

# That I might know Him

by Fred Tomlinson

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**Scripture:** Isaiah 6:3, Romans 3:23, Romans 6:23, 1 Corinthians 2:10, Psalm 99:9, John 8:32, 2 Corinthians 3:17

**Topics:** "Ignorance of God", "Holiness and Sinfulness"

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## Description

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## Transcript

Perhaps I can just follow for a little while with a few thoughts. Probably we've all been reading and thinking over the story of the birth of Christ, and I have, and there are many, many things. It's amazing.

It's a story that we've known for so, so many years. We've read over and over again, and we've listened to many, many people sharing and speaking about it, and you think, well, every last feature has been wrung out of it by now. And I'm not going to look into it very deeply here this morning, but one particular thing that struck me was the ignorance that existed, and I think I can see a link with what Brenda has shared here.

I'm not talking about people being ignorant, but the kind of ignorance when there's just an absence of information. We just don't know. And I see that repeatedly through this story without looking at all the texts, but there's the very obvious moment when the angel Gabriel has approached Mary and is speaking to Mary and makes certain statements to her, you remember, and she says, how? You know, I mean, talking about ignorance, she didn't have a clue how this could ever be.

And I'm thinking about Joseph, and obviously Joseph had a very different part in the whole developing situation, but nevertheless, what a remarkable man he was. And in Matthew chapter 1 and verse 9, it says, and Joseph, her husband, being a righteous man and not wanting to disgrace her, planned to send

her away secretly. He didn't know what to do.

This was a baffling situation. For him, of course, we know how the angel visited him and gave him some information that changed everything. And then there were the wise men.

Their question was, the point where we meet them, where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? I am at a complete loss to know how they even knew about the child that was to be born. In any event, they were sufficiently convinced about it that they made a very lengthy journey and carried some pretty valuable things with them. And where's the child? They didn't know.

And then in a rather different aspect in the story, we've got Herod. And he says to the priests, where is Christ to be born? Remember something has been said to him. And then his next question is, when did you see the star? You know, there's questions over and over again.

And although I don't see this quite as a question, but there must have been questions in the minds of Mary and Joseph when they are instructed by the angel concerning, it was Joseph in particular, that Herod was in fact searching for the child. And the question naturally would be, well, where do we go? What do we do? But that question was answered very quickly by the same statement of the angel who told them where they should go, and so on. All those details are all there in the various passages that we read where the story is presented.

But in the natural world in which we live, ignorance, that is lack of information or the absence of information is very, very common. Of course it is. It's part of life.

I mean, you've listened to me talking a lot over these years. And I can assure you there's a lot about me you don't know. I reckon it works the other way around as well.

And so on. So in a sense, this kind of ignorance is not uncommon to us at all. It's very much a part of our lives.

But there is a particular ignorance which is very, very serious indeed. And it's the ignorance about God. There is no greater or more significant ignorance than ignorance about God or concerning God.

And when we think of the world, the world of unconverted men and women, the world of unbelievers, it's no surprise to find that they are ignorant about God and they don't want God. There's a number of scriptures that I would be tempted to look at where there are references to the world and how the world, which is a sort of a term covering all the people in the category I've just mentioned, they're hostile toward God completely. And the scriptures say that over and again.

And we're told very plainly that we as believers, if we're finding friendship with the world, take it for granted you're in a category that is at enmity with God. And so this is repeated time and again and so on. But what I'm thinking about in particular is not the world and the world's ignorance about God.

In fact, I must add just another scripture that's coming to my mind which is from 2 Peter chapter 3 where he uses the phrase that they were willfully ignorant. That's another angle on ignorance. But I'm thinking about the people of God, the people who would claim to be his people, and perhaps with very good reason.

But then in that context I'm thinking of the words of the prophet Hosea. Remember when God says through Hosea, my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. So that's a very serious statement.

My people, my people are destroyed because of lack of knowledge. It was when I was speaking in a different location to this, I made a statement. I wrote it down and I came across it just the other day and I'll just read it to you.

Again, it was right at the beginning of a series of meetings where I was to be speaking. And I said to the people, my purpose, my purpose here is not to educate your minds with theological concepts, but to excite your hearts to see, to grasp, and to experience the depth and riches of the gospel of God. And I think it's at this particular juncture where we make a very serious mistake, a really big mistake, a very common mistake, almost a universal mistake for us, the people of God.

And that is to imagine that this knowledge, without knowledge, my people are destroyed, that this knowledge is a body of propositional truths or statements. Do you understand? I grew up, I grew up in my earlier life, as many of you already know, I grew up with propositional truths about the Bible, propositional truths about God and about the gospel and so on. Because it's written here, this kind of information is here, propositional theological statements.

The Bible is full of them, certainly. And I think in that context, the danger is that we make sound doctrine, an end in itself. In other words, we get engrossed in the words, the statements that are made.

