

"Knowing God" Ephesians 1:15-23

Introduction

- In the summer of 2000, Miriam and I went camping with our friends John and Suzie Weber on our annual camping trip. From Chicago, we made our way to northern Wisconsin and the Nicolet National Forest in search of a primitive, pack-in campsite near a small lake. After a couple days, I was itching to do some fishing. I had, after all, packed my fishing gear in and I wasn't about to let it go unused. Early on in our trip, I was sitting around the fire pit reading the topographical map when I noticed a little lake called Trout Lake. What began in my heart as I saw the name of that speck of blue on the map grew, in the next few days, into a full blown quest. Only a fool fisherman would go in search of a lake called Trout Lake. Even non-fisherman know that places with names like Trout Lake don't have any fish. Needless to say, because of my passion for fishing, I had somehow convinced my wife and non-fishing friends to help me find this tiny lake.
- Before we began our quest, I decided to get some local info. We went to the nearest watering hole and I began questioning some of the locals inside for secret information about Trout Lake, how to get there, whether or not there were actually trout in that pond. One of the guys knew of it, knew how to get there and gave us some crude directions. The quest began. That day it was about 98 degrees with high humidity and know wind. Armed with our trusty map, our crude directions, a compass and a desire for some adventure, the four of us began zeroing in on this little lake. Good sign. There were no direct roads, no paths to this little lake. So we found the nearest logging trail that headed in the general vicinity and made our way to a spot from which we thought we could hike. John and I left the ladies, in a hot car parked in the direct sunlight, while we left to find Trout Lake. An hour later, we found our way back to the car. Nothing. Somehow we convinced the women that this lake existed and that we could find it. So we left them in the car again. After another 45 minutes of bushwhacking and slogging through marsh and being eaten by mosquitoes we gave up. To this day, you ask my friend John, a map connoisseur, what's the worst map he's ever seen, and he'll tell you it was this map. Small roads and trails were conspicuously missing. Elevations seemed inaccurate. I never found Trout Lake.
- To this day, I knew a lot about Trout Lake. I knew where it is on a map, I had directions and a crude map from the local, I had a friend who could orienteer, I knew that there was a small spring flowing into Trout Lake and that meant there were probably trout in it. I knew its elevation, it's latitude and longitude. And yet, I never experienced Trout Lake. I knew of Trout Lake, but I never really knew Trout Lake.

Transition

As J.I. Packer says in his classic book *Knowing God*, "One can know a great deal about God without much knowing of him."¹ Or similarly, "one can know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God."² How does this happen? How can we know about God but not really know him? How can I know about Trout Lake but not really know it? Packer goes on to say, "It depends on the

¹ Packer, p. 26.

² Packer, p. 26.

sermons one hears, the books one reads, and the company one keeps. In this analytical and technological age there is no shortage of books on the church book tables, or sermons from the pulpits, on how to pray, how to witness, how to read our bibles, how to tithe our money, how to be a young Christian, how to be an old Christian, how to be a happy Christian, how to get consecrated, how to lead people to Christ, and generally how to go through all the various motions which the teachers in question associate with being a Christian believer.”³ And all of this is different than knowing God. Really knowing him. Experiencing him. Being convinced that he exists and that he’s real and that watching his power work in our lives bearing witness that we indeed know him. That’s what it means to know God. That’s the Christian’s calling. In fact,

Proposition

- **The Christian’s highest calling is to know God better**

Transition

But how do we get there? How do we move from knowing about God to knowing God himself? How do we know God better? That’s the question I hope to answer for you this morning. I want us to study Ephesians 1:15-23 because I am convinced that this passage teaches us how to know God better. I believe that...

Organizational Sentence

- **In Ephesians 1:15-23 there are two issues relating to knowing God better**

Transition

And I want to look at those two issues here this morning.

