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KNOWING GOD WITH HEAD AND HEART: THE DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

This is the third of a three-part series on “Growing in Intimacy with God.” The first article, “Biblical Foundations for Growing in Intimacy with God,” was published in the Spring 2019 issue of Knowing & Doing. The second article, “Cultivating Attentiveness to God’s Presence,” was published in the Summer 2019 issue of Knowing & Doing.



can know God only because God desires to make Himself known to us. God graciously reveals aspects of His divine nature so that we might enter into a personal relationship with God. This is the third part of a series on growing in intimacy with God. In the first article, we examined the biblical foundation for God’s desire to be in fellowship with us and our human longing for God. The second article surveyed the importance of cultivating an attentiveness of God’s presence in every dimension of life. This article will address the nature and importance of knowing God and how we can deepen our experience of God.

Scripture clearly reveals God’s gracious invitation to draw us into His presence and experience God. The American Presbyterian pastor William Plumer (1802–1880) declared, “Often in Scriptures religious experience is expressed by hungering and thirsting, by eating and drinking.”¹ Perhaps the best known is David’s invitation: “Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him” (Ps. 34:8)². This same inviting truth is deeply etched in the following New Testament texts: “Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’” (John 6:53). And “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6).³

Knowing God involves not only a metaphorical sense of taste but also hearing and the other three senses. For example, Jesus demonstrates how the sense of hearing affects our relationship with Him when He declares: “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). This passage alerts us to the importance of discernment. Not every experience is of God, and we need to cultivate a discriminating mind to recognize whether it is Jesus’s voice. Space prevents developing this theme now, but I hope to address it in a future article.

One’s Experience of God

Significantly, experience is more than gathering information about God; rather, it is knowing Him in a personal and intimate manner. J.I. Packer captures this well in his classic *Knowing God*:

If the decisive factor was notional correctness, then obviously the most learned biblical scholars would know God better than anyone else. But it is not; you can have all the right notions in your head without ever tasting in your heart the realities to which they refer; and a simple Bible reader and sermon hearer who is full of the Holy Spirit will develop a far deeper acquaintance with his God and Savior than a more learned scholar who is content with being theologically correct.⁴

This reinforces the double nature of experiencing God: we can perceive Him through knowledge that relates to our minds cognitively and through love that relates to our hearts affectively.

Experience has always held a central place in the Christian life. We might be surprised to see within the Dutch minister Wilhelmus à Brakel’s (1635–1711) four-volume *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* a full chapter devoted to the topic of experience. He defines experience as “a godly exercise, consisting in a gathering of numerous noteworthy incidents for the purpose of using them to our benefit and that of others.”⁵ This could include a full spectrum of items ranging from insights



gathered from Scripture, participation in public worship, events from daily life, and observation of creation. Its importance was elevated by à Brakel's warnings not to forget or be inattentive to the experiences God provides for us to know Him better.⁶

The nature and dynamics of experience have been studied for centuries. Archibald Alexander's *Thoughts on Religious Experience* is a valuable guide to this subject.⁷ Alexander (1772–1851) was an American Presbyterian minister who became the first professor at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1812. His wise pastoral heart and keen probing mind enabled him to study the various ways a person could experience God. This book contains a diversity of conversion accounts detailing the effect a person's temperament could have upon one's new birth in Christ. Alexander's study is filled with narratives of religious conversations, spiritual conflict, growth in grace, backsliding, spiritual dryness, affliction, various trials faced by believers, including spiritual warfare, the influence of wealth and poverty upon people, deathbed confessions, and the process of dying. He also includes letters to children, the aged, mothers, widows, and widowers regarding the specific challenges faced by people at these stages of life.

One of the great lessons from Alexander's research is that there is no single way to experience God. His wide spectrum of narratives provides freedom that each person is unique; although there will be common ways of knowing God, there is

never a standard one-size-fits-all. One of his final challenges is, regardless of age, to "cherish and diligently cultivate genuine piety."⁸ It is critical to recognize that any individual will relate to God in a full range of experiences across his or her life. A brief summary of Peter's encounters with Jesus illustrates the spectrum of these



possibilities. He heard the simple invitation to follow Jesus, not knowing what that might require of him (Matt. 4:18–22), but he also witnessed a literal mountain-top experience on the Mount of Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36). He felt the sting of conviction and correction both in failing to understand the necessity of Christ's death and the need to be restored after his threefold denial of Jesus (Mark 8:31–33; John 21:15–19) and the mundane act of paying the temple tax for Jesus and himself by finding the necessary coin in a fish he was to catch (Matt. 17:24–27).

