

Knowing through knowing

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[0 : 00] readings. Now, this evening I have several readings, but I'm going to read just two out of Joshua. So, it's the sixth book in the Bible, so it comes after Deuteronomy and before Judges.

And we're in Judges chapter four. Joshua, yes, you're correct. Yeah, yeah, yeah, sorry. Actually, just for that, can you turn to Lamentations? Forget it. Hezekiah, turn to Hezekiah. No, okay. Okay, so Joshua chapter four, we're going to read verses five, six, and seven, and then we're going to read verses 23 and 24. And then as we get into the body of the message this evening, we're going to read other verses that we're going to pick up on that correlate to the message this evening. So, Joshua chapter four, God's people are entering into the promised land, the land promised to them by God, of course. Here they are doing it. And chapter four, verse five says this, and Joshua said to them, pass on before the ark of the Lord your God into the midst of the Jordan and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder, according to the number of tribes of the people of Israel. That this may be a sign among you. When your children ask in time to come, what do these stones mean to you? Then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark and the covenant of the Lord. When it passed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off so that these stones shall be to the people of Israel a memorial forever. And then it goes on to say that God's people did exactly what Joshua asked. And then here's a further explanation of the reason for doing that in verses 23 and 24. For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you passed over, as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we passed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever. Well, I pray that God would add his blessing upon his word and upon our life.

heart of the Lord your people. And we'll come back to that after this next... Thank you.

Well, as we begin this evening, I want to sort of preface the message by saying that, or rather asking an indirect question, rhetorical question, that how can one message address so many different people in the congregation of God's people?

[4 : 05] Now, how can one message do that? You know, if there was a message on the creation, we can understand that we could all benefit from learning of the creation again.

But other parts of the Bible, how can one message benefit us all? Well, there's two ways of looking at it. Number one is Martin Lloyd-Jones was once asked, you never ever preached on that? And Lloyd-Jones looked back at him and says, no, I did. It just so happened to be when you weren't here. And the other thing was, if I haven't, I will get to it. So, it's impossible for everything to be covered all at once, but it's also possible for it to be covered and for you not to hear it.

But this message this evening, I think, in particular, will address us all. Because it really highlights genuine Christian experience or the lack of experience, genuine Christian faith or the lack of faith, and genuine doubt or perhaps the struggles of doubting.

So, the message this evening is about knowing God through faith and doubt. And I haven't got that incorrect, okay? We know God through faith and doubt.

[5 : 29] Now, most of us would say, well, you know, that seems like a little offbeat message.

You've got it the wrong way around. Don't you mean that we know God in faith and we don't know God if we doubt?

So, we're going to begin here in Joshua 4, and then we're going to go to other parts of the Bible later on. So, as we begin, there's a couple of things that I want to point out.

There's a difference between doubting God and doubting in God. And let me try and address it briefly. So, a non-Christian, you could say, would doubt that God exists.

An atheist would doubt that God exists. That's one way to doubt, not to doubt God, but just to doubt. You could doubt that a number of things don't exist or whether or not they exist because either you can see them or you've not experienced them or whatever they may be.

Now, that is one area of doubt. The other area of doubt is the kind of doubt that we believers have in that we doubt the God we know, okay? So, atheists doubt that the God that we know doesn't even exist, or does he?

[6 : 40] There's their doubt. But their doubt is, no, we really do believe in God, but now I'm struggling. I'm struggling to deal with my doubt in the one true God that I know is real, okay?

Why do I doubt something, someone rather, that I know is real and has proved himself to be real on a number of occasions? So, when I speak of doubt this evening, that's the kind of doubt I'm addressing.

I'm not addressing the atheistic doubt of I don't know whether there is or isn't. I'm addressing the believer's doubt of what do I do, knowing that I know the truth, but doubting that very truth.

I want to address us. I want to address these two factors. So, you will notice by our Bible readings this evening that what God does is what God wants us to know.

Well, to put it a slightly different way, God is only ever known by what he does, okay? If God didn't do something, then we wouldn't know about it because God hadn't done it.

