

THAT I MAY KNOW HIM

IN A WORLD OF INFORMATION & OPINION, WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW?

Humans are hard-wired to acquire knowledge, grab it on our terms, and exploit its power. Christ, however, calls us to know Him, which requires deep heart-change and frequently suffering. Kyle Stoltzfus, FBTI instructor and academic dean, calls us to know Jesus in the context of community, where human knowledge can grow and spread the experiential knowledge of God.

In the opening pages of Scripture, God places mankind in a garden. As they remain within the parameters established by God, He will guide them toward maturity and fruitfulness in their God-appointed work. There is, however, an important qualification: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." These are high stakes!

To reach and grab of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is to partake in death. Our ancient forebears, grabbing for knowledge, disastrously disqualify themselves from receiving what belongs to God alone. Irenaeus, the second-century bishop of Lyon, reflects that God's command not to eat of the tree suited the unexercised moral discernment of Adam and Eve.¹ The command was minimal. In God's time, had Adam and Eve walked with God and obeyed, He would have guided them to moral maturity. As Irenaeus puts it, God would have entrusted them with "fuller and larger illumination of mind."² This would have required patience, experience, and intimate knowing of God. Adam and Eve seem to believe that, by eating from the tree, they can shorten the process with a decisive and impatient lunge. Paradoxically, they not only disqualify themselves from receiving the desired knowledge but also partake in death.

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The more I study the Genesis account of knowledge, the more I find it pertinent to our times. In 2018 Forbes reported that:

- In the past two years 90% of the information in the world was generated
- Every minute, Instagram users posted 46,740 photos
- Every minute, the Weather Channel received over 18 million forecast requests

While the human capacity to amass information has increased explosively in recent years, this has not been accompanied by the sort of patient and obedient knowing recommended in Genesis. We, like Adam and Eve, seem just as ready to presume, grab, grasp, and lunge at knowledge which belongs to God alone.

We are mistaken to assume that our access to information is the same as the "treasures of wisdom and knowledge"³ hidden in Jesus Christ. With all the information presented to us these days, we can easily fail to discern which will eventually pass away as lesser "wood, hay, or straw" and which will endure as "gold, silver, and jewels."⁴ Our capacity to discern the knowledge found in Jesus Christ must grow in proportion to other information we accumulate.

How can we pursue knowledge in ways which are both biblically grounded and focused on knowing God? My intention is not to disparage knowledge that comes through study. Rather, I hope to point out how all knowledge finds its perfection in Jesus Christ.

Knowing the Lord

What knowledge of good and evil is and how we obtain it is a major biblical theme. Modern notions of knowledge emphasize knowledge *that* or knowledge *about*. Growth in knowledge is seen as a solitary process of mastering a body of facts. In both Testaments, knowing is inseparably related to the experience and love of God in the context of community. This is a critical difference. Knowledge, in the biblical sense, is more about our attachments or loves and growth through practice, God's revelation, and change than it is theory, information, or opinion. It is thus more accurate to refer to the biblical vision of knowledge as a process of knowing.

The call of the Old Testament is to know and love the Lord.⁵ Prophets like Jeremiah⁶ and Isaiah⁷ insist: if God's people want to flourish, they must know the Lord. When they do not know Him, they will not flourish and are heading toward destruction.

The story of Nebuchadnezzar provides a striking example of what this sort of knowing involves. The foreign king is singled out by God for his arrogance and is turned into a horrific, exiled beast

until he comes to know that the God of Israel has authority over the tottering dominion of human kings.⁸ When Nebuchadnezzar knows the Lord rightly he is humbled and his humanity is restored.⁹ Nebuchadnezzar's knowledge was more than mental activity! His story makes a brilliant example of how knowing God makes human restoration and flourishing possible.