We fill our minds with them. And in and of itself, this is not wrong. We're talking about the statements of the Bible.

But there's a scripture, I've quoted it so many times standing here, and that is when Jesus said, you search the scriptures, for in them, that is in the words, in the propositional statements, the theology of the Bible, for in them, you think you have eternal life. But these are they that testify of me, and you won't come to me that you might have life. So once again, when I made that statement myself, my mission in speaking to that group, as indeed to this group, is not to simply educate your minds with theology, but rather to, as I put it then, to excite your hearts to seek after God himself.

And that's the challenge. It's a big challenge. I prayed earlier some words to the effect, I don't remember how I said it, but I know I was just overcome with a sense of the mystery of God.

Do you remember some of the things perhaps I was saying? I remember saying, knowing the unknowable, seeing the unseen, hearing the inaudible. This is God. We don't, I see you, I know you, I recognize you.

Because we're in the same dimension. We're on equal footing. But when we're talking about God, God is a spirit.

And right at that point, we know that phrase so well, and we know the text we're quoting from, but there lies a baffling mystery. God is a spirit. As I was driving earlier this morning, I was just generally looking around.

The morning's brightened up a great deal since then. The sun's come up. But the fact is, I'm thinking, you created all this, Lord, with a word.

How can I ever get my mind around that fact alone? I can't. I cannot do it. We know what the Bible says and states concerning it, and we've chosen to believe it.

And we don't doubt it. But do I understand it? Can I comprehend it? I'm reminded of a wise man who once said, in all thy getting, get understanding. Somewhere we need to recognize the potential pitfalls and move away from them and seek a path of faith and trust in God.

And woe be to any or all of us if we accept the status quo of ignorance and never come to a place of knowing. We'll never see everything perfectly. Of course we shall not.

We see through a glass darkly. We're reminded by the Apostle. We know in part.

But then, and that reference has been made already earlier this morning, but then we shall see him as he is. And we shall be like him. Amen.

I suppose what we need to be aware of in thinking about the words alone is that, this is true for every one of us, but it's particularly an issue facing those of us who are preachers. Where we're into the book, where we're into the words, where we're studying the words and so on. And what I know is that we can have a collection, perhaps even an abundance of theological information.

We may have a sharp mind that is able to meditate on these things and collect these thoughts and sort them out in some way. We may have that kind of personality that is an asset in a public function. And we may be able to give a very impressive exposition of scripture.

And people will say, wow, that was really great. And so on. We may even, if we arise into that category, would be part of the elite.

You know, the expositional preachers of the day. If you add to that kind of individual, a few programs that we can quite easily think up and so on. Maybe even some good musicians as well.

We've got a thriving church. We've got it all made. Everything is together.

But the Bible, it turns out, is not merely a book about God. It is that. But it's not merely a book about God.

Jesus said that eternal life is to know him. I can only conclude that if things turn out the way we sort of seem to think the Bible is clearly teaching, then there's a high possibility there will be a lot of people in a lost eternity who have a lot of theological knowledge. And according to Jesus himself, there will be a lot of people who will probably be in that category.

And they will be among those who say, Lord, we prophesied in your name. So we're talking about a serious thing. The question that I think we need to answer to ourselves and before God is how do I think about God? What is it to know God? When the scriptures talk about knowing him, the word know is being used in that sense of intimacy.

We know other passages where it's used where such and such a person knew his wife and so and so. It has to do with intimacy. Knowing God is not merely an intellectual, because we cannot do that.

I can know words about God, but to know God is a different thing. It's on a different level altogether. And I know I'm saying things that I don't fully understand myself, let alone am I able to communicate it to you.

But this is what we need to think about when we think about or we speak about knowing God. It's not merely knowing information. I may be very rich in my knowledge of information about him and never yet know him.

And that's the place of danger for us. And unless we are awakened and may God awaken us freshly this morning to the fact that this is on a different level, this is a different category altogether. And I need to recognize that before I have any hope of discovering it and experiencing it.

Otherwise, I'll just settle down in the status quo of an abundance of information, which I enjoy, which is true. But it's all propositional words and concepts. Am I discovering what the words are describing and what God, through the words, is seeking to make known to me that I may exercise faith in him and move into a position where I begin to know him and so on.

The way I think about God is very important in all of this, certainly because the way I think about this God, who is a mystery to me, the way I think about him will actually have the potential to impact every single area of my life as a Christian believer. I think unconsciously and without making any deliberate effort here, we're all different. Our stories are all different.

Our journey has been different. Our capacities are all different. And so it's not a surprise that deep down within us, we will all think about God.

And if I may use the word with some degree of caution, imagine God, we'll do it in different ways. So the question is, well, what are you thinking? What should we think about? How should we understand God? How should we see? We're looking through the lens of our own very limited, very restricted humanity. And we're reading.

