

CONTENTS

You Mean You Hear God Speak?	2
Where Does Such An Idea Come From?	3
What Is A Personal Relationship With God?	4
<i>A Spiritual Relationship</i>	5
<i>A Christ-Centered Relationship</i>	9
<i>A Submissive Relationship</i>	12
<i>A Mutually-Felt Relationship</i>	16
<i>A Growing Relationship</i>	20
<i>A Shared Relationship</i>	25
One Who Was Close . . . Yet So Far Away	28
Making It Personal	29
Power For Living	32

WHAT IS A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

What does it mean when a person claims to have a personal relationship with God? Would you claim that for yourself? Does anyone really hear from God, talk to God, or have the kind of inside track with Him that would justify such a claim? At what point does claiming to be a friend of God amount to nothing more than the ultimate form of name-dropping?

It is my hope that the following pages will help to clarify this issue for you. None of us can afford to misunderstand this subject, which is as basic as it is profound.

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YOU MEAN YOU HEAR GOD SPEAK?

WHAT DO YOU
MEAN THERE
IS NO GOD? I
JUST TALKED TO HIM THIS
MORNING.

This message borne by a well-faded bumper sticker has prompted a few smiles along the way. But not today. One car-length back, the driver of a late-model Cadillac curses under his breath about being stuck behind a sluggish Toyota in heavy traffic. He's even more irritated having to eat the fumes of a religious fanatic. He doesn't find the sticker funny, or cute, or even honest. He has a hard time with those who talk so casually about:

- Meeting God
- Knowing God
- Hearing God
- Talking to God

- Being led by God

It's not that the driver of the big car doesn't believe in God. Like most people, he's no atheist. He knows what the inside of a church looks like. His wife is religious. And without her knowledge, he has even asked heaven for a little consideration from time to time when facing a tough business deal or even a critical shot on the golf course. Sure he prays, but he's not about to claim that he has a personal relationship with God. He's suspicious of those who do. He suspects that they are indulging in the ultimate kind of name-dropping.

Yet in reflective moments he sometimes wonders if there's something he's missing. What could it mean to have a personal relationship with God?

WHERE DOES SUCH AN IDEA COME FROM?

The Bible doesn't refer to a personal relationship with God. Not in those exact words. But it does show the importance of learning to know, love, and trust a very *personal* God. While you won't find the words *personal relationship* in the Bible, the idea is

While the words may not be in the Bible, the idea is everywhere.

everywhere. Page after page suggests that it is *who* you know that counts, and that the *who* we need to know is God.

Jesus Himself prayed to His Father, "This is eternal life, that they may know

You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (Jn. 17:3). Commenting on this verse, theologian J. I. Packer wrote, "What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. . . . What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God" (*Knowing God*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, ©1973, p.29).

Many centuries earlier, the prophet Jeremiah quoted the Lord as saying, "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me" (9:23-24).

WHAT IS A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD?

In the following pages we'll see that a relationship with God has many of the same characteristics that mark a personal relationship between two friends. These factors include some degree of:

- Mutual recognition—each knows the other.
- Mutual openness—each approaches the other.
- Mutual interests—each shares with the other.
- Mutual respect—each honors the other.

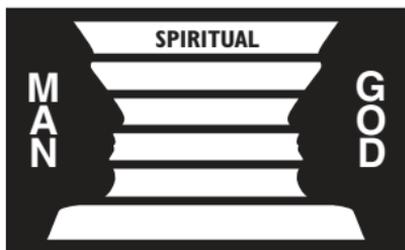
Such a relationship means more than knowing *of* or *about* someone. We might say that we know the governor of New York. But if the chief officer of that state can't pick us out of a

crowd, if we can't get access to him, or if he has never shared our thoughts, feelings, and decisions, then we are claiming a friendship we don't really have.

A relationship with God is similar. If our friendship is real, we will welcome God into our lives. Our actions will show we believe He is the kind of person we want in our homes, in our plans, in our laughter, and in our tears.

A relationship with God is more, but not less, than any other relationship.

With these possibilities in view, let's take a closer look at the marks of a personal relationship with God.



A SPIRITUAL RELATIONSHIP

There are those who say they have encountered God visibly, heard Him speak audibly, and felt His touch physically. Such experiences are possible. Both Old and New Testaments are marked by miraculous, life-changing encounters with God (Isa. 6:1-8). He has shown, through the pages of Scripture, that He is free to reveal Himself in any way He chooses.

