

Knowing God

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[0 : 0 0] someone tell you all about the ocean waves. There you are, sitting in the comfort of your home, sipping a nice cup of Earl Grey or what have you. And they're telling you all about it, how high they get, how the waves are caused by the wind and the tides and how they break and spray and foam. You can learn a lot about the waves that way. But that's a different thing, isn't it, from actually stepping into the water yourself and feeling the tug of the undertow around your legs and seeing that wall of water rise before you and feeling it and its power as it knocks you down and you kind of tumble underwater, losing your bearings for just a moment, not quite sure which way is up. Now you don't just know about the waves anymore, do you? You really know them.

J.I. Packer in his classic book, *Knowing God*, says that it's the same thing that's true about God. There's a big difference between knowing about God and really knowing God.

And the sobering thing about that is that it's very possible that you and I are here today at church and maybe we know a lot about God, but we don't really know God.

It's possible you even call yourself a Christian and you know a lot about God, but you don't really know God. Now imagine knowing all about the nutritional facts of food and yet never eating and enjoying a meal.

That would be a pretty dull existence. But eventually you would starve. And spiritually the same thing is true of us as humans. And corporately that is true of us as a church.

[2 : 0 0] We need to not just know about God, we need to know God. So what does that really look like? Well, with that in mind, let's look at Exodus chapter 3 together.

That's page 46 in the Pew Bible. In Exodus chapter 3, Moses meets God.

And this encounter is one of the pivotal moments of Scripture that shows us what it means to really know God. Exodus chapter 3.

We'll look at verses 1 through 15. Let me read this for us. Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian.

And he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.

[3 : 0 7] He looked and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned. When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, Moses, Moses.

And he said, here I am. Then he said, do not come near. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.

And he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people, who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry, because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them, out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up, out of that land, to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

And now behold, the cry of the people of Israel, has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression, with which the Egyptians oppressed them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt.

[4 : 24] But Moses said to God, who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the children of Israel, out of Egypt? He said, but I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you. When you have brought the people, out of Egypt, you shall serve God, on this mountain.

Then Moses said to God, if I come to the people of Israel, and say to them, the God of your fathers, has sent me to you, and they ask me, what is his name, what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, I am who I am.

And he said, say this to the people of Israel, I am has sent me to you. God also said to Moses, say this to the people of Israel, the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.

This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered, throughout all generations. So Exodus chapters three and four, tell the story, of the call of Moses.

And there are really two interlocking parts, of this story. In the first part, the part we just read, God reveals himself, and his call to Moses. And in the second part, God wrestles with that call, or Moses wrestles with that call.

[5 : 40] Next week, we're going to consider Moses' wrestling, his doubts, his fears. But today, we want to just sit, on this first part, this first part of God's revealing. And the beauty of this text, is that God doesn't just tell us, what he's like, he actually shows us.

And he shows us, verse two, through a flame of fire, out of the midst, of a bush. Now the burning bush, brings together, two of the most important, realities, of what it means, to really know God.

Two realities, that we think, are so far apart, in our mind, and yet God gives this, divine picture, of what he's like, and brings them both together. And the first thing, is God's radical holiness.

Fire. Fire is an image, God uses again, and again in Exodus, to convey the reality, of his presence. The burning bush, here in chapter three, the pillar of fire, that leads the people, out of Egypt, in chapter 13.

The fire on Mount Sinai, in chapter 20. The fire in the tabernacle, in chapter 40. From beginning to end, when God shows up, in Exodus, he shows up in fire. Now I think it's hard, for us in the 21st century, to really appreciate, fire.

[7 : 05] With the flick of a switch, we can light up a room. Right? Our lives are inundated, by glowing screens, on our phones, and tablets, and laptops.

But imagine for a second, a world without screens, and a world without light bulbs, and without switches, with no electricity at all. Imagine a world, lit only by fire.

And then you start to appreciate, the power of the image. What else is like, this thing, that we call fire? Fire has no form.

It's a material, you cannot grasp. And yet you can feel it, and you can see it, and it gives off light and heat. Fire has power, to mesmerize us with its beauty, or to destroy us, with its flames, and yet it has no perceivable weight, no substance.

