

Part II: The Process of the Christian Life

Loving God through Knowing Him

Untangling a really knotted up bunch of wires can take a long time. You have to concentrate as you try to sort out one wire from another; tracing one wire to see where it begins, where it becomes part of a knot, and where it continues. But once untangled, it's very satisfying.

Our Christian lives can feel like those tangled knots – so many responsibilities, so many aspects of the Christian life, so many commandments and promises, that we can struggle to sort it all out. That's what we're attempting to do in this series: to try to explain the Christian life in terms of its priorities, its process, its position, its posture and its practices.

We've begun by considering the great priority of the Christian life. We have seen that the grand priority of the Christian life is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength. The main idea of the Christian life is to give God the love that belongs to the only God – ultimate dependence, devotion and delight. We saw why this is the great priority: it reflects God's glory. It is the human way of showing the beauty of God, when we love Him supremely. Not only so, but we find ultimate fulfilment as we respond to God's excellence. Our deepest joys, our highest pleasures are found in knowing God as the sum of all beauty. Therefore loving Him ultimately is not only our greatest obligation, but our greatest satisfaction. This is the big idea, and the one we need to keep in front of ourselves throughout our Christian lives.

But this leads us to the second part of our series – the process of the Christian life. If loving God is the great priority, what is the process by which that happens? How do we come to love Him in this way? How do we come to respond to Him with ultimate dependence, ultimate devotion and ultimate delight?

What we are going to see in the next few messages is that the process of the Christian life is one of knowing God by living in His presence in a life of faith. In order to love God ultimately, we must come to know Him. We only come to know Him as we live life in His presence, and see Him with eyes of faith.

To say that God is your ultimate love when you do not know Him may be sheer sentimentalism. To sing songs which claim ultimate devotion, dependence or delight in God when you know little to nothing of Him, may be sheer hypocrisy. Loving God is not something we do by sheer act of will, or by imagining that our desire to love God counts as loving God. Loving God is all a matter of *response*. We love God as a response to seeing and understanding who He is. Worship, or loving God ultimately is not the spontaneous, creative expression of humans which can then be pinned on God, regardless of His nature. 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 essentially 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 (1 Pet 1:7-8).

1 Peter 1:7-8 ⁷ *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, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,* ⁸ *whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,*

Faith is the response of enlightened hearts to what cannot be seen physically or measured empirically: divine revelation. It 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 thus seeing Him, we come to love Him.

The priority of the Christian life can only be achieved through the process of the Christian life. The process of the Christian life is one of coming to know God for His excellence. When we know Him as He is, regenerated hearts cannot help admiring, desiring and trusting in Him. Paul's single-minded desire to gain Christ and be found in Him was so that he could know Him (Phil 3:8-10). He knew that knowing Christ was the secret to loving Him wholeheartedly.

The Bible reveals several details about knowing God.

1) It is Personal Knowledge.

Knowing God is knowing a person. A wide difference exists between knowing about chemical reactions, and 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?

Again, a vast difference exists between knowing theoretical calculus, and knowing your child. One kind of knowledge is rational knowledge: knowledge we gain by reasoning from premises to conclusion. 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, performing tasks 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, of suppressing truth inconvenient to oneself. No further knowledge can occur if one is building on a lie.

If the beginning of knowledge is assuming He is a person to be honoured, what will happen if this is not in place? What will happen to the person who comes expecting God to prove Himself? What will happen to the person who tries to put God in the test-tube of his own thought-experiments? Surely he will fail to gain any further knowledge. If you fail at the beginning, you will not proceed to the end-goal. 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 Person, not the route we take to get to Him.

2) It is Sovereignly-given Knowledge

The prophet Isaiah calls God a 'God who hides himself'. God has chosen to seem invisible to many, and conspicuously obvious to others. According to Romans 1, the knowledge of God is unavoidable and overwhelmingly obvious. However, for the many who deny the inherent knowledge of conscience, and the inarguable knowledge of creation, God's “absence” seems self-evident. 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. And once in 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.