These supernatural encounters, however, were the exception rather than the rule. While prophets like Isaiah, Moses, and Ezekiel had life-changing visions of God, they did not spend the rest of their lives

teaching others to have similar experiences.

In some ways it would be nice to believe that a relationship with God means experiencing the shaft of light pictured on the front of this booklet. But as a rule, the truth is far less dramatic.

To meet God doesn't mean we have to see Him visibly. We don't need to wait for visions or life-changing dreams. We can encounter God with the eyes of our understanding. Because He is an all-powerful, ever-present Spirit, He can reveal Himself to us at a deeper level than our physical senses. The One who made the world is more than able to give insight about Himself to anyone who wants to know the truth in order to do it (Jn. 7:17; Eph. 1:17-18). He can also withhold light from those who are more interested in

avoiding the truth than in finding it.

To hear God doesn't mean we have to hear Him audibly. There are times when we might wish God would break the silence and whisper in our ear. Or maybe we're glad He doesn't. In either case, it's not necessary for Him to do so. If we hear only silence, it is our own self-imposed silence.

For those who want to hear, God can be heard speaking constantly through the timeless wisdom of His Book. There and through nature (Ps. 19:1-11), He is always talking to us.

Our problem usually is not that God is not speaking, but rather that we're not sure we want to hear what He has already said.

For that reason, we need to take seriously the words of the author of Hebrews, who wrote, "Therefore, as

the Holy Spirit says: 'Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion'" (3:7-8). Our opportunity to hear Him on every page of the Bible is a privilege that carries a great degree of responsibility.

*The God who
made the world
has no trouble
being seen and
heard by those who
honestly want to
know Him.*

To be close to God is not a matter of location. It is common to think that we must go to church to meet God. That makes sense. We meet friends at predetermined times and places. Yet, while God does use scheduled services and addresses, He is not limited to them. He promises to

meet us in places of the heart. He wants us to make our hearts His home.

James recognized this when he said, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (Jas. 4:8). He didn’t say anything about where to go. He didn’t tell us to find the highest hill in our area, or a quiet church sanctuary. Instead, James told us to humble ourselves before the Lord (4:10). He gave us reason to believe that wherever we seek Him, the Lord will meet with us there.

David, the songwriter, king, and “man after God’s own heart,” shows us why this is true. Deeply humbled by the Lord’s constant, unavoidable presence (Ps. 139:1-6), he prayed:

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my

bed in hell, behold, You are there. . . . If I say, “Surely the darkness shall fall on me,” even the night shall be light about me; indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You When I awake, I am still with You (Ps. 139:7-8,11-12,18).

Nearness to God is not an issue of location. It is a matter of whether we have place in our hearts for Him.

**God is
as close as
a humbled
heart.**

To know God is not a matter of knowing all about Him. That might be the greatest understatement of all. To know God is not to master Him. At best, we can exclaim with the apostle Paul:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom

*and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His
judgments and His ways
past finding out! "For
who has known the mind
of the Lord? Or who has
become His counselor?"*
(Rom. 11:33-34).

Given the limitations of
life, our minds can barely
begin to grasp the meaning
of words that describe God—

***Those who
meet God now
will have eternity
to get to know
Him.***

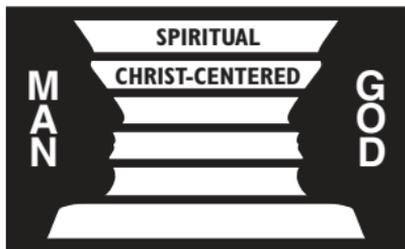
words like *eternal, infinite,
all-powerful, all-knowing,
and everywhere-present*. Yet,
because He has made it
possible to know Him, we
can begin a process of
discovery now that will
never end.

We can know God
because He has come to us,
on *our* terms, to invite us to

Himself on *His* terms.
According to eyewitnesses
of the New Testament
Gospels, God revealed
Himself to us in a person
who walked on water,
controlled the skies, healed
withered limbs, restored
sight, and stopped bleeding
sores. He fed thousands
with a small amount of
food, drove out demons,
raised the dead, loved
deeply, and taught wisely.