This is a very strange thing. Of course, Moses had seen plenty of fire, in his lifetime. Right? But what caught his attention here, was the fact that the fire, was self-sustaining.

[8 : 21] The bush, wasn't really contributing, to the fire. Was it? Otherwise, that bush, would have been burned up. Unlike any other fire, Moses had ever seen, this one was there, of its own accord, and it needed, nothing.

to keep going. And right there, we start to see, the real, radical depth, of God's holiness.

You see, holiness, technically means separation. Something holy, is set apart. In the case of God, holiness, means that he is set apart, from everything, that he has made.

In other words, there is an, infinite distinction, between the creator, and the creature. Think about it, every, created thing, everything, that we interact with, is dependent, on something else.

The book, is held up, by the tabletop. The tabletop, is held up, by the legs. The legs are held up, by the floor. The floor, is held up, by the beams, and the foundation, and on, and on, and on, and on, everything, contingent, on everything else, dependent, and finite.

[9 : 39] But not God. The fire burns, and burns, and burns, and needs no help, from the bush. No help at all.

And what God, is showing Moses, through the bush, about his, absolute, infinite, holiness, he then tells him, again, through his revelation, of his name, in verse 14.

I am, who I am. That's a very, mysterious name, isn't it? I bet no one's, introduced themselves, to you that way, have they? Okay. You see, names in the ancient world, were thought to convey, a person's nature.

Names in the ancient Near East, were sort of a handle, on the essence, of a person. So here, in this moment, when Moses is moving, from knowing about God, to really knowing God, what name, would Moses, know God by?

What handle, would there be, to grasp him? In Genesis, there are a lot of names, that God gives, for himself. What would God, give to Moses here?

[10 : 57] Would it be, God Almighty, like he showed to Abraham? Or God Most High, like he showed to Melchizedek? Or, the God who sees me, like Hagar, or the God of Bethel, like Jacob?

No. In this, pivotal, moment, when God, is revealing, to Moses, who he really is, he says, I am, who I am.

Or simply, I, am. Or in verse 15, which is sort of a version, of the same, the Lord. All of which, communicates the fact, that God, is eternally, unchangingly, self-sufficient, and sovereign, above and beyond all else, without peer, and without compare, completely, self-determining.

Can you imagine, what that is like? You and I are determined, from the moment, we are conceived, our language, our nationality, all of it, thrust upon us, as we come into the world, and yet for God, utter freedom.

You'll notice, in verse 15, that the Lord, is spelled, with all capital letters, that's not a weird, typing glitch, in your Bible.

[12 : 33] It's important, to know what that means, when you're reading, the Old Testament, because it's an important thing. When Lord, is spelled, with all capital letters, it's sort of a stand-in, for what we sometimes, call the divine name, which in Hebrew, which in the Hebrew text, is actually just four consonants.

Yud, He, Vav, He. Sometimes you'll see, the divine name, referred to as the, Tetragrammaton, which sounds really, mysterious, and spooky, doesn't it?

But it actually, just means, four letters, Tetragrammaton. It's a bit redundant. In the King James, these four letters, were sometimes, translated, Jehovah, which you can sort of see, from Yuh, Heh, Vav, Heh, Yeh, Ho, Vah.

That translation, unfortunately, is actually based, on a misunderstanding, of how the Hebrew vowels work, in that name. You see, the ancient Hebrew manuscripts, they only contain consonants.

That's how you write Hebrew, just with the consonants. And then later, scribes went back, and they sort of pointed in, all the little vowels, that you were supposed to say. But that happened a lot later, sometime around the 9th century A.D.

[13 : 46] Scribes eventually went in, and put in all the vowel points, in this just consonant text. But meanwhile, down through the generations, the divine name, was considered so holy, by the people of God, by the Jews, that they wouldn't even pronounce it, when they were reading the Bible.

Instead of trying to pronounce, the divine name, when reading scripture, they would just substitute, the word Adonai, which means Lord. Today, if you have some Jewish friends, they might, if you're reading the Bible with them, say Hashem, which just means the name, as an act of reference.

