, as we obey His Word, and respond to the revelation of Him in the Word, our understanding grows. In the process of obedience, we discover explanation through experience. This explains why several Scriptures teach that obedience to the knowledge of God, that you already possess, leads to more knowledge.

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (Colossians 1:9-10)

Therefore take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him. (Luke 8:18)

Many Christians fail to grow in their knowledge of God, because they fail to respond obediently to the knowledge of God they already have. Responding rightly to the knowledge you do have, brings more, which results in more love for him.

5) We know God through His word-pictures

For God to explain himself to humans presents a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. God is like nothing we know. Part of the 'godness' of God is his uniqueness. How can the invisible, transcendent, holy God explain Himself to us? He cannot only use reason or logic. Reason helps us arrive at correct conclusions. But reason is helpless to describe what we don't know. He cannot use memory of experiences, if nothing in our past or present experience relates to the unique God.

To bridge this gap of understanding, God compares himself to things we do know. He gives us analogies. We know fire. God says in some places that he is like fire. From this, we understand that God means he is powerful, and even dangerous, but purifying, comforting, and beautiful.

For God to reveal himself to us, God must use that faculty of knowledge we call the imagination. Generally, when people hear the word *imagination*, they tend to think of that part of the mind which

dreams and thinks of unreal things, or which allows escape into fantasy. In fact, the imagination is a part of your mind which you must use if you are to understand things which you have not seen, cannot see, or cannot understand any other way.

When you think about it, this is almost entirely how God explains himself to us. Consider some of the images God gives us to understand him: Rock, Shepherd, Door, Water, Shield, Bridegroom, King, Master, Judge, Dwelling Place, Commander of an Army, Father, Eagle, Lion, Lamb. We could list many, many more.

God gives us these images to grant us understanding. If we will ponder the meaning of the images, we come to an understanding of what God is like. More than that, the images, rightly understood, evoke the right kind of love for God. Contained within those images is the kind of love we have for Him. When we hear that God is a King, contained in that image is a set of responses. We love Him the way loyal subjects love a good King. When we hear that God is a Father, there is a kind of love contained in that. We love Him the way obedient children love a dignified and good Father.

If our understanding of ideas such as King, Shepherd, Master, kingdom, redeem, love is being shaped by trite, shallow, banal, or sentimental TV shows, books, or songs, we will not be awed by those images. The wrong image creates the wrong response. God didn't make a mistake in selecting the image. If the wrong response is present, probably the wrong image is in our minds.

Since we must know God analogically, we must protect our imaginations and expose them to what is true, and noble, and honourable and upright, and lovely and pure (Phil 4:8). Much of our faith depends on it. What we read, the hymns we sing, the music we listen to, the art we look at, the poetry we read, and the things we watch are not matters of little concern. They form the imaginative backdrop of our world view. They will take the very images of Scripture and give them colour, meaning, depth, power – or warp, distort, trivialise and weaken them.

There then are five secrets to knowing God.

Ask yourself, do I seek to know Him as a person? Or have I sought to know *about* Him, like a subject, or know facts about him. Knowing God is personal knowledge.

Have I accepted that knowing God is a privilege, granted by His sovereignty? Am I thankful that He revealed Himself? Have I submitted myself and humbly asked that He would enable me to know Him, and to keep knowing Him?

Do I understand that knowing God is knowing Him through the three Persons of the trinity? I know the Father by the Son, and I know the Son by co-operating with the work of the Spirit?

Do I know that knowing God is a process that will take as many years as God gives me on this earth? There are no short-cuts, no sudden downloads of the knowledge of God. It is a long process, and often enough, a painful one.

Do I realise that knowing God comes through His word-pictures? Am I looking for them in Scripture? Am I protecting my imagination from evil, and nurturing it on what is pure?