

Knowing and Understanding God

This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD."

JEREMIAH 9: 23 - 24

My post-retirement journey

In the weeks just preceding my retirement from full-time pastoral ministry, I read Henry Blackaby's book Experiencing Prayer with Jesus. There is a line in that book that reads like this: *Sometimes we just need to wait before God and let Him shape our hearts for our next assignment.*

I decided to do this and God heard. He sat me down for a year and a half. I had expected to be very busy preaching in retirement, but that did not happen. God almost sequestered me. I preached only seven times in 18 months. He gave me ample time to pray, to study, and to think.

During this period, a message began to form in me.

The gospel is spreading with explosive power around the world. There is a Pentecost every hour: 3,000 people are being saved every sixty minutes. That is 72,000 people a day. 28,000 people are being saved every day in China. But this kind of growth primarily in the Southern Hemisphere and in Asia. It is not happening in the Western Church. Why could this be? Secularism is winning the day in western Europe, Canada, and the United States. In the West, we argue over doctrine and moral/ethical issues. But all that aside, it seemed to me that Christians in South America, Africa, and Asia knew their God in a different way than we do.

I came to the conclusion that the Western Church does not understand and know God. It is my belief that the Western Church is at the same place Israel and Judah were in the 8th Century B.C. during the days of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah.

The Condition of God's People in the 8th Century B.C.

Up in Samaria, God's people had become accustomed to worshiping God while looking at golden calves and totally disregarding the plain teaching of the Law in almost every way.

In Judah, God's people saw no disconnect between worshiping Yahweh in Solomon's Temple and going directly to a grove and worshiping Baal.

Had you asked them if they knew God, they would undoubtedly said yes. But there they were offering

grain offerings to God and home-baked cakes to the Queen of Heaven; a lamb to Yahweh and sensual worship at shrines to Baal and Astarte; a calf to Yahweh and there little five-year-olds to Molech, the fire god.

How did they get from Sinai to here? What happened?

At the end of Moses' life, as God's people were going in to possess Canaan, Moses said this:

I am going to tell you the Law a second time. Make certain that you remember these laws and that you impress these truths on the hearts of your children and your children's children *so that these truths do not slip or fade or depart from their heart.* (Deut 4:7-9; 6:4-9)

And when you get into Canaan and start enjoying those large and flourishing cities you did not build, those well-furnished homes you did not provide, and the wells you did not dig, and the vineyards and olive groves you did not plant, when you have eaten and are satisfied, be careful that you *do not forget the Lord* who brought you out of Egypt. (Deut 6:10ff)

What could make them forget? Moses gave them clear instructions to keep this from happening. (Deut 7:2b-4)

Make no treaties with the people of Canaan.

Do not let your children marry their children *for they will turn your sons away from following the LORD to serve other gods.*

You are a people holy to the LORD your God. He has chosen you and you are His treasured possession. Deut 7:6

God's people violated every aspect of God's instruction.

What do you suppose happened when that first Israeli boy married that first Canaanite girl? Nothing bad. Life just went on.

Then there was a second marriage, and a third. Then there were ten and a hundred and then a thousand. Life pretty much went on.

Then one day, a ten year old girl asked, "Mom, what was it like when you were a little girl?" And mom proceeded to tell her about the festivals and fairs connected with the worship of the God's of Canaan, about the Queen of Heaven and Tammuz. Then she baked her some the flavorful pastries that were used in this pagan worship. That little girl spent a month with her Canaanite grandparents and saw how those gods were adored in the home.

The family started going to the fairs and events of the Canaanites and attending festivals to their gods. They did not worship per se, but they developed a tolerance for them.

Then the families started worshipping at the baal shrines, but they continued to make offerings to God.

This scenario was repeated countless times over time and, without anyone noticing, the religious life of God's people was transformed.

Jeremiah 23:27 says that they *forgot God's name through Baal worship*. Little by little, they forgot God then forsook God.

God raised up prophets to call their hand, but the people could no longer get it.

"Amos, I hear what you are saying, but it just doesn't compute."

"Micah, I worship the LORD, but not exclusively. I believe there is good in all religions.

"Joel, I have grown in my faith. I consider myself to be spiritual, but I am not religious. I do not need organized religions."

"I consider myself something of a syncretist, Jeremiah. I have fashioned a theology that includes the strengths of all religions."