Living a sinless life, He
fulfilled Old Testament
predictions, claimed to be
the promised Messiah, and
sacrificed His own life to
secure forgiveness of sins
for all who would trust
Him. It was this person,
known ever since as Jesus
the Messiah, who said, "He
who has seen Me has seen
the Father" (Jn. 14:9).

So, according to the
Bible, not only is a personal
relationship with God a
spiritual relationship, it is a
Christ-centered relationship.



A CHRIST-CENTERED RELATIONSHIP

Mediators often play an important role in helping to resolve family, labor, and legal disputes. When emotions flare, insight is lost, communication stops, and stubbornness sets in. In such instances, an arbitrator can often bring renewed perspective and a plan for resolution.

The ultimate mediator is Christ.

Nowhere is a personal go-between more needed than in resolving the conflict and estrangement between man and God. Our personal sin has dug out a chasm so deep and wide that it is impossible for any of us to “cross over” to God on our own. Without a mediator,

we can never overcome the alienation of affection and disruption of communication that have come between us.

God is in some ways like a parent who watches his runaway son or daughter become hopelessly entangled with the law. As much as the parent would love to wrap his arms around the child and bring him home, he can't. The law has to be satisfied. Justice must be carried out. A debt to society must be paid and a law must be enforced. For such a need, Christ has come to mediate peace between ourselves and God (1 Tim. 2:5).

Words cannot do justice to the importance of the mediating role of Christ. Without His intervention on our behalf, we could never resolve our differences with God (Jn. 14:6). Without the urging of His loving Spirit, we would never want to.

Jesus deserves our unending appreciation, admiration, and affection. When He wiped out our debt to the law by absorbing our punishment, He proved Himself to be a friend without equal. When He rose from the dead to be life and help to all who trust Him, He gave us a basis for undying hope. When He ascended to the Father's right hand to intercede for us and to act as our personal advocate, He assured that He would provide for us what no mere religion or system of belief could ever offer. He has given Himself to be the solution to our every problem, to reveal God to us, and to lead us to a personal relationship with His Father.

Christianity is Christ.

As W. H. Griffith Thomas points out in a book by that title, this is the real heart of our Christian faith. We

have not been called to a system of laws, traditions, and inspirational ideas. We haven't been called to the church, to a moral cause, or to the golden rule of Christian love. We have not even been called to the Bible. We have been called to Christ, the mediating person of whom the whole Bible speaks.

“Everything we know of God, and everything we need from Him, is deeply affected by our attitude toward Christ.”

—W. H. Griffith Thomas

The apostle Paul understood the necessity of a Christ-centered relationship with God. In 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, he made it clear that he was not promoting a system of

ideas. He was speaking of a relationship with God based on:

- Christ whom we serve (v.1).
- Christ who sets Christians apart (v.2).
- Christ on whose name Christians call (v.2).
- Christ who is our Lord (v.2).
- Christ who gives us grace and peace (v.3).
- Christ who brought us the grace of God (v.4).
- Christ who has enriched us in every way (v.5).
- Christ who is confirmed by experience (v.6).
- Christ for whom we eagerly wait (v.7).
- Christ who will keep us to the end (v.8).
- Christ who will have His day (v.8).
- Christ to whom God has joined us (v.9).

Paul's obsession was not a system of new thought, an ethic, a teaching, a form of church organization, or a

new program. It was the person he had come to know as the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). It was the person who had not only

“Jesus Christ received is holiness begun. Jesus Christ cherished is holiness advancing. But Jesus Christ reckoned as never absent would be holiness complete.”

—J. Hudson Taylor

died to pay for Paul's sins (1 Cor. 15:3), but also the person who, through His Spirit, was living His life through Paul (Gal. 2:20) and was his very life (Phil. 1:21).

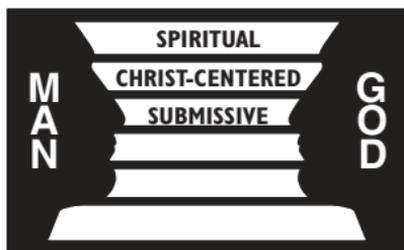
Are we as Christ-centered as Paul? Do we realize that true Christianity is found in the living person and personality of the

resurrected Christ? Have we learned that Jesus Christ is and must be at the heart of a personal relationship with God? Have we realized that no matter where we look, Christ is there?