So the reality is, we're actually not sure, how these four consonants, would have originally been produced. Because in all the Hebrew manuscripts, what the scribes did, was they took the vowels, for Adonai, and they just wrote it right in there, over those four consonants.

So whenever you hit it, reading the Hebrew, you just say, Adonai. At least my Jewish Hebrew teacher, told me to do it that way. Most scholars think, Yahweh is close, but we can't be sure.

So if you ever hear Yahweh, that's sort of an attempt, at the divine name. And when the Old Testament, was translated into Greek, the Septuagint, the divine name, was simply translated, you guessed it, with the Greek word, kurios, which means Lord.

[15 : 08] So our English translations, just sort of follow the same practice, and use Lord. But they put it in all caps, as a signal to us, that there it is. There's that special, divine name, that God revealed, in this very special moment, to Moses.

But I think the important thing, to notice, about the name, is that it's connected, to the I am, of verse 14. It's a way of expressing, that almost unspeakable truth.

The name Lord, is an expression, on the one hand, of God's radical, holiness, and sovereignty, and self-sufficiency, that he's totally unique.

The very ground, of all existence himself. And what that means, if you're here, and you're kind of, exploring Christianity, you might think, oh my goodness, what are we talking about, right now?

Here's sort of, where the rubber, starts to hit the road. What this means, is that when Christians, or when people, are reading the Bible, when we say God, we actually mean, something very, infinitely different, than God's.

[16 : 21] You see, the gods, of Moses' day, like the gods, of the Greeks, and Romans, later in history, yes, were believed, to be powerful.

Some of them, even believed, to be immortal. But at the end of the day, the gods, were very much, part of the whole package, of the universe, we would say. The gods, contended with themselves, and they contended, with humanity, but they were inside, that cause, and effect world, of space, and time, and energy.

But as opposed, to those very, inside the system, sort of gods, the God that Moses met, at the burning bush, was the Lord.

I am who I am. The holy, and completely, transcendent one, who rather than being, a part of the system, of the universe, rather than being, one of those many, supposed little G gods, those little tribal deities, is something, totally different.

He is the infinite, ground of all that is, the creator, and sustainer, of everything, and everyone. one. And that's why God, in this encounter, gives Moses, a solemn warning, in verse 15.

[17 : 48] Don't come near. I'm here, but don't come any closer. Take your sandals, off your feet, for the place, on which you are standing, is holy ground.

Now of course, there was nothing, inherently holy, about Mount Horeb, or Mount Sinai, as it will be called, later in chapter 19. Rather, what we have here, is that this spot, is being made holy, because the holy one, the Lord, had made his presence, known there.

And God tells Moses, to take off his sandals, which was a sign, of reverence, and respect, in the ancient world, and to not come, any closer. And then God says, I am the God, of your father, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob.

And when Moses hears, that this, is the one, the one he had heard about, but now, was right here, in front of his face, he falls down, and hides his face, because he's afraid, to look at God.

Friends, knowing, God, first of all, means knowing God, in his radical holiness. And we have to ask ourselves, do we have that sort of reverence, before the majesty, and holiness of God, that Moses shows here.

[19 : 13] And we have to admit, that we don't really know God, unless we do. Of course, biblical reverence, is not the sort of fear, that you have, before an erratic, or harsh tyrant, some sort of, untrustworthy, human, ruler.

Rather, this is the sort of fear, that you have, when you're standing, on the observation deck, of Niagara Falls, and the immensity of it, and the power, and the beauty, makes you tremble, as six million, cubic feet of water, roar over the crest, of the falls, every single minute.

Too often, I think we have, a very domesticated, and sort of, chummy, view of God. There's no tremble, and there's no awe.

Rather than God, being a lightning bolt, splitting the night sky, in ferocious, incomparable beauty, for us, God is a lightning bug, that we try to catch, and keep in our little, coffee cans, thinking we better, poke some holes in the top, or else he might not, get enough air, and then what would he do?

This is what you do, when you grow up, in rural, upstate New York. And friends, the reality is, our lives suffer for it.

[20 : 39] Our lives suffer, for having such a chummy, domesticated view of God, because our lightning bug God, can't liberate us, from our fears, and our anxieties.