Matthew 11:25-27 *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. ²⁶ "Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in Your sight. ²⁷ "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.*

You see, we as a race 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 whom He will reveal more of Himself to. 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.

What this should make us realise is that knowing God is a God-granted privilege. In our sinful state, we do not naturally come to Him to know Him. To know God is a merciful act of God. He has been

spurned and rejected by us times without number. So when 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, something that is not granted to all.

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. No, 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.

Matthew 16:16-17 ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ 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.

We should never treat the knowledge of God in a proud, cavalier way. However hard we might study, however diligently 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) It is Trinitarian Knowledge

According to the Bible, knowing God is an action of the three Persons of the Trinity. Since the coming of Christ, believers now understand that knowledge of God takes place through cooperating with all three Persons of the Godhead.

To summarise it: the Father shows Himself in the Son, who is revealed by the Spirit. What does that mean? 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. John 1:18. All of God's glory is seen and reflected in the face of Christ.

2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15. 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 a transcendent God made immanent. What was unknowable has now been expressed in human form. Eyewitnesses saw His glory (Jo 1:14), handling, hearing and seeing Him (1 Jo 1:1-2), meaning that they had now seen the glory of the Father expressed through the Incarnation of the Son (John 14:9-10).

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.

So this is where the work of the Third Person of the Trinity comes in: with Christ's ascension, the Spirit now comes to do a far greater work (Jo 14:12). His work 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. The Spirit's primary work in this age is revealing the Son (Jo 15:26).

According to Ephesians 1:10-12, Philippians 2:9-10 and Colossians 1:16-20, the Father has chosen

to make His Son the focal point of salvation and worship. God is working all things towards the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ.

Why does God the Father do this?

God the Father is delighted to have all attention point to Jesus as His 'image bearer', because it will ultimately rebound back to Him. Once again, put simply, the Spirit reveals the Son, who in turn reveals the Father.

To know God, we must cooperate with the Spirit's work of showing us the glory of Christ, so as to know the Father. In so doing, we know the glory of the whole Godhead. If we look to know God in ways or through methods which are not those which the Spirit uses, we will fail to know God. God has the right to tell us where and how He will reveal Himself, and we do well to seek those means.

The Spirit's primary way of revealing Christ in this age has been to inspire the Scriptures (2 Pet 1:21), and then to continue to illuminate hearts so as to understand them (1 Cor 2:1-14). When we look to know God in the way He has appointed, we will find the the Spirit-inspired, and Spirit-illuminated Scriptures are entirely sufficient to this end (2 Tim 3:16, 2 Pet 1:3). The Bible tells us all God wants us to know about Himself.

To know God will be a process of seeking God in His Word; in total reliance upon the Holy Spirit.

4) It is Progressive Knowledge.

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.

2 Peter 3:18 ⁸ *but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

Ephesians 3:16-19 ¹⁶ *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.*

God has chosen to make knowing Him. a relationship by means of 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. It is in the process of obeying Him that 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 personal experience apart from His Word. I am saying that as we obey His Word, as we respond to the revelation of Him in the Word, our understanding grows. In the process of obedience, we discover explanation through experience.

This is why several Scriptures teach that obedience of the knowledge of God that you do have, leads to more knowledge.

Colossians 1:9-10 *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; ¹⁰ that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;*

John 7:17 ¹⁷ *"If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.*

Psalms 25:12 *Who is the man that fears the LORD? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses.*

Luke 8:15 ¹⁵ *"But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.*

Luke 8:18 ¹⁸ *"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.*

John 14:23 *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.*

Many Christians fail to grow in their knowledge of God, because they fail to respond obediently to the knowledge of God they already have. This correct response is so important, that we will devote an entire section to it – the posture of the Christian life. We must live in a certain way before God – a life of faith, humble faith, repenting faith, obedient faith and seeking faith. This life of properly responding to God brings more knowledge of Him, which results in more love for Him.

This is the process of the Christian life; we come to love God by growing in the knowledge of Him. Knowing God is knowing a person. It is knowing Him through His sovereign, gracious decision. It is knowing Him as the Triune God – the Father, revealed by the Son, revealed by the Spirit in the Word. But there is one more aspect to thinking about the knowledge of God.