[7 : 48] If God didn't reveal himself as the creator, we wouldn't know him to be the creator. If God didn't reveal himself as the Messiah, we wouldn't know him to be the Messiah.

God has to do something first in order for us to know anything about him. It's impossible to find anything out about God if God hasn't actually revealed that about himself.

We can't get there. It's not like trying to get a secret out of someone where they haven't told you and you keep pestering and pestering and pestering and then suddenly they tell you. God doesn't work like that.

The only thing you can ever know about God is something that he's already told you, something that he has written down in his word.

And so there are several ways of understanding God and therefore there are several errors to understanding God. I could address a few of these, but we're going to get straight to the point.

[8 : 47] The one here that I want to address is that there is a difference between knowing and knowing as in experiencing. And the difference is spout out here with these stones that are laid here at Jordan.

God tells Joshua to tell God's people to collect these stones, to pile them up so that they would be a reminder, so that they would be a memorial, so that when people look back on them and they say, what are those stones there for?

The older generation who put the stones there can say, oh, we put them there for this reason. This is why they are there. But notice what Joshua has to say in verses 23 and 24.

He words it ever so slightly, carefully rather, so that we would understand the distinction being made. This is what is meant to be understood.

For the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you. For you. This is the present generation. This is what they have experienced.

[9 : 57] They passed over the Jordan on dry land, all by themselves, but all by themselves in the presence of God. Until you passed over as the Lord your God did to the Red Sea.

Notice the change which he dried up for us until we passed over. Now, why does Joshua move from one way of addressing the issue to another way?

Well, how many people actually entered into the promised land from the original? Joshua. Two. Hardly any.

In fact, none in comparison. But Joshua is one of those ones that came out of Egypt who experienced crossing the Red Sea on dry land. And none of these people who have crossed the Jordan had the Red Sea experience.

Okay? We learned that in Deuteronomy several weeks back. They didn't get to experience that. This is the second generation of people. However, this generation is now moving into Jordan.

[11 : 03] God's done the same thing for them. It's a different experience, but it's the same type of thing. Joshua knows both crossings. These people here know only the one.

So what's the lesson? What's actually being addressed here? Well, it's pretty straightforward, but here's the complication. Faith is produced in God's people by one means and by one means only.

The Word of God. Faith is produced in God's people by one means and by one means of God's people by one means and by one means of the word. If that happens to me, then I believe. But that is never the case.

And biblically, that can never be proven to be the case because God has said that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word. To put this really strongly, faith doesn't come any other way. It doesn't come via experience. It doesn't come via experience. Now, I'm going to draw your attention to a verse that seems to indicate that, but the very first following it will indicate the very opposite.

[12 : 09] Faith comes by God's word. And sometimes, and only sometimes, or depending on what it is, it is accompanied with experience.

Okay? So faith comes by God's word, and sometimes it is accompanied by experience. Doubt, on the other hand, can only exist where there is a gap.

I want you to remember this. Doubt can only ever exist in the believer's life where there is a gap. And a gap can only exist in two areas.

The one area is a gap in your knowledge of God, and the other area is a gap in your experience of God. If you're a Christian who doubts, you're doubting in one of those two areas.

Okay? If you're a Christian who's struggling with God, the reason you're struggling, the reason you're doubting, is because there is a gap either in your knowledge of God, or there is a gap in your experience of God.

[13 : 06] Okay? Because when those two are filled in, as we will see, there is no doubt. There's lots of faith, but there is no doubt. Let me give you an illustration. When Jesus got in the boat with his disciples, it says in Mark, very calmly, that the storm abruptly, but Jesus was asleep with his head on a pillow.

Which is another way of saying, okay, he was comfortable. Okay? He's fast asleep, head on the pillow. And the disciples want to wake Jesus up because they are afraid that they're going to drown. And they wake Jesus up, and you know how the story goes. Jesus awakes, and he calms the wind and the waves. And he rebukes them also for having little faith.