The wealthy Boaz provides a positive example of God-knowing. On the surface the book of Ruth is a heartwarming story of tragedy and redemption. But it says more. Boaz is a "man of standing."¹⁰ He is wealthy and privileged. As he generously pursues Mosaic laws of gleaning¹¹, prudently avoids scandal¹², and skillfully navigates public transaction¹³, we recognize how resourcefully he applies his advantage to the good of others. More importantly, the marriage of Boaz and Ruth is remarkable as a union of an Israelite man to a woman of Moab. This marriage would be unusual for a highly available man of Israel like Boaz. When he marries Ruth, who has abandoned the gods of Moab and thrown herself on the mercy of Israel and Israel's God, we recognize how Boaz has come to love and know the Lord through the law of Moses.

A few weeks ago when our van's tire rapidly flattened in our driveway, I was handy enough to remove the tire and identify the metal that had punctured it. I could say that I knew something about the tire. It would be a little strange, though, if I felt that such knowledge made my situation much better. It was not until I took the tire to someone who knows tires that it could be repaired. The Old Testament vision of God-knowing includes the former but champions the latter kind of knowledge.

Knowing like this happens best in community with other God-knowers. The Old Testament vision is for God's people to pass on and live the stories, practices, and laws of God and thus know God. It has less to do with speculative reason or interior experience (though it includes both) and more to do with entering a community of testimony to God's acts and revealed priorities.¹⁴ Thus, knowing God requires access to people with significant experience and godly character. We learn as much through observation of their lives and mimicry as we learn from their words.

Whether for pagan kings like Nebuchadnezzar or God's people, the

Old Testament vision of knowledge remains the same. The flourishing of humans advances as we come to "know the Lord" and explore what this means within our communities. God-knowing is not at odds with knowledge *that* or knowledge *about* God and God's work. Indeed, the community of God's people is to be rich with such memory.¹⁵ Rather, knowing and memory should grow harmoniously together. The alternative to false knowledge, in other words, is not ignorance but true knowledge.

The Knowledge of the Cross

The New Testament vision of knowing is in keeping with that of the Old. As before, humans flourish where God is rightly known. As before, knowing occurs within the possibilities and limits of community. The most significant shift of the New Testament is a clarified portrait of God and true humanity in Jesus Christ. Unlike the first Adam, who saw equality with God as something to be grasped, Jesus Christ empties Himself, takes the form of a servant, and obeys to death. No grasping or clinging here. Then, God highly exalts Him.¹⁶

Paul is relentless in his claim that in our experience of Christ's life, and especially in His death and resurrection, we come to right knowledge of God.¹⁷ To know Christ and live we paradoxically enter into His death.¹⁸ Thus, for Paul, there can be no right knowledge of Jesus Christ apart from His cross. Perhaps this is why he declares to the church at Corinth he "decided to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified."¹⁹

The significance of knowing "nothing ... except Jesus Christ" can at first seem unimpressive, especially to ears which have been conditioned to insert "about" after "to know." For Paul, though, to know is to be joined through love and experience to a serving, humbled, dying, and exalted Lord for the sake of God's people, the church. This is not the language of a theorizer or wishful dreamer. Knowing Christ is more about Spirit-trained reflexes, immediate judgments, attachments or loves, and senses trained with experience to "discern good and evil"²⁰ and less about opinion or information.

Other forms of knowledge find their perfection in such knowing or else they risk becoming idolatrous. Our capacities for such idolatry are truly alarming!

In our age, where rights and privilege are seen as things to be grasped, to know nothing except Jesus Christ

is to leave oneself powerless before the invitation of Jesus to "take up our cross and follow," offering loving obedience where we might grasp for rights, dominance, or power.

To know Jesus is to prefer vigorous love over the wishful dreams we harbor for our communities, however pious or well-intended. This is strongly said, but conceited knowledge is the worst kind of ignorance.²¹

The pleasure and challenge of friendship, when it begins to nourish ultimate attachments, substitutes for knowing which belongs to God alone.

Knowledge *about* Jesus or *that* thus-and-such happened at some age of church history can become contrary to knowing Jesus Christ in the times appointed as our own.

Self-mastery and preening technique can give the impression of godliness, but lack the power of knowing Jesus Christ, whose wisdom appears to the world a spectacle of foolishness.²²

Out-of-control appetite or unchecked desire can temporarily fill the void which God alone can satisfy.