Jonathan Edwards's Model

Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the well-known American minister during the First Great Awakening, provides a helpful case study about the nature and dynamics of Christian experience. Unfortunately, for many people their awareness of Edwards is limited to his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Most people don't realize that he preached only the first half of his message, emphasizing God's judgment. The result produced a powerful conviction of sin and loud wailing that prevented him from completing the second half, on God's grace. We get a very different impression of Edwards from reading his *Personal Narrative*. This treatise reveals the surprising nature of his diverse experiences of God. On one occasion, he reported the following:

My mind was greatly engaged, to spend my time in reading and meditating on Christ; and the beauty and excellency of his person, and the lovely way of salvation, by free grace in him. I found no books so delightful to me, as those that treated of these subjects. Those words (Cant. 2:1) used to be abundantly with me: "I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys." The words seemed to me, sweetly to represent, the loveliness and beauty of Jesus Christ. And the whole book of Canticles used to be pleasant to me; and I used to be much in reading it, about that time. And found, from time to time, an inward sweetness, that used, as it were, to carry me away in my contemplations; in what I know not how to express otherwise, than by a calm, sweet abstraction of soul from all the concerns off this world; and a kind of vision, or fixed ideas and imaginations of being alone in the mountains, or some solitary wilderness, far from all mankind, sweetly conversing with Christ, and wrapt and swallowed up in God. The sense I had of divine things, would often of a sudden as it were, kindle up a sweet burning in my heart; an ardor of my



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*soul, that I know not how to express.*⁹

While Edwards's soul soared in delight and enjoyment of God, upon closer examination we discover the initial simplicity of this vivid Christological experience.

First, Edwards encountered Christ in Scripture. Some critics deny the validity of contemplation because they believe it focuses on the individual and not God. But clearly Edwards was meditating on the objective truth of Scripture and Christ. He confessed that Canticles (i.e., Song of Songs) was one of his favorite books. Following the Puritan practice of spiritual reading, he recognized that the bridegroom was Jesus and the spouse, his soul. This reading inspired him to think more deeply on Jesus. In particular, Song of Songs has long reflected the great love of Jesus for sinful humanity and His desire to reconcile them to God to restore an intimacy of union and communion.

Next, Edwards mentioned that his "mind was greatly engaged" as he meditated on the "beauty and excellency" of Christ. The combination of his reading and meditating on Scripture is reflective of knowledge or the cognitive nature of experiencing God. He is interested in the truth and wisdom of Scripture. As he continued to engage his mental activities, he expanded his description by reporting that he found "an inward sweetness that used, as it were, to carry" him away in contemplation. This reveals the awareness of love or the affective dimension with God and relates to the fervor and burning delight of his soul. Contemplation expressed a loving and grateful gazing upon God and His mighty acts. More than the mental study of meditation, it reflects the savoring and enjoyment of God. This dual concentration of knowing God both cognitively in our heads and affectively in our hearts has been recognized through the history of the church as a sign of an integrated awareness of God. This rarely is automatic and illustrates the intentionality of Edwards's desire to deepen his experience of God.

Third, Edwards realized he can't find adequate words to describe his experience. Twice he confessed, I don't know "how to express" what I am perceiving. This is known as ineffable because words fail to capture one's awareness of God. God is mighty and transcendent and yet simultaneously tender and compassionate. God's ineffable nature or our experiences that defy description often produce poetry or hymns that are more effective and affective than prose in capturing the depth of a person's experience. This also suggests the limitation of the human mind to grasp and adequately express all of our experiences with God. This should create humility and a deepening respect for the mystery of our triune God. The *Personal Narrative* is filled with numerous examples similar to this. Consistent throughout is Edwards's intentional integration of his head and heart, so that his reflection on "divine things" would "kindle up a sweet burning in my heart." Fourth, Edwards's multisensory account is heavily indebted to the senses of taste (sweetness), sight (beauty of Christ), and touch (burning in my heart).