But then you get to see why they have little faith. Because their question, when they look at Jesus, is this. Who is this? Now, you would think by that stage they would know who it is.

But they go, who is this that can calm the wind and the waves? In other words, they don't know. They don't. The reason for their behavior in the boat, the reason they are shaking Jesus to wake him up, is because they don't know who it is that they're waking up.

[14 : 20] The reason they have the doubt that they have is because they don't know who it is that can calm the wind and the waves. In other words, they've experienced everything else about Jesus, but their knowledge is incomplete.

They don't believe that they have the Lord of all creation over the wind and the waves. They don't understand that creation itself cannot destroy its creator.

They don't understand that God in the boat is in perfect control all the time. But instead, Jesus rebukes them for their lack of faith.

And their lack of faith exists in their gap of their lack of knowledge. They don't know who it is. Here's the other reason for doubt existing, and this is the reason that we're going to concentrate on this evening.

You doubt God because you lack experience. Not experience in the Christian life, but the experience that you think you should have that should contribute, or at least coexist with everything else in your Christian life.

[15 : 27] Perhaps it's an experience that you think you should have, and you don't have. And here's why it happens. Because there are plenty of people in the Bible that get to experience God.

Okay, the crossing of the Red Sea on dry land. The crossing of the Jordan on dry land. And we think, well, I'm a believer.

Why can't I have the same type of experience as they did? Wouldn't my belief in God be a whole lot better? Wouldn't my faith in God be a whole lot stronger?

And so we end up trying to seek the same experience. Not a Red Sea crossing or a Jordan crossing. What we're trying to seek is the experience that comes along with faith in God.

And when we don't get the experiences that we think God should give us, what do we do? We doubt. And we doubt for a couple of other reasons, because we compare our experiences with

other people's experiences.

[16:29] In other words, here I am as a Christian, just like them as a Christian, and they get to have all of this and experience God's blessing in all this way, and here I am with none of it, then I'm going to, is God treating me differently?

The reason we doubt in God is not because we doubt the God that we believe in, but we doubt because we don't have the same experiences that he does. Or we doubt because we don't have the same experiences that she does.

And we know that if God wants humans to flourish, which he does, then the one thing that we want is the experiences that come with that human flourishing.

And this is made worse by plenty of the people in the Bible who have experience after experience, and some of them are deep-rooted. Women who long to have children, who don't seem to have any, and then all of a sudden God blesses and they have a child.

And here we are, a woman, a Christian woman, longing to have a child, and we can. Right? What's going to happen? Well, God did it for her.

[17:37] Why can't he do it for me? Right? That kind of doubt doesn't doubt in God's existence. It isn't even doubting in the power of God. The challenging is the lack of experience.

Not the lack of experience, but the lack of, you're not doing for me what I know you have done for others. And that causes us then to doubt in God.

So doubt in your life as a believer will always exist in one of two areas or both at the same time. In the gap in your knowledge or the gap in the experience that you think you should have.

That's when doubt creeps in. God isn't doing for me what he's done for them. And I look back on the Bible and I know God you can do it because you did it for him.

You did it for him. You did it for her. And this person and that person. You did it for all the... But have you forgotten about me? And what about me? So we understand that we're not doubting in God's sovereignty.

[18:39] Even the psalmist who cry out against God to do something because God isn't doing something is still crying out to God to do something because he knows he can.

The psalmist is doubting God, not the God who exists, but doubting God's response to him as one of his children.

And that's why doubt is destructive. Because it hurts. It actually causes us to think that God thinks differently about me than he does about you.

It actually causes me to really believe that God is treating me differently than he is treating you. It even causes me to believe that God favours you and loves you more than he does me.

Not because there's a lack of my knowledge of God here, but actually because there's a lack in what I'm experiencing compared to what you're experiencing. And my heart and yours can so quickly turn against God.

[19:51] Doubt has a crippling capacity of being able to turn us on God. So let's go back to these stones and why they are so important.

