

Article 5: Knowing God

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God knows you. Before you were born, He knew you. He knows the number of hairs on your head. He knows what makes you tick. He knows what you need and want even before you ask. He knows exactly what you mean no matter how you say it. He knows what makes you happy or angry. He knows your plans for the future. He knows your purpose on this earth. He knows *YOU*.

Do you know God?

It's pretty easy to learn things *about* God—just go to church and read your Bible. But to truly *know* Him is something altogether different. You probably know quite a bit about the President, but I bet his wife and kids know him a lot better!

Knowing things *about* God does not mean that you *know* Him. I spent enough years of my life fooling people into thinking I was some kind of “super-Christian.” I was raised in church. I went to a Christian school. I read my Bible all the time (mostly in public). I could rattle off Bible verses as if I had written them myself. I knew every Bible story and had heard enough sermons on all of them to preach about them myself. Everyone would comment on what an excellent example of a Christian I was.

But I didn't know God.

It wasn't until I was about seventeen that I finally came to my senses and realized how much I truly needed Him. Suddenly my Christian life took a whole new turn. I began to pursue God. I started to speak to Him in private. Then I discovered how to hear and discern His voice, and things REALLY took off! You are His child, and so you too were created to have this kind of life!

You can Know God

Before time began, God decided to create *you*. Why? So you can know Him. He wants a relationship with you, and He gave you a free will to either choose or reject that relationship. That's love.

Having a relationship with God is your purpose in life, and that means God already designed you with the ability to interact with Him.

But there's a problem...

Have you ever been underwater in a pool and tried to listen to noises that were outside? You can't hear much, can you? All you can really hear is stuff that's already in the water—splashes, bubbles, muffled voices, and so forth.

But what happens when you come up out of the water and take a breath of air? Suddenly your senses are awakened to a whole new world where things make a lot more sense!

Well, interacting with God and His Kingdom can be a lot like trying to interact with people outside a pool while you're underwater. But did you know you can get "out of the water" with God too? You can know Him more personally and understand His voice more clearly!

A baby in his mother's womb can distinguish between voices, even if he can't understand what they're saying. When the baby is born, he can recognize his mother and father's voices even though they had been muffled during his development in the womb.

In the same way, we all go through life hearing our heavenly Father's voice, but it's just muffled noise until we step into real life. Only then can we learn to communicate with Him and understand Him more clearly.

And so we come to a term that Christians tend to throw around a lot: "born again." Christians all over use this term to describe their lives—you might too. "I'm a born-again Christian," we might say.

There's nothing wrong with this; but did you know that the term "born again" is only used in one chapter of the entire Bible? Take a look some time at the third chapter of John's gospel. Jesus is meeting with a Pharisee named Nicodemus. Here's how I imagine the story in my mind (remember that this is largely my imagination, so please read the original version some time soon as well):

Jesus and a few of His disciples are gathered around a fire in the blackness of night while the rest of them drift off to sleep around them. The night is still, and a set of soft footsteps are heard scuffing through the dirt. Jesus looks up to see a Pharisee in his religious robes sneaking through the dark.

Who knows what was going on in the disciples' minds? Just a short while earlier, Jesus had charged through the temple with a whip, turning over tables and trashing the evil "money-changing" scams. They were probably feeling a little lump in their throat as the authority figure approached. They hadn't been with Jesus very long and already He was bringing down the angered attention of the religious leaders.

"Jesus?" the man whispers, hoping no one will recognize him. Jesus, dimly lit by the dying fire, waves the man over. The Pharisee's eyes are wide as they nervously dart around the campsite and focus momentarily on Jesus. "Teacher," he says, "I believe it's clear that You have come from God—we've seen the miracles you do in His name."

Jesus heard what the man said with his ears, but He *listened* with His spirit. Knowing that this Pharisee had not snuck out in the night to merely compliment His ministry, Jesus responded to the cry of the man's spirit. It almost seemed like He changed the subject, but the conversation didn't miss a beat. "I tell you the truth," stated Jesus, "unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

The Pharisee's eyebrows quickly furled. Stories from his culture flooded his mind. The Jewish Rabbis of the day had a teaching that sounded like this. In it they said that the earth is like a womb where we develop and grow; and when you finally die, you get "born" into *real* life in God's Kingdom.

But Jesus was confusing! Jesus didn't talk about a future kingdom that would be experienced after death; He preached that "the Kingdom of heaven is AT HAND!" Nicodemus contemplated the words of Jesus. If Jesus was talking about a future Kingdom, then it would all make sense. If that were the case, then being "born again" would mean dying in this world and being born into the Kingdom of God; but Jesus said the Kingdom is HERE!

"How can I be born again?" asked the puzzled Pharisee, "Do I have to crawl back into my mother's womb or something?"