5) It is Analogical Knowledge

For God to reveal Himself to us, God must use that faculty of knowledge we call the imagination.

Now people get nervous when they hear *imagination*. Generally, when you hear the word *imagination*, you tend to think of that part of your mind which dreams and thinks of unreal things, the part of you which is amused when it watches stories about spaceships and flying horses and magic kingdoms. But 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 God comes to man to tell him, "This is who I am", there is a difficulty. God is like nothing we know. That's part of what it means to be God - to be utterly unique. So when God says – this is what I am, guess what He must use? He cannot use *memory*, He cannot use *reason* or logic all the time. Certainly they have their uses in Scripture – to reason what is revealed. But you can't reason what you don't know. So God compares Himself to things we do know. He gives us analogies. We know light, we know darkness. So God says – who I am is like your experience of light. We use our imagination to think that means God is open and revealed like light, truthful, it is bright and welcoming and safer than night. We know fire. So God says – I am like fire. And using our imagination we understand that means God is powerful, and even dangerous, but purifying, comforting, and beautiful.

When you think about it, this is almost entirely how God explains Himself to us. Using pictures, things we can associate with Him, so as 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. The knowledge of God is analogical knowledge.

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 is going on in the unseen spiritual realm. But more than that – He does so, because the images are what cause the right kinds of affections. In fact, it is exactly those images given in Scripture which God wants us to use to understand what He is and isn't, and therefore, what kind of love we give Him. Contained within those images is the kind of love we have for Him. When we hear – 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 – 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.

Knowledge of Scripture, correctly unpacking the imagery in which God reveals Himself, be it in narrative, or poetry, or prophetic literature, or in the epistles (in which the writers continue to use imagery all the time), guides us to understand who God is, and what He is like. He is actually unlike anything exactly, but by giving us a huge book full of images, He is helping us cross the bridge to the unknown using the known.

To love God we must know Him. Knowing Him is personal knowledge, sovereignly given knowledge, trinitarian knowledge, progressive knowledge and analogical knowledge.

You need to become aware of all the images you are being bombarded with every day. Begin to think about what it is that is shaping your religious imagination. What do you expose yourself to that is going to help you correctly imagine what God says about Himself? What do you expose yourself to that is going to help you understand what the Bible means when it talks about unseen things like truth, justice, courage, trust – and above all – love.

If your understanding of King, Shepherd, Master, kingdom, redeem, love is being shaped by trite, shallow, banal, sentimental TV shows, books, you will not be awed by those images. Protect your imagination by exposing it to what is true, and noble, and honourable and upright, and lovely and pure. Much of your faith depends on it.

Parents, protect your children from what will trivialise and water down their understanding of biblical images. They will never tremble or be in stunned silence, or filled with excitement, or amazed or thankful, if the images that come into their minds when they hear inheritance, rescue, redemption, light darkness are shallow, small, boring ones. If they need a TV to make them imagine, they are hobbling on one leg when it comes to faith, because faith requires the moral imagination.

So you need to think very carefully about your music, your TV watching, your reading, your entertainment choices. Shield yourself from those who rock the Gospel. Shield yourself from Christian songs which dumb down the religious imagination. The reason we select the hymns we do, is that they fire the religious imagination. Consider the profound images in this beloved hymn:

*Jesus, Thou Joy of loving hearts,
Thou Fount of life, Thou Light of men,
From the best bliss that earth imparts,
We turn unfilled to Thee again.*

*We taste Thee, O Thou living Bread,
And long to feast upon Thee still;
We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead,
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill.*

Compare that to the trite sentiments of love for Jesus, which, ironically, do not cause the love we're singing about. Shield yourself not only from TV with blasphemy and nudity, but from that which dumbs down your imagination. It does more damage than you will understand on this side of eternity.

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. So what you read; what hymns you sing; what music you listen to; what art you look at; what poetry you read; what books and stories you read are not secondary – they are the things which are going to put the very images of Scripture in context – give them colour, meaning, depth, power.