- Look back—He’s our Creator (Col. 1:16).
- Look ahead—He’s our Judge (2 Cor. 5:10).
- Look up—He’s our Savior and Lord (Phil. 2:5-11).
- Look down—He’s our Sustainer (Col. 1:17).
- Look right—He’s our Teacher (Mt. 23:8).
- Look left—He’s our Advocate (1 Jn. 2:1).
- Look within—He’s our Life (Gal. 2:20).

There is no question that a personal relationship with God must be a Christ-centered relationship. It is Christ and Christ alone who can bring us to God, cleanse us from the constant pollution of the world, and be our ever-present Source of life and help.

It is Christ, the living Word, who reveals, defines, and expresses the personality of the Father. It is Christ who should continually be in our thoughts as Lord and Life. It is Christ who, by His Spirit, is a constant presence in and with all who have put their faith in Him (Mt. 28:19-20).



A SUBMISSIVE RELATIONSHIP

Any husband who is content to be just “one of the boys” in his wife’s eyes isn’t much of a husband. Neither is a woman much of a wife if she is satisfied to be just “one of the girls.” The intimacy of the marriage relationship carries with it a great sense

of mutual commitment that will have a bearing on all of the couple's other activities and relationships.

For far greater reasons, the Designer of human personality is also not satisfied to be just "one of the gods" (Ex. 20:1-6). Yahweh, Provider and Deliverer of Israel, the God who came to us in Jesus the Messiah, will not accept a place on the shelf alongside Ra, Krishna, Moon, Allah, GM, or CBS. He has always been a jealous, possessive, commanding God. He will not share His honor with anyone else because no one else deserves that honor (Isa. 48:11).

God is to be feared more than all others.

Most of us don't even like to think about things that frighten us. Whether we're talking about public speaking, high places, cramped spaces, dark nights, noises at the door,

or creaks in the attic, the very thought can make us jumpy. Yet without fear, life would be very difficult. Even the animal world is endowed with an alarm and escape mechanism that provides the creature some degree of fight or flight necessary for survival.

A relationship with God begins with a fear that will drive us to the safety, certainty, and enjoyment of His love.

At no time, however, is the emotion of fear more important or more neglected than when it involves our fear of God. To the extent that we know Him, we will also fear Him. Yet it is a fear, when understood, that calms all other fears and drives us to the Lord, not

away from Him. It is a fear that teaches us to love, trust, and enjoy Him.

This fear might be described as the first step to a personal relationship with God. According to Solomon, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7). In other words, the fear and knowledge of God go hand in hand.

Nothing and no one deserves to be feared more than the Lord. Not people, not governments, not disease, not death, not even Satan. Many who don’t know God can’t understand this. They assume that the Lord is the only one in the universe who *doesn’t* need to be feared because He is too good and too loving to do us any harm. The ironic result is that such persons often end up missing the very love they seek because their lives are full of fear—fear of failure, fear of people, fear of natural

disasters, and fear of accident, disease, and death (Dt. 28:58-68).

You’ll know you have the right fear of God when it drives you to Him rather than away from Him.

Those who really know the Lord take Him seriously. They realize that God expects to be listened to when He warns about moral and spiritual failure (Prov. 8:13; 16:6). He alone determines whether anything or anyone else will be allowed to touch or test us (Job 1); and most important, He alone determines where we will spend eternity (Mt. 10:28; Rev. 2:10; 20:1-15). Such authority deserves our respect and fear.

Although we reverence God and stand in awe of

His great power, at the same time we can have strong confidence (Prov. 14:26). With David we can say, “I sought the Lord, and He heard me, and delivered me from all my fears” (Ps. 34:4). A couple of verses later David added, “The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who trusts in Him! Oh, fear the Lord, you His saints! There is no want to those who fear Him” (Ps. 34:7-9).

That comes from someone who knew his God. It comes from someone who personally experienced that the God who asks for our surrender is a God who wants us to fear Him for our own good (Jer. 32:37-39).

God is to be loved, trusted, and obeyed more than all others.

Obedience, like fear, is something we tend to resist.

Yet, seeing the importance of such obedience is just a matter of perspective. For example, most of us are happy to obey a stranger's directions when we're in an unknown area. We don't even think of it as obedience. We see it more like accepting help. That's the way we can look at obedience to the Lord. It is a way of accepting His help and His love that we so desperately need. Obedience is a way of showing that we really do know the Lord and that we are growing in our knowledge of how good, loving, and wise He is.