There are two things to notice here. That the stones can only transfer one thing, they cannot transfer two. They can transfer the knowledge of what God has done, but they cannot transfer the experience of what God has done to you.

They can tell you everything about how God, with wonder-working power, got these people across the Jordan on dry land.

They can transfer that knowledge across to you so that you can know how great God is. But the one thing it cannot transfer across is the Jordan crossing experience. The one thing it cannot transfer across is the Red Sea crossing experience.

Every child in the future can learn about what God did and can learn about what God did for their parents and look how good and powerful God was towards them. All of that can be transferred onto a younger generation, but the one thing that cannot be transferred onto the younger generation is the experience of the crossing.

[21:09] They don't get to enjoy that. Now, they may get experiences that their parents didn't have, but that's not the point here. The point here is to understand what can be transferred and what can't be.

God doesn't transfer experience. He gives new experiences to new believers and to different believers throughout different generations, but he gives, most importantly, the same knowledge to

all.

I want you to recognize that. The stones are to convey something about God, something about what God does to all people of all generations.

You're to look at this and learn something from it. When God's people, in Exodus 17, this is after the Red Sea crossing, didn't have any water to drink.

The first thing that they said was this, is God going to do something about it or not? Is God in our midst or not? Not, Lord, we don't have any water.

[22 : 17] Can you help us? We know that you're able to do it. No, they don't say, Lord, please give us water. The first thing that they say is, is God with us or not? Is God on my side or not?

Now, they ought to know from all the past experience and all the past knowledge that God is on their side. But you'll notice they're not denying God.

They're not denying God's power. They're not denying God's existence. They're not even denying how good God has been in the past. What they're asking is, is it going to continue?

Are you going to do for me today like you did for me way back then? Are you going to do for me tomorrow like you did for that person years ago?

Because this is my stumbling block. I'm not doubting for a moment that you can do it. I'm asking you whether or not you're going to do it for me. In fact, when I was sat under Professor Donald MacLeod for years, it felt like a lot longer than it actually was.

[23 : 23] Perhaps I shouldn't say that because he's probably one of the best theologians in the world. And, you know, he's still good and he's superb. He says that Scottish people have a particular type of doubt that only seems to exist in Scotland.

I had to take his word for this because, as you are aware, I'm Cornish. You'll get there one day. It's called the glorification. I'm joking.

And he said this, that Scottish people don't doubt that God can do all of these things. And don't doubt that God can do it for you. But they do doubt that he'll do it for them.

The Scottish people seem to have this Scottish reserve that causes them to doubt. That will God do it for me? They're very, very positive that God will do it for you.

They will be very, very positive that God can do it for anybody in the world. But the thing that they struggle with the most is whether or not God will do it for them. Is he right? When Jeremiah had an issue with God, he actually went one step further.

[24 : 43] And he was asking God whether or not God was being deceitful with him. Whether or not God was a father of intermittent reinforcement.

And you know what intermittent reinforcement is, don't you? It was first practiced on a chicken. And a scientist decided that they'd put a little seed out.

And every time the chicken pressed the button, he would get a seed. And this carried on. And then once he didn't put a seed out. And the chicken pressed again. No seed.

Pressed again. And after about 15, he put a seed out and he pressed. The next time, the chicken only pressed twice and he got a seed. And there was this intermittent reinforcement. So what do you think the chicken did? Well, because the chicken didn't know when he was going to get a seed and when he didn't get a seed, he'd just keep pressing the button until he eventually did.

This is very similar with parents with children in supermarkets. Can I have those sweets? Not today. Well, yesterday I did.

[25 : 48] Well, not today. Okay, you can. And then you go to the shops tomorrow. Right? They've already figured out that if I ask twice, I'm going to get it. But they also know that tomorrow I might need to ask three or four times.

And why do you think children keep going on and on and on and on and on? Because you've programmed them, right? Because you give it to them sometimes and you don't give it to them other times, you've programmed them not to try and figure it out, but to keep asking until they receive.

Can I have it? Can I have it? Can I have it? Can I have it? Because they know eventually that when they asked it last time, they got it. It's just a question now of how many more times do I need to ask before I get it?

