

What every Christian needs to grow: How to know God better

Message for Sunday, March 27, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Hosea 6:6; John 17:3; Jeremiah 17:7-8;
Luke 9:23-24

Children's Message: (for Easter Sunday)

Have you seen any of the action movies, like *Avengers* or *X-Men* or *Star Wars*? The good guys always win, even though the enemy is so powerful it's scary.

What if they killed the enemy, but the enemy came back to life? It was impossible to defeat the enemy! Now that would be *really* scary!

Well, that's what Jesus did. Except he's not the enemy. We're on his team. He's our leader, and our friend. Whatever scary thing is out there, Jesus is even more powerful than that.

That means we don't need to be afraid of things. Things like what people think about you. What people say about you. Those things can hurt you, sure. But because you have Jesus with you, you're bigger than all that. It's like you get a bit of dirt on you, and you just brush it off.

Here's what we can do: each one of you take a piece of paper. Write on it, or draw on it, whatever it is that you're afraid of. Could be anything at all. Then take that paper, crumple it up, and throw it in here. We're pretending this is the tomb where Jesus was placed after he died.

Jesus overcame death. And with his help, our fears don't need to worry us any more.

Message "What every Christian needs to grow:
How to know God better"

1) Are you hungry for more of God?

Singer Johnny Cash once said,

Jesus is the foundation of my whole life. He is my strength. If you have Jesus in your life, you know it, you feel it. He's the solid rock you can stand on every day. There's no problem you can't face if you have the love of Jesus to strengthen you.

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. received death threats on a regular basis. He said in a speech the day before he was murdered:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. I've looked over, and I've seen the promised land... I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

I have heard or read personal stories from the lives of hundreds of people, who tell of the peace and the power that has come into their lives as a result of having come into a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We see it in the pages of the Bible, and in every day of human history from that time until now.

Until now. That's where we come in. The question for us is, "Is this something that I want to be part of? Do I desire this for my life, too?"

When I preach, there are always two things first and foremost in my mind: (a) I want to preach God's Word, not my opinions or someone's Great New Idea or whatever is popular at the time. These other things aren't reliable, but God's Word is; and (b) I want to be relevant. If what I say doesn't connect with what's going on in your life, then I'm wasting your time and I'm wasting my time.

So when someone says to me, "Bruce, when I come to church, I'm not looking for an explanation of the Trinity, how one God can be three persons. I don't care about that. I just want to be closer to God. I want to know God for myself, so that when my children ask me about God, I can tell them about my own relationship with God" —when I hear this, I started getting excited. That's what I'm hungry for, too. Just because I'm a preacher doesn't mean that I'm a spiritual giant. Often I feel just the opposite.

What about you? Is this something you're interested in? Are you hungry for more of God in your life, too? I hope so. In fact, I hope that I will *never* say that I've had enough of God.

Maybe you're just visiting today, but you realize this is what you've been looking for: to be closer to

God. That's going to be my focus for the next five weeks. Why don't you make a commitment to give God a try for the next five Sundays?

2) God wants to have a relationship with you

I want a closer relationship with God; that's also what people have said to me. But it turns out that's exactly what God wants, too!

Hosea 6:6, New Century Version

[The Lord says,] "I want faithful love more than I want animal sacrifices. I want people to know me more than I want burnt offerings."

Jesus also talked about knowing God:

John 17:3, New Century Version

[Jesus said,] "This is eternal life: that people know you, the only true God, and that they know Jesus Christ, the One you sent."

3) Like trees with roots reaching down deep

So let's begin this journey. We are on a spiritual adventure, with God as both our goal and our guide. Our goal is to grow into a deeper relationship with God. Our guide is God's Word, the divinely inspired writings which have been given to show us the way.

Jeremiah 17:7-8, New Living Translation:

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD and have made the LORD their hope and confidence. They are like trees planted along a riverbank, with roots that reach deep into the water. Such trees are not bothered by the heat or worried by long months of drought. Their leaves stay green, and they go right on producing delicious fruit.

When we build our lives on the Lord, we are like trees growing by a river. Our roots go down deep, solidly grounded in our relationship with God. We drink from the river, the source of life-giving water.

Jesus talked about himself as being the source of that life:

John 7:37-38, New Living Translation

Jesus said, "If you are thirsty, come to me! If you believe in me, come and drink! For the Scriptures declare that rivers of living water will flow out from within."

That's the invitation that Jesus gives to us. A deep, personal relationship with him. Let's see how we put this into practice.

4) How to know God better: the next steps

a) Give ourselves totally to God, rather than use God

Many people view God as an antidote, an ally, an airline attendant. In other words, God can fix our troubles, help us in conflict, and give us final victory over death. So many prayers are for God to "do this" and "do that." Finally, we figure that if we live a reasonably good life, then God will provide a ticket to take us home to heaven.

The problem is that all of this is me-centred. "What am *I* going to get out of this?" We are *using* God like a servant when it is we who ought to be serving God. Jesus put it quite bluntly, when he talked about what it means to follow him:

Luke 9:23-24, New Living Translation:

Jesus said, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life."

Here is a **key question** for today: *How would you describe your relationship with God?* That is, who is the servant, and who is in charge? Your answer to that question will tell a lot about whether or not you feel any closeness to God.

b) Experience God in worship

Sometimes we think of the worship service as being a time for fellowship, for praying about our situations, for hearing a sermon on some challenging topic; and yes, all those things happen. But worship, first and foremost, is to experience God's awesome presence, and to give him our love and our life.

Two things happen to us when we are aware of God's presence. First, we bow down humbly before God's pure holiness. Many people talk about God is a sort of folksy way; for example, "the big guy upstairs." In contrast to that, the Bible usually pictures God as a brilliant, blinding light. That symbolizes his absolute holiness, to which we dare

not come close. The natural response here is praise, adoration and confession.

Second, as we become aware that, even though we could never be pure enough to approach God, we see that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. Through Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross, he has taken our sins away, and the barrier between us and God is gone. The natural response here is joy and thanksgiving.

Here is the other key question for today: *Do you take God seriously?*

In other words, do you see the awesome holiness of God, and where you stand before God? Do you appreciate what Jesus has done for you?

Again, your answer to these questions will tell a lot about whether God is real in your life.

In a moment, we will have an opportunity to pray. This could be your time to start getting to know God, if you've never taken that step. Or maybe you consider yourself a Christian, but you've just realized that something has been missing in your faith, your relationship with God. Then this prayer is for you. I invite you to join me.

Holy, pure, almighty God: I bow before you in worship. You are far, far more than I ever imagined. I usually think of myself as being a pretty good person. But when I look at you... I'm not even close to the kind of person I should be. I'm sorry for all the wrong things that I've done.

I thank you for your Son, Jesus Christ, who gave his life on the cross for me. Because of him, I have forgiveness for all that wrong. A tremendous weight is lifted; I feel light. I thank you for giving me another chance, for a new life. I now turn away from all the wrong things in my life, and I turn to you. I commit myself, every part of my life, to following and serving you, and you only. I ask you to fill me with your Holy Spirit, to help me in this new life.

And thank-you for the joy and the peace. Amen.