The apostle John wrote: *Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in*

him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked (1 Jn. 2:3-6).

The fear, trust, and obedience involved in knowing the Lord do not leave us the way we were. They make us better because Christ lives within. They change us until this relationship possesses us and dominates us—bringing us heart to heart and face to face with the God of all goodness and light.



A MUTUALLY-FELT RELATIONSHIP

Roadworn, pawsore, and unnerved by children's stones and the nervous yipping insults of small

pampered housedogs, the German Shepherd stray followed the stranger from a safe distance. Head low, and with an occasional look to the side, he stepped lightly and painfully in the tracks of the man who had thrown him half a bagel near the garbage bins of Ol' Blue's Diner. Cold, hungry, and longing for attention, the dog watched the stranger's every move, waiting for one more sign of recognition, the faintest chance for friendship. But it never came.

There are people who, when thinking about God, feel like this unwanted stray. They long for the assurance that God would smile and move toward them. But they assume Him to be too selective to feel anything for them. Some even see Him as an unchanging, eternal spirit who lives far above the ever-changing winds of pain and emotion that blow

in and out of our lives.

But that is not true of the God of the Bible. The Scriptures assure us that He feels deeply for the most broken, roadworn, and dejected people. He cannot be touched by our strength, but only by our weakness. While God's character never changes, His affections do change.

To know God is to affect Him. While God knew us, loved us, and chose us along with all His people in eternity past (Eph. 1:3-6), He relates to us personally and presently in a very intimate way. He rejoices with us when we are happy, sorrows when we are sad, and grieves when we are bad.

He has made Himself just that vulnerable to us. He has exposed His own heart to all of the loveless and heartless things that we do to Him. The Bible tells us that God can be:

- Pleased (Heb. 11:5).
 - Grieved and sorrowful (Gen. 6:6; Eph. 4:30-32).
 - Provoked and tested (Ps. 78:40-41).
 - Burdened and wearied (Isa. 43:24).
 - Angered, agitated, and furious (Ezek. 16:42-43).
- Specifically, Ephesians 4:30-32 says:

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

The greatest evidence of His decision to make Himself vulnerable to us is found in the personal pains and sorrows of the One who with His own mind and heart revealed the Father to us. In the face

of Jesus Christ, we find the face of God. He is the One who suffered for us so He could bring us to the Father. He loves us that much!

It might be hard for us to personalize that kind of love when we know we are only one in a world of more than 5 billion people. But we need to keep in mind who it is we are talking about. God does not have our limitations. He is not confined to human, one-at-a-time relationships. Rather, the One who made the world is able to relate intimately to as many of us at the same time as He desires.

How do we know God has that kind of capacity? We might come to that conclusion by reflecting on the size and complexity of the universe He created. Or we might consider the vast amounts of knowledge and information that finite people like ourselves can

amass through the global Internet. Or we might simply trust the words of the One who said:

Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows (Mt. 10:29-31).

If a sparrow doesn't fall to the ground apart from His knowledge, then the One who numbers the hairs of our head is also counting the tears, the moments of our fears, and the depth of the swirling waters threatening to engulf us.

If God knows us with this kind of knowledge, then we are never as alone as we feel. We are never without help. We are never out of the Father's reach. Even though He might test our faith and our patience by

not responding immediately in the way we want Him to, we can be reassured with a peace and confidence that can calm the turbulence within and lead to dramatic changes in us.

To know God is to be affected by Him. Think for a moment about the people who have changed your life for the better. Maybe it was the teacher who inspired you to go for your dreams. Maybe it was the parent or grandparent whose words and hugs made you feel deeply loved. Maybe it was the neighbor who showed you by his example that any job worth doing is worth doing well. Looking back, you can see that knowing these people changed your life.

What is true of these people will be even more true of those who come to know God. No one can know Him without being changed by Him. Anyone

who comes into God's presence will be touched and changed by the One who loves us enough to accept us as we are, but loves us too much to leave

To develop a personal relationship with God means to learn to love what He loves and hate what He hates.

us that way. The apostle James described such a personal relationship with God like this:

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter

*be turned to mourning
and your joy to gloom.
Humble yourselves in the
sight of the Lord, and He
will lift you up (4:7-10).*

To know God in this way means allowing our hearts to be broken by the things that break His heart. It means finding joy in the things that bring Him joy, discovering strength in His strength, and receiving hope in the assurance that nothing is too hard for Him. It means finding a new lease on life in One who offers us forgiveness in exchange for our repentance, comfort in trade for our sorrow, and the promise of a world to come for our willingness to release our grip on this present one.