Israel and Judah now felt at home in both worlds. Judaism became a convenient cultural affect. It made them *feel* loyal to their heritage as children of Abraham, but any connection to the purposes of God was lost. They knew God's name and they called themselves His people, but they no longer understood nor knew His nature, His character, and His ways.

They were unaware that even if the pagan things they did were mindless habits, they still angered God.

Zephaniah 1:9 Avoiding the threshold

Jeremiah 7:18-20 Children gather the wood, father starts the fire, the women knead the dough to bake little cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

When they longed for “the Day of the Lord”, the prophets said, “Be careful what you wish for. It is not going to be what you think it is.”

When the wrath of God fell on them, they were stunned. That had no idea that they were far, far from God.

So here is my question. Is it possible that the church in the West, including the evangelical wing of the church, finds itself in an eerily similar position?

Is it possible that over the past 70 or 80 years, we have let the knowledge of God slip away? The Bible shows us that you can forget and forsake God and not know or realize that you have done it.

Grand Canyon Association’s recent discipleship conference. Greg Ogden illustration: “Pastor, I don’t want to be a disciple. I just want to be a Christian.” I wonder how common her sentiment is in Southern Baptist churches in Arizona? If that woman understood and knew God, she would never have even thought that.

The Barna Research Group reports that only 9% of American adults has a Christian worldview. And only 19% (less than one out of five) born-again adults do. If these are the people who vote in our business meetings, lead our small groups, compose of deacon or elder bodies, it is no wonder that our churches make poor decisions. No wonder so many evangelical churches just don’t seem to get it.

Consider who was sitting in your congregation last Sunday. According to recent research done by the Pew Center for Religion and Life:

Every Sunday

Less than every Sunday

Reincarnation	5%	20%
Astrology	8%	23%
Yoga	7%	21%
Spiritual energy	15%	22%

If our people knew God's nature, His character, and His ways, this would not be.

The world can invade the church. In a church I once served, a woman volunteered to provide a centerpiece for the Lord's Supper table. She created a beautiful diorama that showed the cross upon a little hill, a pathway descending to the tomb. She put in little trees and shrubs. It was beautifully done. But at the entrance of the open tomb, she put a little Easter bunny. She unknowingly blended the vicarious atonement of Christ with a pagan fertility symbol. See how easily the sacred and the profane can come together?

If I have heard from God, what does it mean?

We think we have an obedience problem. *If God's people would just do what they ought to do.* But here are the facts: people will not obey a God they do not love and they will not love a God they do not know.

We think we can solve our problem with more information. But what if that believer without a Christian worldview does not want a Christian worldview? Until he knows and loves God, nothing you tell him about living like a believer will stick.

And what if God does not change? What if He is the same yesterday, today, and forever? What if He will always have a deep, settled hatred of sin? What if the things that fired his anger and provoked judgment in Old Testament days still fire His anger today? What if He decides to follow through on the warnings He gave the seven churches in Revelation? Is that even possible? If we say no, we display an ignorance of God that is profound and stunning.

And what about the Day of the Lord's Coming and the Western Church? What if our churches are filled with people who do not understand and know God? The Day of the Lord, which will come, will hold two things and both of them are bad.

They will be terribly ashamed at His coming as 1 John 2:28 says. Or they will hear Him say, "Depart from me. I never knew you."

And a final question: to what degree are we complicit in this situation?

In Jeremiah's day, the prophets and priests were a part of the problem. (Jeremiah 6:13-15). The most stinging indictment was that they treated the wound of God's people as though it was not serious.

Barna Research finds that only 51% of Protestant pastors have a Christian worldview. Southern Baptist pastors score much better at 71%. Still, that means 29% of us don't. We cannot give away what we do not have.

Is it possible that we pastors have, in varying degrees, let some precious truths about God slip from our hearts? And with those fading truths, have we seen our deep love for God wane? Have we left our first love? Would it be prudent for us to go stand before God and ask, along with the Pharisees, "Are we blind, too?"

If a person wanted to seek God's face, how would he or she begin?

Simply open God's Word, quiet your heart, and simply say, "God, I want to know You. Please show me Your nature, Your character, and Your ways." Then read God's Word with anticipation. God will take it from there. We have God's promise about that: *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your hearts. Jeremiah 29:13.*

Do not be surprised if it takes a while, even months. God may choose not behave like a concierge at a five-star hotel. But rest in the assurance that God is faithful. He always keeps His promises.