Background and Setting

- The first chapter of Ephesians divides nicely into two sections. In the first section, which we looked at last week, verses 3-14, Paul begins the book with one long sentence that is a blessing, a eulogy that praises God for every spiritual blessing that we have in Christ. We have been *blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ*. In other words, Paul describes God’s great work in saving us, in getting us where we are as Christians. God’s great work in saving us through Christ are reasons to praise God. *To the praise of his glorious* grace as the refrain throughout that first section goes.
- In the second section, verses 15-23, the section we are going to look at this morning, Paul prays that the churches in the region of Asia Minor may begin to as John Stott says, “appreciate to the fullest possible extent the implications of the blessings they have already received.”⁴ In fact, the entire book of Ephesians is in some sense a more detailed explanation of the great truths that are expounded in the first chapter. The blessings are there. They exist, they are unchanging. What you and I need are not new blessings, but a deeper understanding, a fuller realization of what God has already done. We need to experience these blessings. That’s what it means to know God. That’s the difference between “knowing about” and “knowing.” Verses 3-14 are the knowing about. Verses 15-23 are about the knowing.

³ Packer, p. 26.

⁴ Stott, p. 53-4.

Transition

Look at verses 15-19. Our highest calling is to know God better. How do we get there? Two issues relating to knowing God better. The first.

Main Points

I. The Spirit enables us to know God better (1:15-19)

A) Validation

- i) The French poet [Arthur Rimbaud](#) once said, “*Only divine love bestows the keys of knowledge.*”⁵ He’s right. The only way to get to know God better is if God’s Spirit enables us to understand what God has done for us through Christ. Knowing God is a work of God. Does that surprise you? If this is true, then we must pray. We must implore God to help us to know him better. But what should we pray? How should we pray? What should we pray for? Let’s find out.

B) Explanation

- i) Paul begins in verses 15 and 16 with a prayer of thanksgiving for the Ephesian Christians. He’s pleased with their faith and love for God. *For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you.* Because of the great blessings in his eulogy section, he’s pleased that God has chosen the people he’s writing to, to believe by faith that Christ died for them and to love others. Paul gives thanks. But his thanksgiving for faith and love is not enough. Again, as [John Stott](#) says, “Despite Paul’s gratitude for them, he is still not satisfied with them. So what is his request? It is not that they may receive a second blessing, but rather that they may appreciate to the fullest possible extent the implications of the blessing they have already received.”⁶
- ii) Look at verses 16-19. HE PRAYS THAT THEY MAY KNOW GOD. *Remembering you in my prayers. 17 I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. 18 I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, 19 and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength.* What does it mean to know God? I am amazed each time I read this. New spiritual visions and special insights from the Holy Spirit? A special word from the Lord? New techniques and methods? Paul wants them to experientially know all the blessings he wrote about in the first section. What I’m amazed at is that what Paul seems to say is that “Growth in knowledge is indispensable to growth in holiness.”⁷ And what we are to know better, in fact what it means to know God is to know what God has already done for us through Christ. To experience those blessings in our day to day lives. And this can only happen if the Spirit makes it happen by giving us the wisdom and insight, the illumination,

⁵ Arthur Rimbaud (1854–91), French poet. *Une Saison en Enfer*, “Mauvais Sang” (1874). The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press.

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⁶ Stott, p. 53-4.

⁷ Stott, p. 54.

the revelation, as the text says, to understand these deep truths of God. As one commentator says, “The goal of this gift of wisdom and revelation is the personal knowledge of God. This is much more than the bare knowledge of God from his works which was available to the pagan world; it is that personal knowledge of him in experience which involves a two-way relationship, entered into by those who have come to know God, or rather are known by God.”⁸ Paul prays for three things in verses 16-19 that cut to the chase of what it really means to know God. In other words, those Christians who are growing in their experiential knowledge in these areas are genuinely understanding their salvation and are coming to know God better. “Basically, [his prayer] is a petition that those who have been so richly blessed by God may learn about hope, glory and power.”⁹

- (a) **Hope of God’s calling.** “God’s choice of his people in Christ before the world’s foundation. Paul prays that his readers might grasp more fully the hope into which God has brought them by his call, that hope which is held out in the gospel.”¹⁰
- (b) **The glory of his inheritance of the saints.** “That God should set such high value on a community of sinners, rescued from perdition and still bearing too many traces of their former state, might well seem incredible were it not made clear that he sees them *in Christ*. God’s estimate of the people of Christ, united to him by faith and partakers of his resurrection life, is inevitably consistent with his estimate of Christ.”¹¹ “Paul prays here that his readers may appreciate the value which God places on them, his plan to accomplish eternal purpose through them as the first fruits of the reconciled universe of the future, in order that their lives may be in keeping with this high calling and that they may accept in grateful humility the grace and the glory thus lavished on them.”¹² We are God’s portion, his own people. We are chosen by God, claimed by him as his portion, his inheritance, made his treasured possession. “Jews and Gentiles together are God’s glorious inheritance, his own possession, in whom he will display to the universe the untold riches of his glory.”¹³
- (c) **The greatness of his power for us who believe.** Paul “uses three synonymous terms to underscore the basis or standard of this exceptional might: ‘according to the operation of the strength of his might.’”¹⁴ If the death of Christ is the supreme demonstration of the love of God, the resurrection is the supreme demonstration of God’s power. And this amazing power of God works on behalf of believers.