We are changed as we discover that to know God is to love Him. To love Him is to give Him first place in our hearts. Giving Him first place is to care about those

He cares about, to love what He loves, to hate what He hates, and to join Him in the family business of redeeming broken lives.

This is the kind of healthy relationship that God calls us to. But such maturity doesn't just happen. Sometimes a personal relationship with God remains a faint glimmer of what it was meant to be. Sometimes we stop short of the growth to which God calls us.



A GROWING RELATIONSHIP

Who could doubt the personal relationship between parents and their newborn baby in the hospital nursery. Yet a one-sided parent-infant

relationship provides an important counterbalance to much of what we've said up until now. On earlier pages we've emphasized the mutual nature of a relationship. Now we need to see the other side of this truth.

Just as some babies do not grow and thrive, many children of God follow a similar pattern. Sometimes growth starts and then stalls. Even though God Himself is committed to bring us to eventual maturity, He often allows us to remain infantile in our attitudes and knowledge of Him.

The apostle Paul addressed this issue of immaturity and lack of growth when he wrote:

I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you

were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

Expect a process.

Growing to maturity takes equal amounts of diligence and patience. On one hand, we must never be satisfied with the level of our relationship and knowledge of God. If we are, we'll stagnate, sour, and go backward. On the other hand, we must be patient with ourselves and not expect more than God expects of us.

Scripture shows that this maturity doesn't happen overnight. It requires time—time with God, and time in His Word. For that reason Peter wrote, "As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may

grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (1 Pet. 2:2-3). James supported the progressive nature of this relationship with God when he wrote:

My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing (1:2-4).

Don't rush the process.

But don't let it stop. Continue to feed on the Word of God even as you allow Him to show Himself faithful in the seasons, tests, and troubles of life. Don't expect perfection. We will fail. Be content to be learning and growing. Don't be like the homeowner who planted a garden, only to dig it up 2 weeks later because he didn't have tomatoes yet.

Expect change.

Because of the very nature of spiritual life, our relationship with the Lord will change. It will change because as we go forward we will always find more—more knowledge and experience of God that will stretch us, enlarge our hearts, and make us better.

Our relationship with God can also change for the worse, however, if we begin to coast and rely on past experiences with Him. We must expect change because our relationship with Him is by nature a contested issue. Our adversary, the devil, won't be satisfied until he neutralizes us and we slip into a spiritual coma (Eph. 6:10-13).

Although our personal relationship with God can never be lost, the characteristics of that relationship will change. We will change. Count on it. Our hearts will either

grow warmer or colder. Our character will either deepen or thin out. Our conversations with God will either become more intimate or less meaningful and less frequent.

Allow for incompleteness.

Speaking of our incomplete relationship with God, Paul said:

For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. . . . For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Cor. 13:9-10,12-13).

That's the realism we're faced with. Our knowledge and experience are incomplete. It's as if we

are looking at the face of God through a clouded glass. But then it will be face to face. In the meantime, we have our orders. We must accept our incompleteness, trust God, and put our hope in His imminent return. We are to love God and His imperfect family with all of our heart. We can't afford to demand perfection of ourselves. Neither should we demand it of others. The holiness and growth that God is looking for will be seen in our brokenness and humility, not in our spiritual perfection.

Don't expect heaven now. Not only is it important for us to give ourselves time to grow in the Lord, but it is also essential that we take time to let Him show Himself absolutely faithful and satisfying to us. But don't expect in this life what He has promised to complete in eternity.

We who trust in Christ are people of eternity. There are no time limits on our future. We are not like the professional athlete who has to reach his goals and make his money and a name for himself in just a few short years before he loses his competitive edge.

Having a relationship with God is not a way to get everything we want in life. It is not the key to financial success, good health, and long life. It is, however, the way to find increasing amounts of inner love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). It is a means of finding the ultimate relationship, the ultimate purpose, the ultimate mission, the ultimate security, the ultimate hope.

All that remains for us is to trust Christ for what we cannot now see or have.

We need to believe that what Christ said to His disciples is still true:

Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also (Jn. 14:1-3).