It is critical to remember that our primary concern is not collecting amazing experiences of God but rather seeking God so that we might know and love Him more fully. Despite my reminder that his contemplative divine encounter began in Edwards's practice of reading and meditating on Scripture, we might minimize or even neglect the daily mundane ways in which we perceive God that can enrich our lives in following Jesus Christ. After any mountain-top experience, we need to return to the valleys of our normal life. In the case of Peter, James, and John, their lofty spiritual encounter of the transfiguration quickly faded as they were confronted with their inability to heal the demon-possessed boy (Matt. 17:14–21). Most of our lives most of the time are fairly normal and uneventful, yet Jesus is constantly seeking to work in and through our lives to accomplish His purposes. By searching for the rare spectacular experiences, we are reducing our ability to experience Christ in the simplicity of a childlike wonder and faith. As a result of this fascination with the more dramatic experiences of faith, some writers on the spiritual life caution people not to ignore the quotidian encounters with God that are occurring all around us if we but only would become attentive to them.¹⁰

More important, any experience of God is a secondary benefit of cultivating a relationship with Him. Therefore, we seek



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God not for His blessings but for knowing Him since He is our Lord and God. Fortunately, God is gracious and often provides us with experiences that can shape us more fully into Christ's likeness. Wilhelmus à Brakel suggests that once we have experiences of God they need to be cultivated because they can provide numerous benefits to both ourselves and others. Some of the possible uses include reminders of God's faithfulness and His promises kept that give us encouragement for facing challenges in our daily life. They also can sustain us in times of distress and provide hope for the future. Additionally, they can be shared with others to sustain them during trials and periods of doubt or fear.¹¹ A pedagogical reason for reflecting on our experiences is their ability to help us better know both God and our own selves. Plumer offers another essential reason, that being attentive to our experiences can reverse the tendency of superficiality that can be all too common in the church. Relationships grow in intimacy only as we experience more of a specific person. It is no different with God. As we deepen our awareness of God, it will motivate our desire to know and love Him and our own selves more fully and consistently.

Application

It is time to digest this more fully and apply it to our own lives. In returning to our case study of Jonathan Edwards, we can examine his experience to draw out more specific practical implications for contemporary disciples of Jesus Christ. To reiterate, a person's awareness of God might originate as either a perception of knowledge or love of God or His mighty acts. Knowledge and love of God need to be seen as a continuum. There is no superiority of one over the other, and both are necessary to deepen one's intimacy with God. Ultimately this is a matter of personal preference. Although we all have the potential to experience God through the affective or cognitive experiences, the North American context frequently appears to favor love over knowledge. Often this is related to the more dramatic nature and elevated language of delight or spiritual intensity than to that of knowledge in our feeling-saturated culture. Or from the reverse perspective, some people who prefer a cognitive insight about God might be suspicious of a person who champions the more affective awareness, finding those experiences lacking in depth or content. C.S. Lewis confessed his own preference for the latter experience:



For my own part I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that "nothing happens" when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and pencil in their hand.¹²

Again, it is essential to recognize that this is Lewis's preference and does not mean that intellectual experiences of God are better than affective ones. This is confirmed by recalling Packer's observation at the beginning of this article.

The second principle that we need to recover from Edwards is the importance of reflecting upon our experiences of God. The Puritans stressed this through their language that a person's awareness of God needed to be "improved" or sanctified. In other words, how could a person's perception of God, whether it began in knowledge or love, be deepened to guide that individual into greater intimacy with God? Edwards illustrates this through reading and meditating on Scripture. The words of Song of Songs 2:1 "I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys" captured his mind and inspired his imagination. But as he continued to reflect through meditation, he experienced a new awareness that expanded his initial perception to integrate both the cognitive and affective dimensions of knowing God. Not only did he sense the "beauty and excellency" of Jesus Christ, but he also tasted a deeper love and appreciation for Jesus Christ that he expressed through the vocabulary of inward sweetness and delight in Christ. As we read this section of his *Personal Narrative*, we realize that his spiritual disciplines have been cultivated to a high pitch that oscillates from conversing with Christ and focusing on divine things to being filled with an inward burning of his heart overflowing with sweetness and being swallowed up by God.