And our lightning bug God, can't rattle us, out of the cages, of our selfishness, and self-centeredness. Absent of God's holiness, we put ourselves, in the center of our universe, and then we wonder why, the planets start to spin, out of control.

You know, sometimes I think about, the beginning of, Exodus chapter 3, and I think about, the beginning of, Dante's Inferno. In the middle of life's way, I came to myself, and where did I find myself?

In a dark wood, and the straight way, had been lost. And there's Moses, in the back water, of nowhere, shepherding his father-in-law's sheep, wondering, what has become of my life?

Translation, he's in Idaho, working for his dad's, used car shop. Nothing wrong with used cars, or shops, or Idaho. But it's not where Moses thought, he was going to end up.

[21 : 54] And he comes to himself, and he thinks, what on earth, am I doing here? What's my life all about? What purpose, what direction do I have?

Probably feeling like, he blew it too. And how does God show up to him? Differently than we would expect at first. At first, God doesn't come in comfort, he comes in holiness.

He comes in such blazing ferocity, that Moses for a second, has to stop thinking about himself, and start to put God, in God's place.

We don't need the lightning bug, we need the lightning. We need the burning bush, we need the consuming fire. Friends, we need the Lord. But the radical holiness of God, isn't the only thing God shows us, in the burning bush.

We also see God's radical love. Do you remember the scene, that famous scene, in C.S. Lewis's line, The Witch and the Wardrobe, when Lucy is in the house, of Mr. Beaver, and she asks if Aslan is safe, and Mr. Beaver replies, safe?

[23 : 17] Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. And then what does he say? But he's good. The burning bush shows us, not just the radical holiness of God, but his radical love.

How? Read again. The bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. The blazing holiness of God, was present in power, and in glory, and in purity.

But that bush wasn't destroyed. And the bigger surprise of all, Moses wasn't destroyed either. You see, that's just it.

That bush should have been turned to dust, but it wasn't. The miracle isn't just that the fire keeps going, that's God's holiness, but also that the bush keeps standing, and that's God's love.

You see, the same thing in verse 15, with the divine name. He's the Lord, the self-existent creator, and sustainer of everything, of all that was, and is, and ever will be. He's not some tribal deity, some lowercase g God.

[24 : 35] He's the Lord of creation, for whom all nations, and all molecules, and all planets, will eventually bow in submission.

But at the same time, in the same breath, God says, I'm also the Lord, not just of creation, but of a covenant. He's bound himself to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

A tiny little family, in a tiny little city, a tiny little group, of exiles and immigrants.

God stoops to be known, to the world, to carry out his purposes for the world, through a particular human family. How stunning.

In verses 7 through 9, God tells Moses then, that he sees, he sees the affliction, and oppression of his people, and he hears, he hears their cry, and he knows, he knows their suffering, and he has come down, to deliver them.

[25 : 53] Look again, at the end of verse 7, I know, their sufferings. Funny that word, know.

Not merely, I know about their sufferings, but I know their sufferings. Isn't that a curious thing? How could the Lord, the eternal, self-sufficient God, radical, and transcendent holiness, know, their suffering?

How could a fire, that burns, of its own accord, know what it's like, to flicker, and go out?

For Moses, that will remain a mystery, his whole life. But friends, here's the shocking thing, of the gospel, that what was a mystery, for Moses, has now, been made clear, in Jesus.

Because, 1500 years later, after the burning bush, Jesus came. And on one occasion, he tried to convince, the religious leaders, that he was the Christ, and finally he says, truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.

[27 : 16] And that claim, was so bold, and so forthright, that the religious leaders, the only thing they could do, was immediately, pick up stones, and try to stone him, for blasphemy.

Because they knew, that Jesus was claiming, to be the Lord God of Moses, the great I am, the eternal, and self-existent God, in the flesh.

As an aside, don't let anyone, try to tell you, that Jesus never claimed, he was God. But earlier, in that same chapter, of the gospel of John, Jesus says this, when you have lifted up, the son of man, then you will know, that I am he.

Or more literally, then you will know, that I am. For Jesus, the cross was the place, where we would see, most clearly, that he was, the Lord.