That is our hope. We should not expect the Lord to give us everything we crave now. While He has promised to provide for the needs of all who follow Him, He also reserves the right to determine what we need now and what we will be able to enjoy more if it is deferred until later.



A SHARED RELATIONSHIP

We all come to God one at a time. In a sense, we come all alone. It is our personal decision, our choice, whether or not we are willing to enter into a personal relationship with God. No one else makes this decision for us. But it doesn't stop there. Once we come to God, we are joined to Him and born into His family.

Those who love God will love one another.

It is impossible to have a personal relationship with God without also having Christ-centered relationships with other people. Christ's love shown on the cross is our example.

He showed us that to be close to the Father means to share the Father's love for others (1 Jn. 4:7-11). As I get to know the Lord, I will also be confronted with a God who dearly loves those people around me—my family, friends, neighbors, business associates, acquaintances, and even my enemies.

This is the kind of attitude that Paul encouraged in the Christians at Thessalonica. After affirming the reality and evidence of their relationship to God (1 Th. 1:1-7), he went on to say:

Concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another; and indeed you do so toward all the brethren who are in all Macedonia. But we urge you, brethren, that you increase more and more (4:9-10).

We might like to live in isolation, but we can't do it if we're going to grow in our relationship with God. Knowing God doesn't mean just knowing about Him; it means entering into Him—into His thoughts, His heart, His sacrificial love.

The apostle John wrote: *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love (1 Jn. 4:7-8).*

Those who love God are dependent on one another. In Ephesians 4, Paul made it clear that our vertical relationship with God is accompanied by many horizontal relationships. He pictured each child of God as a member of the body of Christ. Each part has a function. Just as the eye, ear, mouth, and foot make

distinct contributions to our physical bodies, so each believer plays a distinct role in the church, the body of Christ. When every part does its share, the whole body receives the benefit (see 1 Cor. 12 and Rom. 12).

Even though we have received a complete salvation in Christ, there is another sense in which we are not complete without relating to and serving one another. We need one another just as much as the mouth needs the eye and the eye needs the hand. This is the outworking of our salvation. We might think we are independent spirits who can do just fine on our own, but we will soon discard that idea as we grow in our knowledge of God.

Those who love God will submit to one another. In Ephesians 5:21, Paul said that we are to submit to one another in the fear of God. In the

counsel that follows, his words become very specific:

- Wives are to serve their husbands as a means of serving the Lord (5:22).
- Husbands should lovingly surrender their own interests in behalf of their wives as Christ lovingly surrendered His interests in behalf of the church (5:25-28).
- Children are to obey their parents in the Lord (6:1).
- Servants are to be obedient to their masters as a means of serving the Lord (6:5-7).
- Masters are to show consideration for their servants out of deference to the Lord (6:9).

The message comes through clearly. Knowing God and His love (Eph. 3:14-21) means that we will lovingly and submissively serve others. As we trust God and obediently serve others, we will discover deep

within our own souls the righteousness, wisdom, and power of the love of Christ.

Obediently channeling God's love to others enables us to begin to experience the meaning of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3:14-19.

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

ONE WHO WAS CLOSE . . . YET SO FAR AWAY

It is possible to be close to Christ, yet so far from the life He offers. This was true even among the original 12 apostles of Christ. They had the most obvious opportunity for a personal relationship with Him. Yet even in that inner circle, there was one, probably the most trusted member of the group (for he kept the money), who never really had the kind of personal connection with Christ that we are talking about. Judas knew a lot about Jesus. He knew the Teacher's habits well enough to lead Jesus' enemies to a garden meeting place. He knew Christ well enough to betray Him with a kiss of greeting. But Judas didn't know Jesus as his Savior and Lord.

Trusted though he was, the "keeper of the money" never had the kind of personal, Christ-centered relationship with God that is available to us today. He is a troubling example of the kind of person Jesus talked about when He said:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction. . . . Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Mt. 7:13,22-23).

Let's make sure that we do not end up as one who presumed that to know *about* Christ is to know Him personally.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Someone has said, “Knowing Christ died—that’s history. Believing He died for me—that’s salvation.” A personal relationship with Christ begins at the moment of our salvation. Jesus referred to this event as a second birth (Jn. 3:3). Only when we are born spiritually into God’s family do we become His children, His friends, His servants, and members of His spiritual kingdom.

