

Knowing God through Living in His Presence

If you have ever looked at a computer screen, or a printed page with your eyeball nearly touching it, you will sometimes see that what looks like a picture or an image is actually made up of thousands of little dots or pixels of different colours. If you had to look at those dots by themselves, you wouldn't understand the big picture. You have to step back, and allow your eyes and brain to combine the dots to see the image on the screen.

That's true of the Christian life. Sometimes we are so embedded in the Christian life, looking so closely at the various duties and responsibilities and truths of the Christian life that we don't see the big picture. We see the individual dots of things like grace, or holiness, or Calvary, or the Holy Spirit, or spiritual gifts, or any one of thousands of truths. But if we are to be truly God-glorifying Christians, we need to step back and see the big picture.

That's what we're attempting to do in this series. We are trying to understand the whole of the Christian life, and then relate the parts to the whole. We began by considering the grand priority of the Christian life. We saw that the big idea, the key goal, the first and greatest obligation is to love God ultimately. In loving God this way, we glorify Him – we reflect and display His beauty, while experiencing ultimate fulfilment ourselves.

We then asked the question – how do we come to love God this way? What is the process of the Christian life? We saw last week that the process of loving God is one of knowing Him. It is when we see how trustworthy, beautiful and delightful that He is that we love Him. And we saw that the knowledge of God is the knowledge of a Person, knowledge given to us at God's sovereign discretion, knowledge that is Trinitarian, knowledge that comes progressively in an obedient relationship, and knowledge that is analogical.

Today we want to take this matter of the process of knowing God further. It is fine to speak about the kind of knowledge we will receive, but how exactly do we come to know Him?

Before we consider this, let me make my assumption clear. I'm assuming that we are talking about Christians. We are talking about those who have turned from living for self, turned from sin, and embraced Jesus Christ as their only Lord and Saviour. They are looking to God the Son to save them from sin's penalty and declare them to be righteous in God's sight. Apart from God's work of regenerating a sinner, declaring him to be righteous, giving him a new nature, coming to indwell him, there can be no real knowledge of God in the way we will talk about today. In fact, Jesus defined eternal life this way:

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."*

Knowing God truly begins at the moment of receiving eternal life, when you believe on the Son. But after that, the process of knowing God continues. Paul, a seasoned and successful believer said:

Philippians 3:10 ¹⁰ *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death,*

As we said last week, knowing God is a process that continues through our lives as Christians. But how should we think about this process of knowing God? Is knowing God something that happens only a Sunday? Is it something that occurs through some kind of prophetic vision or dream? Do we know God when we pray or read the Bible?

Let's remind ourselves that knowing God is knowing a person. To know God is not studying a topic,

learning a new language, or classifying insects. It is the knowledge of a person, gained in a relationship. When we think about human relationships, what is fundamental to two people knowing each other? The answer is, they must be in one another's presence. Now it is true that things like the Internet have made it possible for relationships to continue over vast distances. But we'd all admit that reading an email or seeing someone on a screen is still secondary to being in such a person's presence.

From the beginning of the Bible to its end, we find an emphasis on God's people knowing Him through being in His presence.

Let's take a walk through the Scriptures to see several examples:

We know that man begins in innocence in the Garden of Eden, God's garden, where they lived in God's presence. Apparently, the Lord would appear daily in the cool of the day and walk and talk with them. After they had sinned, they no longer loved this.

Genesis 3:8 *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.*

As judgement for their sin, they were driven out from the Garden, which was the same as being driven out from the presence of the Lord. When Cain killed, it is said explicitly that he went out from the presence of the Lord.

Now that man is a sinner, God cannot be present with man in the same way. However, in grace, He continues to call a people to Himself so that they can be in His presence, and He can be in theirs.

In Genesis 17:1, this is what God says to Abraham:

Genesis 17:1 *When Abram was 99 years old, the LORD appeared to him, saying, "I am God Almighty. Live in My presence and be devout."*

And when God called the descendants of Abraham to be His people, this is what He said to Moses

Exodus 29:45-46 ⁵ *I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God.* ⁴⁶ *And they will know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt, so that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.*

Leviticus 26:12 *I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people.*

When Moses is praying to God, he points out that it is God's presence which distinguishes Israel from all other nations.

Exodus 33:13-16 ¹³ *Now if I have indeed found favor in Your sight, please teach me Your ways, and I will know You and find favor in Your sight. Now consider that this nation is Your people."* ¹⁴ *Then He replied, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest."* ¹⁵ *"If Your presence does not go," Moses responded to Him, "don't make us go up from here.* ¹⁶ *How will it be known that I and Your people have found favor in Your sight unless You go with us? I and Your people will be distinguished by this from all the other people on the face of the earth."*

In fact, it is God's presence with a people that identifies them as His people. When He lives with them, and they live with Him, there is a mutual covenant relationship. And it is God's intention that by living with His people, His people learn what kind of God He is, His ways, His works, His purposes, His desires, and His loves. Just as we learn to love our spouses or our children or our friends by knowing them through being with them, so it is in a relationship with God. Israel came to

know God because He lived among them.