You see, Jesus was speaking Nicodemus' language. He was using an example that Nicodemus might be able to grasp. Nicodemus knew from Jewish traditions and teachings that being born into God's Kingdom required death.

The trouble with many believers today is that they think they can be a "born again Christian" without experiencing any form of death. They think that agreeing to a set of beliefs and going through the motions is enough to consider themselves fully "alive." That's just not possible.

What kind of death was Jesus talking about? It's all summed up in the first real proclamation Jesus ever made in His public ministry: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!" This is hopefully what you experienced when you received Jesus into your life.

Repentance brings us in line with God and His Kingdom. Repentance is death to one way of life and rebirth into a new life. You cannot see the Kingdom of God unless you are born again; and you cannot be born again without repenting from your old way of life and giving yourself completely to God.

And here's the exciting part: once you are born into the Kingdom, you can start developing a relationship with the King! You are a Christian, so now is the time to deepen the relationship you already have with God!

God is Talking to You

Maybe you feel like you've dealt with the whole death and life thing, but you just can't hear God's voice. Just like a baby (born or unborn), you can already hear your Father's voice—all you need to do now is learn to understand what He is saying.

God speaks to us in many different ways: dreams, visions, thoughts, audible voice, signs, impressions, and more. And everybody hears from God differently. The tricky thing, though, is that there's often a symbolism about it. For instance, there have been times I've had a strange dream, remembered every detail, known that God was trying to tell me something, but I had NO clue what it meant until months later! So how does one come to understand what He means?

Well, how do you understand what any person really means? I recently overheard some people commenting on how a person I knew had been really rude to them that day. Knowing this was out of character for my friend, and knowing he often said things in a sarcastic way in order to just be playful, I stepped into the conversation and stood up for him. I was able to admit that he

shouldn't have responded that way to someone who doesn't know him well, but I was also able to soothe the offense and end some gossip.

God is often misunderstood as well. Some symbolism can be taken two ways. For instance, a snake could represent Satan, or it could represent Christ (like the bronze snake Moses raised up on a pole so that those who looked at it could be healed—we find out in John 3:14 that this snake represented Jesus on the cross).

I've seen a lot of ministers try to make lists of symbols and their meanings so that people can better understand their dreams and visions—this is nice, but it's not that simple. You see, God often speaks in symbols so that we will ask Him what He means—not so we will run to our bookshelf and grab our dream manual.

Trying to figure out what God is saying without knowing Him is like trying to interpret an abstract artist's painting without knowing the artist. Ten different people could see ten different things with ten different meanings, but only the one who knows the artist personally can tell the true meaning.

So I'm not going to give you a handful of steps to help you figure out what God is saying in His symbolism. Instead, I'll give you a handful of practices that will help you know Him better.

Only by knowing God can you really understand God. Remember, real understanding involves direct experience. If you have given yourself to Jesus Christ and invited the Holy Spirit to be an active part of your daily life, then you've already got the first step out of the way. Again, Christianity is not a matter of finding the path, but rather following the Guide.

The following six instructions are meant to bring you into a deeper relationship with our Guide. They can be applied in two ways. Either you can treat them religiously as methods to be acquired, or you can keep your focus on Christ and allow Him to guide you through each path. The first possibility will be worthless, but the second possibility will radically enhance your spiritual life! The following are what I call the 6 "P's" to *Knowing God*:

1. ***Participate***
2. ***Peruse***
3. ***Purge***
4. ***Pray***
5. ***Practice***
6. ***Pursue***

#1) PARTICIPATE

Once we have entered a relationship with Jesus, we all need to get involved with a group of people who are also meeting with Him and experiencing Him. Find people who know God and are passionate about Jesus Christ.

Now I want to clarify something: Going to church on Sunday and sitting through a two-hour program does NOT meet this requirement. Such services meet the need for corporate celebration and apostolic instruction, but not

interaction. All the most essential nuts and bolts of Christianity rarely happen in a big “church service” where everybody listens to one person.

In fact, if you absolutely cannot attend more than one Christian meeting a week, make it a small group of people who will worship God together, openly confess sin to each other, pray passionately together, endure hardship together, support each other, pray for one another, and discuss the things of God together.

Such groups will be described later in this book; but for now, please realize that “spectator Christianity” will not really help you grow spiritually in the same way that participation with the Body of Christ will help you grow.

True Christianity is NOT a *religion*—it is an interactive lifestyle of both divine and natural relationships! Christianity involves knowing people, knowing God, and letting down your emotional and spiritual walls so that you too can be known.

#2) PERUSE

The Encarta Dictionary defines “peruse” (pronounced: pe·ruse [pə rúoz]) in this way: *“to read or examine something in a leisurely or careful way.”*

How do you read the Bible? Do you scan over a paragraph and call it a day? Or do you read carefully and think critically about the message? Do you scan the text as if it were a menu at a restaurant, or do you ask the Holy Spirit to walk you through the adventure that can be had in God’s Word? It’s the difference between skimming the menu or actually eating the food!