Because it was there, that he could display, his holiness, and at the same time, truly know, our sufferings, in love. Moses saw the bush, burning, yet it was not consumed.

[28 : 41] But here is the mystery, of mysteries friends. At the cross, on another tree, the Lord was consumed. when our sin, had made the holiness of God, our greatest threat, in love, God in Christ, absorbed our sin.

He was consumed, so that we never have to be. And that is why, the eternal God, can say, 1500 years, before the fact, I know their sufferings.

Because the lion, is also the lamb. And here is the thing, when you know God, in his holiness, and his love, something happens.

If you know God, in his radical holiness, you will bow before him, in rightful fear and awe. But when you see, not just that, but also his suffering love, for you, then you'll have a mission.

Then, you're called. The burning bush, was the site, of Moses' call. Of the reorientation, and repurposing, of his entire life.

[30 : 14] When God showed him, his holiness, and love, then Moses went, from knowing about God, to knowing God. And knowing God, meant that he couldn't, stay the same. And when you and I, see them both, you won't stay the same either.

And to you, just like God said to Moses, he says, come, I will send you. Very interesting. God at first says, don't come near.

And then he says, come, and I'll send you. Come. Three final things, and then we go to the table. First, if you're starting to see the radical holiness, and love of God displayed, in Jesus Christ, maybe for the first time this morning, then here comes the call of God, to you, to place your trust in Christ, to receive him as Savior and Lord, and to become a Christian.

You see, friends, ordinarily, God doesn't usually meet us, at burning bushes, or speak to us in audible voices, but he speaks to us, through the preaching of his word. God still exposes our need for salvation, and compels us personally, and individually, to trust him, through the proclamation of the gospel.

And he still calls our names, and he still wants to enter into, personal relationship with us. Come, God says to Moses in verse 10. And he's saying the same thing to you this morning, by name, come.

[31 : 54] Second, knowing God, in both his holiness and love, compels us, to become servants of the people of God. God sends Moses, where? Back to Egypt, to be the means that he will use, to liberate his people.

Now, of course, we have to admit, Moses had a unique role, in redemptive history, but still today, God sends us, to build up his church. We're called, to be sent, into our lives, with renewed purpose, and courage, and love, for the sake of God's people.

And to share Christ, with those, who aren't yet God's people. You see, you can't truly know, God's holiness and love, and remain indifferent, to the well-being, of God's church.

And that pattern, runs throughout scripture. Do you remember Isaiah? Isaiah has a vision, of God's holiness, in the temple. And like Moses, he is undone.

And then God, comes to him, with the coal of his love, and touches his lips, and then he responds, to God's call to be sent. And Peter, goes out on a boat, with Jesus. And Peter, catches a glimpse, of Jesus's holiness, in this miraculous, catch of fish.

[33 : 05] And Peter, falls down at his feet, undone. And then Jesus, speaks a word of mercy, and sends him out, on a mission. Knowing God, will change our vantage point, on everything that we do, and particularly, how we view the people, that he loves.

And we will want, to love them too. Third and last, this calling, is for everyone. Yes, Moses was unique, in a sense, but in the light, of the New Testament, we know, that every member, of the family, of Christ, has a role to play.

Aren't we often, tempted to ask, with Moses in verse 11, but who am I? And what's God's reply? I'll be with you.

I'll send you, and I'll be with you. That sounds familiar, doesn't it? In Matthew 28, when the risen Lord, Jesus, stands before his disciples, he says, go, and I'll be with you.

So friends, there's a role for you to play. Find your place, in the family. Find your place, in the mission. And here's the beauty of it. God's holy.

[34 : 30] He doesn't need you. God didn't need Moses. But God wants you, just like he wanted Moses. And he wants you, not just to know about him, but to know him, and to heed his call, and to be a part, of his mission, in the world.

Let's pray. Father, as we come to the table, would you come, by your Holy Spirit, to make these things real, to our hearts?

God, we confess, we are so comfortable, knowing about you. Would you come, and would you break up, the hard ground, of our hearts, with your holiness, and with your love, so that we might know you.

We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.