One of the things God repeatedly told Israel was that they were to live holy lives because He was dwelling among them. They could not live in idolatry and defilement, because God was among them. One of the saddest days in Israel's history is recorded in Ezekiel 9-11, where God's glory cloud departed from the Temple. That does not mean God had severed His relationship with Israel, but it did signify that His relationship with them, as their immediate King, signified by His presence, had altered. "Ichabod"- the glory has departed.

The coming of Jesus signifies one of the greatest expressions of God's presence with man. His very name – Emmanuel, means God with us, God among us.

John 1:1 tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Then in verse 14, he writes, *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"*.

The word for dwelt among us is the Greek word for dwelling in a tent – to tabernacle among us. God had been with Israel in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple, but now God the Son, by adding to Himself a true and perfect human nature, was tabernacling among us in the greatest way yet. God was in the presence of men as a man. This is why John adds to *verse 14*, *"And we beheld His glory"*

When Jesus came, He came not simply to dwell among us, because His first coming was temporary. He came to die for the sins that prevent a relationship with God. In other words, He came to make it possible for us to live in God's presence perpetually.

We know there is coming a day when we will live in God's presence physically, and know and see Him in unprecedented ways.

Revelation 21:3 ³ *And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God."*

However, before that day, it is possible for Christians to live in God's presence, and so come to know Him and thereby love Him. Shortly before His death, Jesus began to teach His disciples how this would be possible. He said it would be possible by His leaving, and sending the Third Person of the Trinity, who could indwell all believers and mediate the presence of Christ. In His incarnation, Christ was in one place at a time. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, believers around the world could be in the presence of Christ.

John 14:16-20 ⁶ *"And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever --* ¹⁷ *"the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you. ¹⁸ "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you."*

Notice Jesus says – I will not leave you orphans – I will come to you,. But how will He come? In these sense He is speaking of here – He will come when the Spirit comes to dwell in believers.

John 14:23 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 him and make Our home with him."*

Here is the New Testament version of living in God's presence. Once we are saved, God the Holy Spirit comes to live within us, locating the very presence of God into the temple of our bodies. The

reason He can do that is because at the moment of justification, we are placed in Christ. All His merits and all His righteousness cover us, and we are hidden in Him. And since that makes us positionally perfect and pleasing to God, God is pleased to come and dwell within us permanently. God the Spirit becomes a pledge - a down payment - that the presence of God we now have in Him will one day be consummated in being in God's actual presence and seeing Him.

So in the New Testament we see this emphasis on being in Christ, while at the same time, Christ being in us by the Holy Spirit. Jesus spoke of this several times.

20 "At that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you.

We will spend several messages in this series considering what this means – Christ in you and you in Christ, because it is the basis of our confidence to keep approaching God and living in His presence. We call it the Position of the Christian life. This position is grounded on the wonderful truths of the gospel. The position we gain through the gospel keeps manifesting in the life of a Christian. For now, we want to continue to consider how all this ties in to the process of the Christian life.

How do we respond to this truth of our living in God and God's living in us? Jesus gave us one word, which has been sorely misinterpreted again and again. It's that simple word: **abide**.

John 15:4-5 *"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. ⁵ "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.*

There's nothing mysterious about the word 'abide'. It just means *to dwell*. It is the image of living together. It fits perfectly the idea of living in God's presence. Since you are now located in Christ, and since He now abides in you through the presence of the Spirit, then dwell together. Live together. Live in His presence.

Living in God's presence is no longer a matter of journeying to a faraway temple. Living in God's presence is no longer a matter of having to make your way to some temple or tabernacle, where God's presence is particularly manifest. The glory of the Christian life is that God has chosen to dwell within His people, and it is therefore possible to be in His presence at all times. The merits of Christ make it possible for God to continually dwell in you and never leave you nor forsake you. The presence of the Holy Spirit means you do not have to shout with raised tones to reach God, for He is within you. You do not have to find a priest who can mediate God's presence to you. It is possible for a New Testament believer to live in God's presence continually because of this unique arrangement – you in Christ and Christ in you.

To put it all together: if you want to love God, you must know Him. If you want to know Him, you must live in His presence. For a New Testament believer that means abiding.

Volumes have been written about what Jesus means by abiding, some of them good, some of them not so helpful. What we need to remember is that Jesus is giving us an image. Of course, there is the image of the vine and branches. But mixed in is the image of dwelling – remaining, living. Branches must live, remain, dwell in the vine to bear fruit and stay alive.

The image of living together is familiar to all of us. If you live with someone, that relationship can either be pleasant or unpleasant. Pleasant relationships are a result of the people who dwell together deliberately trying to enjoy one another, to avoid the things that displease the other, to ask for forgiveness for wrongs done, and to do the things that please the other. In situations like this, the

parties enjoy each other more and more, because they are trying to please each other. Inevitably, they know each other better, because people open up more to the ones they trust and love.