You see, the Bible is a written record of words which have been proven to be God’s. By reading the Bible you get to know who God is, what His desires are, what His voice sounds like, and how He likes to work. You’ll also discover what He thinks about you, why you exist, how to fulfill your destiny, and how to build your relationship with Him more fully.

Read the Bible carefully and give the words time to sink in. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal new and exciting things to you that you’ve never noticed before!

#3) PURGE

As you participate in close Christian relationships and “peruse” the Scriptures, you will begin to notice things in your life that separate you from God. These “obstacles to intimacy” must be purged from your life!

One of the biggest issues is our ability to love people. The Bible teaches us that if we do not love people, we cannot claim that we love God, “for if we don’t love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen?” (1 John 4:20,21; NLT). Now there’s an obstacle to intimacy!

Allow the Holy Spirit to reveal any hidden bitterness, judgments, and resentment in your heart that you might hold toward people in your life (or from your past). It’s not that you need to sort out your entire life before you can know God; but as you walk in relationship with Him, He will reveal obstacles such as these that have kept you from knowing Him more intimately. As you live your Christian life and allow the Lord to purge away your inner obstacles, you will find it easier and easier to communicate with God and experience Him.

#4) PRAY

Chapter fourteen will deal more fully with prayer, but for now we'll note that "prayer" is *conversation* with God. It's not about taking five minutes of your day to *tell* God a bunch of stuff and simply ask for things. Prayer involves listening to Him as well. This will develop throughout your Christian life—remember, even unborn babies can hear their father's voice, but it will take some time to fully understand what he's saying.

Your heavenly Father is already speaking to you, and prayer is one of the key practices that will help you develop your spiritual ears to hear Him better. *ASK* God to reveal Himself to you! *ASK* Him to help you understand His voice! *ASK* Him to be your friend, **AND HE WILL ANSWER!**

#5) PRACTICE

I work at a nursery school with 2½-year-olds. These kids are just learning to communicate and interact with people. It's neat to watch. It's also interesting to see that they often haven't got a clue what you're saying! If a teacher tells the children, "go into the classroom, hang up your coat, and sit at group," a child of this age might only hear "sit at group."

So in they come—twenty children—and then they scatter. Some go sit at group with their coats still on, some go take off their coats, and some just come inside and stand around trying to remember what to do next! The only children who get in trouble, though, are the ones who don't come inside but run back to the playground. The first group is *trying* to be obedient even though they don't know exactly what to do, whereas the second group is being outright disobedient by choosing to go about their own business.

We are God's children, and He knows that we don't always understand exactly what we're supposed to do. All He asks is that we *try* to be obedient. In other words, don't worry about messing up!

Lawyers "practice" law, and doctors "practice" medicine. They call it a "practice" because there are always new techniques to discover and there's always the possibility of error. They are always learning.

Christianity is also a "practice." And just like doctors and lawyers, mistakes *do* have consequences; but they are results from which we can learn and grow.

So go ahead and practice! If you think you've heard God's voice, give it a shot and obey! It's best to run things by other Christians first to see if they're hearing the same thing from God, but sometimes that's not possible. Often, you'll only know if it was God when you see the results. And don't be afraid to apologize when things fall apart. We often learn more from messing up than succeeding. Just like my nursery school class, you're better off *trying* to obey (even if you fail) than you are choosing to do something more appealing to you. In time, you'll learn to recognize God's voice more clearly. It just takes practice.

#6) PURSUE

Never settle for yesterday's experience. It's easy sometimes to witness a miracle or a powerful spiritual encounter and get so excited about it that we begin to live

in the past. Suddenly our “testimony” is purely past-tense. Everything God ever did to show us that He’s alive happened in the past. Is that the way God did things in the Bible? Not at all!

God desires that we would NOT experience the glory of His presence *one time* and then live the rest of our life with a mere pleasant memory! God wants us to go “from glory to glory!” We should go from one experience of Him to the next!

But don’t get too excited. In our American mindset, we might think this whole “glory to glory” thing means goose bumps and tingly feelings every day. Sorry. Experiencing God can also be deeply convicting and uncomfortable. It almost always involves some form of life-change or sacrifice. It might also involve hardship “because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son” (Hebrews 12:6; NIV).

If you really want to know God, you will pursue Him. And if you really truly pursue Him, He will draw near to you and begin raising you like a loving father raises his children. This is a matter of your spiritual sonship, and it is the purpose for which God created you!

Colossians 1:9b,10—*We ask God to give you a complete understanding of what he wants to do in your lives, and we ask him to make you wise with spiritual wisdom. Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and you will continually do good, kind things for others. All the while, you will learn to know God better and better (NLT).*