And we're spending time before him. I mean, I know that there are some people whose knowledge of God will simply be words in the book called the Bible. That's got to be a lot of people, I imagine.

There'll be others who will think of God in terms of, well, he's a taskmaster. Be careful what you say to him. He may take you at your word.

And then situations happen, don't they? We all know this. Situations happen in life that in and of themselves are baffling to us, which I think we've been reminded already this morning, have the potential to turn us into unbelievers in that sense. And the enemy is there.

I'm thinking what Paul said to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians when he's saying, you know, our warfare is not with flesh and blood. And the issue is to challenge our knowledge of God in our minds. We're thinking wrong.

We're believing, we're being tempted to believe things that are not true. And I think that's the essence of what we heard earlier, that God will, he's seeking to continually bring us back to this place of simple childlike faith in a God who in human terms we cannot see, in human terms we cannot know. And I understand what was also said this morning, that we see him in one another.

And I identify with that 100%. But we don't see him yet as we shall see him in that day. And that was reminded to us as well.

There's another strain of thought, another category of thought, I think, where we can tend to see God as a kindly sort of grandfather figure who's for us. Sometimes, and maybe this is not true, but it may be thought to be true. The grandparents are softer on the grandchildren than their parents, be that as it may.

But I think there's a temptation to think of God in those kind of terms. He's not going to approve me. Grandparents don't discipline their children, do they? I could say a lot more about that, but I'd better not.

But do you see, we can have this idea that God is just so generous, he's just so loving. Of course he'd sort this out and do the other and so on and so on. But there's more to God than that.

It's not to diminish that aspect of God. But in fact, there's a word in Psalm chapter 50, verse 21, and it basically says this, you thought I was just like you. That's not a complete paraphrase, but it's certainly simpler than the old King James.

You thought I was just like you. God said, but you're wrong. My thoughts are not your thoughts.

My ways are not your ways. So the issue before us is not information about God. It's not even what does God do or what is God doing, but it's who is God to me.

Who is he? How do I know him in that most intimate way that God has ordained that I shall know him? This is something that is intensely, exclusively personal. In other words, I cannot help you with this. I can share the information of Scripture as others share it with me.

And we can talk about these things and we can seek to encourage one another. I'm not discounting the virtue and benefits of the life of Christ in our brethren because that's definitely a vital category. But sort of climbing over these different issues, which are all true, the pinnacle of it all is that I can only know God insofar as he reveals himself to me.

He may choose many ways to do that, but that is the ultimate issue. It's personal revelation. And all this can sound like sort of vague.

I hope it doesn't. I hope that the Holy Spirit can apply this in some way that is meaningful to your life. You know, we talk in a very human way in our human relationships.

We may, I could be telling you about, I won't mention names because I'm maybe being recorded right now, but I can say, well, there's this person who's coming to speak here in a few weeks. And I can tell you a few things about this person, but you've got to meet this person and then you'll know. That's where we're coming from.

In the final analysis, we can talk about him. But in the final analysis, you've got to know him yourself. He must make himself known to you and you must grab hold of that revelation that he brings to your heart at that point in time.

I think I may be right in believing that at this particular time in history and in our culture and in our Christian communities, there's a lot of presumption, a lot of assumption about one's knowledge of God. In other words, we've responded in such and such a way, we've prayed such and such a thing, and so on. And someone has encouraged me to believe, well, now I'm a Christian.

But are we? Have we really experienced a visitation of God? And I think many of our thoughts about God and our things that we presume about God's work in our own lives, in so many ways, is far beneath the

honour and the dignity, the wonder and the glory of our Most High God. You thought I was just like you. He's not.

Amen. At some point, somewhere, each one of us must come, and you may want to suggest that I should make that into an ongoing thing, which I'm more than willing to do. But at some point, you must come to a point where you are alone with God, and you say what the Apostle said on the Damascus Road to Jesus, who art thou Lord? Show me, show me who you are.

Amen. You will never be initiating the pursuit. Never.

You will be at best responding to his initiative. In other words, we don't just come up with this of ourselves. God has been working by his Spirit.

It may be that as you listen to me, whether you're in this room or wherever, that you sense that God, the word, is resonating because God's already been priming you to think these things through and to do something about it. And so we're saying, this is God. The first thing we do is praise him.

Thank you for ever pursuing me and bringing me to this moment where I am. I'm like a little tiny baby, but I'm just beginning to get a glimmer of understanding about the greatness of who you are. I need to close in a moment.

The Bible presents God in a variety of ways. We refer to some of these features concerning God as his attributes, and depending on which or who is your favorite preacher, there may be seven, there may be 10, or whatever, an endless number of attributes. But certainly we do know that the Bible presents God in different lights.