Abiding in Christ is really no different. He is in us by the Spirit, and we are in Him by the Spirit. Positionally we cannot be removed from Him. However, our experience of His presence is dependent on how we choose to dwell with Him. We can choose to deliberately seek to know Him and please Him, avoiding the things that displease Him, and doing the things that please Him. If we do this, we will find ourselves in a delightful cycle of knowing Christ more and more. Paul describes this cycle in Ephesians 3:

Ephesians 3:16-19... *that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, ¹⁷ that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, ¹⁸ may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height -- ¹⁹ to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

When the Spirit's work in us is not quenched, Christ's presence in us is lavishly felt, and abundantly expressed. When this atmosphere of loving Him roots and grounds the relationship, we go on to staggering levels of knowing the love of Christ.

Just think back to when God dwelt physically with Israel. God told them not to defile themselves but to be holy, because He was now among them. There is a way of living that grieves God and quenches a full experience of knowing Him. There is way of living in harmony with His presence that brings greater knowledge of Him.

We have already said that the medium of knowledge is the Word of God. The Spirit of God takes the Word of God and shows us the Son of God. However, there is a way we can live that is like living coldly with a spouse that hinders a growth in the relationships.

We could think if this life of abiding, of living in God's presence as a cycle. The cycle follows five stages: communion, conviction, confession, cleansing, conformity, and then it begins again. We'll consider this cycle in more depth next week, but let's outline it here.

We begin with communion. This ought to be the default state of abiding. It is simply the enjoyable and easy state of sharing life with God and in God. As you would with a physical person who lived with you, it means communicating – observing, thanking, praising, asking. This is life lived in a state of continual prayer. By continual I don't mean *continuous*: non-stop, or uninterrupted. I mean, as you would with someone you live with – the communication is free, easy, natural, and ongoing. Sometimes you simply do activities together without talking. But they are shared in each other's presence, done with each other, with the easy comfort of being with one you love.

As we live with God in communion, something happens. His holy nature begins to identify ways that we displease Him. We do things, think things, or desire things that are offensive to our heavenly Indweller. So, He does the work of conviction. Conviction is where God identifies something He wants us to confess to Him so that we can keep enjoying the joy of communion. Now when God convicts us, He does not convict us of all sin in our lives. To do so would utterly crush and discourage us. We are only faintly aware of how many ways we offend God, and it is through the complete work of Christ that He dwells with us and we remain acceptable to Him. But since He is committed to progressively growing us, He puts His finger on a particular area of sin that needs to be dealt with. This conviction is not God identifying the *only* sin in our lives, but it is the sin God wants you to become aware of and confess at that time. Given your growth and level of maturity, God decides it is no longer tolerable, and He makes you aware of it. Once again, this is not because

this sin has made God forsake you like He did His own Son on the cross. Jesus experienced that for us so that we will never have to. What it simply means is that in God's living with you, He progressively makes you aware of things He wants you to deal with.

After all, we put up with crying for food in our one-year-old children, but we would not accept it in our eleven-year-olds. We put up with some immature sin of our four year-olds, that we do not tolerate in our seventeen year-olds. As our children grow, we expect them to put away certain ways, and grow up. So it is with living with God. As we commune with Him, He makes us aware of something which has now become a sticking point in the abiding relationship.

That then leads to the third stage, which is confession. Confession is where we own up to our wrongdoing. What God wants here is not some kind of work from us which will appease Him. Our tears or sorrow cannot atone for sin. The atonement has been made, and God has already been propitiated towards us, His justice satisfied, the penalty paid, and our sins forgiven in Christ. A New Testament believer confesses because according to 1 John 1:6-10, this is how we walk in the light. We step up to more maturity, and claim ownership for our sins. We call sin what it is - sin; we agree with God; we identify something in our lives as offensive to God, as unfitting for one in whom God dwells and we bring it to God as sin. Confession involves an attitude of forsaking. If we agree with God that it is wrong and evil, then we agree it must go. This confession leads to the fourth stage: cleansing.

1 John 1:9 tells us that the blood of Jesus Christ His Son has done and is always doing its cleansing work. We are no less or more justified when we confess our sins. But what does happen is that our conscience, that part of us which senses and experiences our closeness to God is cleansed. Our consciences sense the Fatherly displeasure at our sin, and when we confess it, we know that the ongoing cleansing power of Christ's blood is true of us, and that God is pleased that we have recognised and owned up to our sin. Boldness to commune with God is restored.

That leads to the fifth stage of abiding in Christ, which is conforming. As we forsake our sin in confessing, we are replacing it with a new set of behaviours, attitudes, thoughts, desires. These new ways of living conform to the character of God. The more like Him we become in practice, the more we know and experience and enjoy Him in practice. Just like a child who becomes much like his father, becomes more like his friend as he grows up, so our conformity to Christ makes the communion with God closer, sweeter and deeper. And so the cycle begins again.

This is how we come to know God by living in His presence, and the more we know Him, the more we love Him. Next week, we'll take more time to consider this cycle of communion, conviction, confession, cleansing and conformity.