And Jeremiah is saying this to God. Are you a God of intermittent reinforcement? He said, I don't know when I'm going to get it from you and when I'm not going to get it from you. So do you bring me to that place where I just keep asking and asking and asking and asking?

And I'm so afraid not to ask because the next time it might just be the very time when I could get it. All right, the 998th time and I did 997th.

[26 : 55] Are you the God that would have given it to me if I only did it one more time? And you haven't given it to me because I haven't done it. Are you like that God? I mean, Jeremiah was pretty heated.

Are you dealing with me in a deceitful way, God? And no, God is not like that. He's not like that at all.

There is no intermittent reinforcement. When God asked his people to set up these stones, it was for his people to remember very specific things about God.

And the two things are this. What God does, not just what God can do. And sometimes in the Christian faith and in the Christian church, Christians are so preoccupied with what God can do that they forget to realize that that's not actually the issue.

The issue is what does God do? Because God, by definition, can do anything that he likes. But it's what God does do which is the issue.

[28 : 07] What is God doing now? So here's, as we sort of come to a conclusion, as it were, here's two New Testament examples.

In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus is preaching. And as he's preaching, he's telling his disciples, but of course the crowd that are listening, that God cares for everyone.

That God cares for you disciples in particular. And the way that Jesus frames this is by saying, look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap. But God, your Father, cares for them.

He gives them food. Jesus then says, observe the birds of the air and then understand that you are way more valuable than these birds. God loves you more than he does the birds of the air.

You were made in the image of God and birds were not. And God loves you more because you're a reflector of his image. And because of that, and because of that very reason alone, work it out for yourself, that if God provides for birds, then God is surely going to provide for you.

[29 : 14] Okay, I understand that. But that's not where the doubt creeps in. The doubt creeps in with when he doesn't. In other words, what I'm experiencing now seems to be opposite to the truth, Jesus, that you're proclaiming.

Either that or what I'm experiencing is sufficient. It is exactly what I need. I'm just being greedy.

Or I'm just wanting more. Or I'm just wanting what they have. Which is it? Well, I'm back to the Jeremiah problem. I'm back to the God's people problem. I can't quite figure it out.

But Jesus is quite adamant that if God cares for birds, and you are more valuable than birds, God is going to care for you.

Despite what your experiences are telling you in the moment. Because when we feel, even if it isn't true, we only have to feel that we're not experiencing what we should for us to doubt in God.

[30 : 21] Here's a second example. In John 20, Thomas misses out on seeing Jesus. And Thomas says this.

That unless I get to put my hand in the side of Jesus, I am never going to believe. And it's quite clear from this that Thomas' doubt is caused by the lack of experience.

He doesn't get to experience the things that the other disciples did. He doesn't get to share in the same experience. He doesn't get to have it. But it's so bad that he effectively says, I'm not going to believe unless I do.

I want you to think about that for a moment, just in worldly terms, or at least people in the world.

How many people in the world say the very same words as Thomas?

Unless I get to experience God, I'm not going to believe. Unless I get to do what Thomas, I'm not going to believe. And here's the thing. John knows and Jesus knows that he's not going to turn up for everyone.

[31 : 26] Jesus isn't going to turn up for everyone else like he did for Thomas. It just so happens that Jesus turns up for Thomas, says to Thomas, do the very thing that you think you need to do in order to believe.

And then says to Thomas, blessed are those who have never seen yet believed. Now that's crucial. We'll get to that in a moment. But I want to point out just briefly, if I can, that that kind of doubt, that kind of doubt due to the lack of experiences, actually got Thomas to say, well, I'll never believe unless it happens.

So this idea that experiences aren't important is just not true. They are incredibly important. But as John rightly points out, there's something even more important that leads to experience. It's not the same one, but experience. John knows that Jesus will not turn up and do that for everyone. Jesus equally knows that he will not turn up and do that for everyone. Hence why Jesus says, blessed are those who have never seen yet believed. And this is what John says. The reason I've written this gospel is so that you may believe.