C) Illustration

- i) When trying to find Trout Lake I had a detailed topographical map. But that wasn’t enough. What I needed was a guide, someone who had experienced Trout Lake for himself and could take me there.
- ii) It’s no different with knowing God. The right map can’t always get us there. We need a guide who can lead us to God. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, he will help us to experience God, to know God better.

D) Application

⁸ Bruce, p. 269-70.

⁹ O’Brien, p. 125.

¹⁰ O’Brien, p. 134.

¹¹ Bruce, p. 270-1.

¹² Bruce, p. 271.

¹³ O’Brien, p. 136.

¹⁴ O’Brien, p. 137.

- i) Do you realize what's at stake for not knowing or growing in knowledge about God? You can't grow in your relationship with God without growing in your knowledge of God. You can't become more holy and fulfill all that God intended for you, for us as a church if you don't grow in your knowledge of God. That means there must be a blend of faith and reason, knowing and believing in our pursuit of God. Enlightened knowledge from the Holy Spirit. Study, soaking up the Scriptures with a faithful humble dependent upon God's Spirit to reveal to us the great mystery of our salvation through Jesus Christ. How are you doing in this area? Or are you just coasting? Relying on past experiences, past knowledge. Relying on the faith and love but not growing in you knowledge of God.
- ii) Are you praying for one another? Not specifically the needs that we all have, for our health, well-being, job situations, for our families, which are all good and important by the way, but are you interceding like Paul that the people in our church might know and comprehend what God has already done for them in Christ.
- iii) How many of you wish that God's Spirit would work in your life and in the life of this church. That God would do something fresh and alive? We've got to remember that the most alive and fresh thing that we could ever seek is the old, old story. Tell me the old, old story of all the wonderful things God has done for us through Christ. Spirit of God teach us the deep things of God.

Transition

I want to turn now to verses 20-23. Our highest calling is to know God better. How do we get there? Two issues relating to knowing God better. Now the second.

II. If you grow to know God you will grow to love the church (1:20-23)

A) Validation

- i) In what seems to be a rabbit trail, Paul in talking about God's power in raising Christ from the dead, goes on to explain more specifically what God's power actually accomplished in and through Christ. Christ is supreme. He rules over all. Christ's position, his status, is a result of God's power. And all of that power was exerted in and through Christ for one purpose. For the benefit of the church. As Gary Coleman might say, "what you talking about." That's right. What I'm saying is this. **If you grow to know God you will grow to love the church.**

B) Explanation

- i) But you may confess at this point and say, but Eric, "I don't love the church." Then you'd agree with [Daniel Defoe](#) who said, "*And of all plagues with which mankind are curst, Ecclesiastic tyranny's the worst.*"¹⁵ At times the church is the last place where God seems to be at work. The backbiting and infighting. The red tape. The bureaucracy. "And Eric, you're telling me that this thing, the church is valuable?" To you I say, that there is hardly a thing more valuable in God's sight than the church. Not just the universal church, the church gathered, the heavenly church comprised of all true people of God, but the local, visible manifestation of this heavenly reality. The church, this church, all churches who fall under

¹⁵ Daniel Defoe (1659–1731), English writer. *The True-Born Englishman*, pt. 2 (1701). The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