I mean, for example, we know that the Bible teaches that God is infinite. We know that the Bible teaches us that God is merciful. We know the Bible teaches that God is just.

We know that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign. Each of these statements are true concerning God and many others that we could think about. But would you agree with me if I suggest to you there is one attribute which is like, it's the overarching attribute.

And if we fail to recognize this, we'll never know or even begin to understand any of the others. It's where God says, I am holy. And we scarcely know what that means.

If you were called upon to stand up now and explain to us what does that mean, I think you'd be at a loss. You may be able to quote some things, but what does that mean? And yet really it's the pinnacle of everything concerning God. He's omniscient.

He's omnipresent. He's beyond us completely. And that really is what it means at the end of the day.

It really means at its root that God is different. He's other than. You thought I was like you, but God is holy.

He's separate. It means to cut apart. It means to separate from.

Sorry, my mind is rather strange as you know. But in that moment I just thought about a chocolate cake that Norman brought to an event on Friday night. And I didn't taste any, Norman.

Sorry about that. But I did see the knife being cut through it. Some pieces were being separated and given.

God is separate. He's separate. He's not of us.

That's where the illustration falls short. But he's separate from us completely. And have you ever wondered to yourself, I ask you this question, have you ever wondered when you've read Isaiah chapter 6? Believe it or not, my Bible's open right there.

And it goes like this. In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne lofty and exalted, and with his train and robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above him, each having six wings.

With two he covered his face. With two he covered his feet. With two he flew.

And one called out to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory. And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out.

And it continues on and on. Let me pause there just for a moment. I'm asking you the question, have you ever wondered why these archangels were crying out holy? They didn't cry out sovereign, sovereign, sovereign.

They didn't even cry out love, love, love. But it was holy. It was this holiness.

Not to suggest that he was not all loving or the very source of purest love or that he's absolutely so. Of course, all those factors are true. But overarching them all is this fact of the holiness of God.

And the point that I want to make quickly here is Isaiah's response. Because when he heard this and observed this, he said, woe is me, for I am, my translation here says, for I am ruined. I'm among a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

The fact of the matter is, if we don't begin to know God for who he truly is, you'll never understand sin for what it is. Sin came to light in the presence of God, in the presence of his holiness. And if you don't understand what sin is, then you'll have no concept of the significance of the gospel.

So if we back up, the most important thing of all is this issue of my knowledge, my knowledge of God, which is so very, very important. It's vital to us, absolutely. We need to see that sin, at the end of the day, is, you know, we can all relate to sins.

We can all relate to things that we should or shouldn't have done. And, you know, various actions, various behaviors, and we can say, I'm sorry for that. And so we can understand forgiveness in that sort of category, in that way.

We think anyway, we understand those things. But sin, and we've noted on other occasions how the Apostle Paul, writing in the book of Romans, he makes a distinction between the plural word sins and the singular word sin. Sins are the result of sin.

To use one of Paul's own statements from chapter 7, he says, sin which dwelleth in me. We don't understand that. We can relate to things that we do or other people do or don't do, and so on.

We can relate to that immediately. Maybe say, well, I don't think that's right. I don't think it's right for me.

I don't think it's right for him or her, and so on. We can relate in that way. But it's only in the presence of his holiness that we gain a true recognition of our own sinfulness.

Woe is me. I'm unclean. And you can read the text about it, but for it to become real, the Holy Spirit has to work and minister.

I wrote this down. I was thinking of, for the purpose of my illustration, an unregenerate man comes home, and as he approaches his house, he sees water running under the door, coming out, and a disaster. He opens the door.

He rushes in. He scrambles. He finds a mop and a bucket, and if he's a bit more wealthy, perhaps a wet vac, and he starts work cleaning what he can see up.

But it's only in the presence of the Holy God that he could realize and become aware that there's a burst pipe underneath the ground. And you can mop, and you can put it in your buckets ad infinitum, but there's a deeper problem. And that is only revealed to us, not by someone telling us, not even by merely a verse of scripture informing us, but it's by the Holy Spirit, his presence, and he gets hold of the word, and he speaks it into your heart, and he says your problem is not what you're doing or what you're not doing.

Even though Jesus intensified the commandments, didn't he, by saying it's what you think, not just what you do. We only understand our own inward state when it's revealed to us by the Holy Spirit of God. Amen.

So the real issue is our ignorance of God. If I'm ignorant of God, I'll be ignorant of the nature of sin, and I'll be ignorant of God's remedy, the gospel. Once upon a time, a mop and a bucket was all there was.

But then came a time when the spirit of life was manifested, and the spirit of life is able to make us free from the law of sin and death. And as was quoted earlier, where the spirit of the Lord is, this is the Holy Spirit of the Lord, there's liberty. Amen.

Let's just bow and pray.

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