While we may not know exactly when this new life begins, we can understand the steps we need to take to begin this relationship.

FIRST STEP: We need to admit our lost condition.

All of us are born to the parents of a fallen humanity. We come into this world

separated from the life of God and absorbed with an interest in finding satisfaction, significance, and personal independence on our own terms. In the process, we don’t show a natural desire for the kind of God who made us for Himself (Rom. 3:11-12).

*Knowing Christ
died—that’s
history.
Believing He died
for me—that’s
salvation.*

While we may look good to ourselves as long as we measure ourselves by ourselves, Jesus Christ showed us our sin. He is the One who showed us what it means to have a personal relationship with God. He is also the One who said that He didn’t come into this world to help good people, but “to seek

and to save that which was lost” (Lk. 19:10).

The Bible says we all come into this physical world physically alive but spiritually dead—missing out on the quality of life for which God made us. The apostle Paul wrote, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), “There is none righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10), and “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

SECOND STEP: We need to know what God has done for us.

The word *gospel* means “good news.” The gospel of Christ is that God Himself loved us enough to send His own Son into this world to rescue us from ourselves and our sin (Jn. 1:1-4; 3:16).

The good news is that Jesus lived the quality of

life that God intended for us to live. Without flaw, He loved His heavenly Father with all of His heart, soul, and mind. Without fail, He showed us what it means to love our neighbor as ourselves.

***“I have not come
to call the
righteous, but
sinners to
repentance.”***
—Jesus (Lk. 5:32)

Then, to solve the problem of our lost relationship with His Father, Jesus died in our place, offering Himself as a perfect sacrifice to pay the price of sin. Because He was not only man but God our Creator as well (Jn. 1:1-14), His death was of infinite value. When He rose from the dead, He proved that He had died in our place to pay the price of

all sin—past, present, and future. With one sacrifice, He paid for the least—and the worst—of our sin.

THIRD STEP: **We need to personally believe and receive God's gift.**

While we all have earned the wages of spiritual death and separation from God (Rom. 6:23), no one can earn a relationship with God. It is a *gift* of His love and mercy—not a reward for our effort. No one is saved by trying to be good. We are saved by trusting in Christ.

This is why the apostle Paul could write, “For by grace [undeserved favor] you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9; see also Rom. 4:5; Ti. 3:5).

This may sound too simple. But it takes a

miracle of God's grace to break our pride and self-sufficiency. It takes God's Spirit to draw us into this kind of personal relationship. If this is your desire, this is how *you* can begin.

The actual words we say to God to receive this gift may vary (Lk. 18:13; 23:42-43). What is important is that we believe God enough to be able to say, “Father, I know I have sinned against You. I believe that Jesus is Your Son, that He died for my sins, and that He rose from the dead to prove it. Now I accept Your offer of eternal life. I accept Jesus as Your gift for my salvation.”

If this is the honest expression of your heart, welcome to God's family! By simple, childlike faith you have entered into a personal relationship with the One who made you and saved you for Himself.

POWER FOR LIVING

Every child of God is to grow spiritually. The following POWER acrostic will help you to remember the essential elements to spiritual progress.

Pray. Christians who want to grow, communicate with God through prayer. They express their gratitude to Him, confess their sins, and come to Him with their requests for themselves and for others. God promises to be near to all who come to Him in prayer (Ps. 145:18).

Obey. In John 14, Jesus said that our obedience to His commands is an indicator of our love for Him (vv.15,21,23). We can't do it in our own strength, however. That's one of the reasons He gave us the Holy Spirit (vv.16-17). As we yield to Him, the Spirit

provides the power to walk in obedience (Gal. 5:16-25).

Worship. As Christians, our devotion to God is to be continuous. Privately, we should worship God in our thoughts and prayers (Ps. 34:1).

Publicly, we should unite with fellow believers in a local assembly to bring praise to God (Ps. 111:1; Heb. 10:24-25).

Evangelize. The good news of the gospel is to be shared. As we tell others what Christ has done for us, we will find ourselves growing by spiritual leaps and bounds (Mt. 28:19-20).

Read. The most direct source of a Christian's spiritual growth is the Bible. It must be read regularly because it is our milk and strong meat (1 Pet. 2:2; Heb. 5:12-14). It tells us how to live (Ps. 119:105). It is God's word to us today.

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