[32 : 41] He doesn't say the reason I have written this gospel is so that this is what you need to believe. He doesn't say this is why I have written this gospel so that you have something to believe.

No, what he says is striking. That what I have written is so that you may believe. This is what John is saying about the word of God.

That to believe the word of God. To truly believe the word of God. Is to be blessed in such a way where it is equivalent to sharing in the same experience that Thomas did.

That to believe the word of God is to be blessed by God in such a way. That you get to have an experience of equal validity.

It doesn't mean that you get to touch the side of Jesus. However, what it does mean is that you are blessed in such a way for believing the word of God. That it will lead to a blessed experience.

[33 : 44] In other words, you don't miss out simply by believing the word of God. In the same way that God's people will not miss out simply by looking at those stones. That faith in God's word leads to blessing.

So here's the exhortation as we close. Christians forget how the Bible began. How did God create after all?

Did he not do it just by speaking? We need to remember that when God speaks, speak. Things happen. God's word has creative power.

It created the world after all. It brought you from death to life. Isn't that an experience? It is by believing the word of God that actually leads to the greatest experience of all.

God's word is both powerful and effective. God's word leads you to being blessed by you believing it. So the issue is a fairly simple one.

[34 : 50] The issue is that while we may doubt due to the lack of experiences, our faith is encouraged and strengthened by the fact that we are to believe in the word of God.

Because the word of God produces faith in us. It is creative power. This is not a case of choosing one or the other. By believing in the word of God. It produces in turn greater faith in us.

It's not like a park ride or a film. You know, I watched a film years ago that I thought was brilliant. You know? And I thought, well, let's get that film and we'll watch it again.

And you watch it again and you think, I don't know what I found so interesting the first time I'm watching it. But God's word is not like a park ride. You know, when I used to go on a roundabout when I was sort of five years old or whatever it may be.

You know, I can take my children on the same roundabout. They get to enjoy the same experience I did when I was on that roundabout. Well, I felt sick. But they get to enjoy the same roundabout.

[35 : 53] It goes around in exactly the same way as it did for me as it does for them. Okay? Anticlockwise or clockwise. It does exactly the same thing. The trouble is, is God's word is not like that.

God's word in the world is not like that. We live in a different period of time. And therefore, God does deal differently with us. But it's the same God who does deal with us.

So I understand your struggles. Because I understand my own struggles. And I understand the struggles of those found in Scripture. That doubt for the Christian is not always caused by our lack of knowledge.

Sometimes it's caused by the presence of our knowledge in God. I doubt God because of what I know about him. Not just what I don't know about him.

But because I know God has done this for others. Because I know that. But I'm experiencing something different. I am now doubting in the God that I say I believe in.

[37 : 03] And that is a real difficult tension for the Christian to live with. It is a struggle. And it doesn't get any easier.

So what's the solution? It's John. I've written these things so that you may believe. Not here is something to believe. Or believe this.

I've written these things so that you may believe. The word of God has creative power. It is able to lead you into a place of blessing.

Blessed are those who have never seen. Yet believe. Even in the presence of a lack of experience. Here's the conclusion.

Because knowledge is transferable. The word is preeminent above everything. Okay. Because knowledge is transferable.

[38 : 03] Knowing God is transferable. The word of God is preeminent above everything. But experiences is not transferable. And therefore we can never give what anybody else wants.

I can never give you what you want experientially. Because you can't. So what's the solution for us. Who are caught in this tension. Of knowing the God we believe in.

Of trusting the God we believe in. But then doubting the God we believe in. Because of what we know about him. Due to the lack of experience. And the only answer I have. Is this.

You need to pray hard. And often. Okay. Pray hard. And often. Always trusting God. In other words. Always believing what he has said. Always believing what he has said. And remember this. That the one who makes right choices. According to Jesus.

[39 : 00] The one who makes right choices. Has never any need to worry. The believer who is called to make right choices. Never has a reason to worry.

Amen.