- the headship of Jesus Christ are the most valuable cherished possessions in God's kingdom. How so?
- ii) Look at [verses 20-23](#). You see, the resurrection power that raised Christ from the dead is still at work more than two thousand years after the fact. As we know God better, we realize that God's power that is at work here now works in and through Christ on behalf of, for the church. *Which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, 21 far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. 22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, 23 which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.* Because of this, there is incredible worth and value to the church. Paul's progression in this passage goes something like this. If you know God better, you experientially come to know what it means to be called by God, to be God's inheritance to experience the resurrection power that made Christ supreme in order that God's power might be made manifest through the church.
- iii) God's mighty strength, his power accomplished quite a bit through Christ. Not only was he raised from the dead, God's power didn't stop there. But it was by God's power that Christ *was seated* at the father's *right hand*. Those two things are significant. Seated in that the work is done, completed. At the right hand, position of special honor. But by God's power Jesus was also given the name that is above every name, above every title. And by God's power he placed everything under Christ's feet in subjection to him. Our God does all of this, elevating Christ, making Christ supreme, for one purpose. So that Christ might be given to the church. God's power is made known through Christ for the church, for the benefit of the church. Think about the significance of this. Who did Christ die for? The church. Who does Christ reign for? The church? Where does God's power work now? The church. The church is to be valued and esteemed and cherished, it has great worth in God's sight. Those who despise the church, who leave the church, who turn their noses at the church, who mock the church, who trample the church under their foot, trample under their foot and make a mockery of Christ's death and his resurrection. You want to do something significant with your life? Give your life to the helping build the thing that is most important to God, the very thing for which God made Christ supreme, the church.
- iv) Again, let me try to explain the sequence here. Jesus died, was resurrected, was enthroned over the powers, and is made head of the church. Then Paul makes two great claims about the church. Christ is the head of the church, which is the body of Christ. And Christ fills the church. [Stott](#) says this, "Thus both universe and church have in Jesus Christ the same head."¹⁶ "As head over all things Christ exercises his sovereign rule by filling the universe. But only the church is his body, and he rules it, that is, he fills it in a special way with his Spirit, grace, and gifts: it is his fullness."¹⁷ To put it as simply as I can, **a knowledge of God leads to the supremacy of Christ in everything and a recognition that Christ is supreme so that the church might display the power of God.** The church is where it happens. That's why this series on Ephesians is entitled God's great purposes for the church. If I could quote [Stott](#) one final time, he says, "Nobody can emerge from a careful reading of Paul's letter to the Ephesians with a privatized gospel. For Ephesians is the gospel of the church. It sets forth God's eternal purpose to create through Jesus Christ a new society

¹⁶ Stott, p. 61.

¹⁷ O'Brien, p. 152.

which stands out in bright relief against the somber background of the old world. For God's new society is characterized by life in place of death, by unity and reconciliation in place of division and alienation, by the wholesome standards of righteousness in place of the corruption of wickedness, by love and peace in place of hatred and strife, and by unremitting conflict with evil in place of a flabby compromise with it. This vision of a renewed human community has stirred me deeply. At the same time, the realities of lovelessness and sin in so many contemporary churches are enough make one weep, for they dishonor Christ, contradict the nature of the church, and deprive the Christian witness of integrity. Yet increasing numbers of church members are seeking the church's radical renewal. For the sake of the glory of God and the evangelization of the world, nothing is more important than that the church should be, and should be seen to be, God's new society."¹⁸ This is what God is calling us to.

C) Illustration

- i) In searching for Trout Lake I was able to enlist the help and services of three people because I was able to convince them to join me, not because they really cared about Trout Lake. I guarantee you that Miriam, John and Suzie didn't. But what they did care about was me. And because finding this lake was important to me, it became, important to them.
- ii) The church should be valuable to us because it is valuable to God. If we grow to know God, the more we grow to know God, the more we will grow to love the thing he loves, the church.

D) Application

- i) Some of you must confess to God this morning that you have thought too little of God's church. And if you don't love the church, you don't know God or you don't know God as well as you think you do.

Conclusion

- This morning we've talked about the difference between knowing about God and knowing God. As we close, I don't want to assume for a second that every person here already knows God. You may know about God, but if you don't personally know God, know what it means that Christ died on the cross for your sins, if you don't know what it means to walk with God, to be led by him, to talk with him. Then let me say this to you. What are you waiting for? What's keeping you from knowing him? 2 Corinthians 4:6 says, "*For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.*" God has reflected his glory in Christ, the light of our salvation. The way out of the darkness. He has shone that light in our hearts enabling us to know Christ. Ask him this morning to shine the light of Christ in your life so that you may know the living and true God, Jesus Christ. Pray with me.

¹⁸ Stott, p. 10.