Technical knowledge may land us a career by which we come to surround ourselves with luxuries and exaggerated sensitivity to our personal needs, but this is not knowing Christ.

As horrible as it is, even self-hating knowledge of our shame, guilt, or grief (of which we have plenty) can become a substitute for knowing Jesus Christ. He will do for us the many things we cannot do for ourselves.

It always works the same way. As we find things which bring us happiness or put us in control, we become attached to them. We begin to love them and know them, and as we love them we come to fear losing them. So we cling to them, grasp them, and grab for them. As we close our hands around these things and hold them tightly, we die. We must hold them openly. We must die to them.

But this is not the Stoic death of detachment, where say to ourselves, "I never wanted that anyway." Knowing how to die is a matter of learning how to love all things in Christ. We seek to hold openly all the passing joys of creation while, at the same time, not resenting or despising them for being passing. We

take up our cross, empty ourselves, and follow. But this is our entrance into life. In a way, He gives our lives back.

As the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck puts it, "He who seeks Christ except under the cross in patience will not find Him." To know Christ is to accept the agony of patience which comes with being united to a serving and crucified Lord. Whatever glory is found in knowing Him, it is not the glory of mastery and power, but the glory of Christ through the lowliest of His servants.²³ Any lesser knowledge, however tantalizing as fruit to be grasped, will ultimately lead to death.

Growth in the knowledge of Christ happens best in community. In one sense, when we are baptized the Holy Spirit takes the lead and guides us through Christ's death and into His life. As we know Him more, the Lord entrusts fuller and greater illumination. There are no shortcuts. But in another sense, growth in the knowledge of Christ takes practice and ancient memory. We begin as novices and learn best by observing the judgments, responses, commitments, and even mistakes of those living and dead who have had their God-knowing honed. Just as masons pass on the knowledge of their trade by teaching an apprentice how to hold a trowel or glory in the suffering that can be blocklaying, so Christians know and love Jesus Christ together.

The Determination of the Lord to be Known

One of the profound promises of the Gospel is that, as it relates to knowing Jesus Christ, today's Christians are in the same situation as Christians of all time. This is astonishing. Certainly, the experiences appointed to our period of history are different than those who have come before us. Yet, the enduring promise of Jesus to be with us through His Spirit reassures us that before we know Him, He knows and pursues us.²⁴

We, like the first disciples, learn to know Christ through all other things and all other things through Jesus Christ. This informs all domains of human knowledge, whether the knowledge of the sciences, the knowledge of parenting, that of gardening, church-building, or finances. As we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to make visible the mind of Christ in the changing scenes and times of our lives, we begin to know Him, even as we are known. On such knowledge the Lord places an imperishable blessing.²⁵

Endnotes

1. Against the Heresies, 4.39.2. cf. 3.22.4; 3.23.5; 4.38.1-3.
2. Against the Heresies, 4.29.1.
3. Col. 2:3.
4. I Cor. 3:12
5. Jer. 31:34; Hos. 2:20; Deut. 6:4-5.
6. Jer. 2:8; 4:22; 8:7; 9:6.
7. Is. 1:3; 5:13; 44:18-19; 45:4-5; 47:10; 59:8.
8. Dan. 4:25; 5:21.
9. Dan. 4:34-37.
10. Ruth 2:1.
11. Ruth 2:15-16.
12. Ruth 3:14.
13. Ruth 4.
14. Exod. 4:31; Josh. 3:5; Hos. 13:4.
15. Is. 46:8-11; Deut. 6:9; 8:2; 19; 9:7; 11:20; 24:19-22; 25:17-19.
16. Phil. 2:6-8.
17. Col 2:9; 2 Cor. 4:4-12.
18. Jn. 12:24-25; Lk. 17:33; Mt. 10:39.
19. I Cor. 2:2.
20. Heb. 5:14.
21. I Cor. 8:2.
22. I Cor. 4:9-10.
23. Mt. 5; 25:31-40; Lk. 17:10; I Cor. 12:21-26.
24. Mt. 28:20; Jn. 16:7.
25. Jn. 20:29.



Kyle Stoltzfus

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