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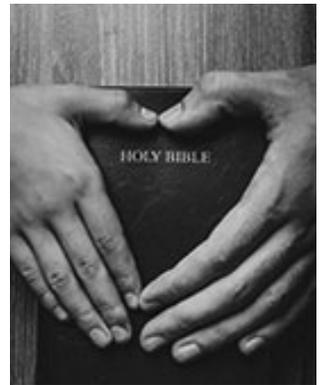
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To apply this more specifically to our lives, I will offer some questions for reflection to guide our meditation and imagination. Note that I am merely illustrating this by my own example not suggesting a method for others to follow. Recently in my morning reading of Psalm 28, the sentence that attracted my attention was “Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their shepherd and carry them forever” (v. 9). More specifically I personalized this and reflected on the second half of that verse, “be my shepherd and carry me forever.” As I continued to sit with this passage, I asked myself a series of questions: What does it mean to have God as my shepherd? Are there other passages that reinforce this truth? I immediately thought of John 10:7–9:

Therefore Jesus said again, “Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.”

How does this imagery challenge me? How does it create a sense of peace and hope amid the challenges and uncertainties of my life? The more I meditated on these words, the more the awareness moved from a cognitive truth to an affective sense as I gained great peace and comfort in knowing Jesus would lead me.

Or from the other side of awareness, I have a number of pictures of our grandchildren on my desk. One is of our oldest grandchild sitting on my lap. Her face is full of joy and beaming with a giant smile. I too am smiling because of the delight of holding her. Although my attention to Psalm 28:9 began as a cognitive insight from Scripture, this picture first spoke affectively to my heart. Being curious how it might deepen beyond the enjoyment of our granddaughter, I chose to meditate on it. Why were we both smiling? The cause of joy was obvious because we loved each other, and we were having a good time. But as I continued my meditation on this picture, I realized that instead of embracing my granddaughter I imagined that God desires to hold me in the same way as I was holding her. By now the affections of being loved and held securely by God had moved deeply into my head and brought me a renewed sense of embrace and the cognitive truth that I am engraved on God’s hands and belong to Him (Isa. 49:16).



Packer is helpful in reinforcing this central truth that we belong to Him:

What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it — the fact that he knows me... All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him, because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters.¹³

And as we ground our knowing of God on these transforming principles we will ever grow into deeper intimacy with Him. ■

NOTES

¹ William Plumer, *Vital Godliness: A Treatise on Experimental and Practical Piety* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1993), 9.

² Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

³ Other passages listed by Plumer include Isa. 55:1; Song 5:1; John 6:54–58. *Vital Godliness*, 9.

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973, text Americanized, 1993), 39.

⁵ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995), 4:45.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 4:49.



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⁷ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience* (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1844, 1967).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Personal Narrative*, in *Letters and Personal Writings*, vol. 16, ed. George S. Claghorn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 793. For an expanded treatment of four early evangelicals' contemplative experiences of God, see Tom Schwanda, "To Gaze upon the Beauty of the Lord': The Evangelical Resistance and Retrieval of Contemplation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 7, no. 1 (2014): 62–84.

¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xiv, cf. xvii.

¹¹ Brakel, *Christian's Reasonable Service*, 4:46, 49, 51.

¹² C.S. Lewis, introduction to St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. & ed. a Religious of the CSMV (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1944, 1977), 8.

¹³ Packer, *Knowing God*, 41–42.



The heart never takes the place of the head: but it can, and should, obey it.

— C.S. Lewis

How, according to Tom Schwanda, does the example of Jonathan Edwards help us understand the nature and dynamics of Christian experience. After reading the article, would you like to read some of Edwards' writings?

1



Near the end of the article, Schwanda discusses how, in reading Psalm 28, a particular sentence attracted his attention, and the way in which he meditated on it. As you read the Bible, do you meditate on specific verses/phrases? If not, how might you try doing so in your Bible reading this coming week?

2

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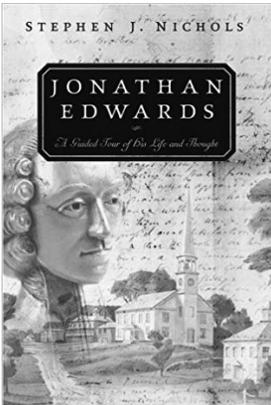
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RECOMMENDED READING

Stephen J. Nichols, *Jonathan Edwards: A Guided Tour of His Life and Thought* (P&R Publishing, 2001)

Jonathan Edwards, a leader in the Great Awakening during the eighteenth century, still has much to teach the church. Evangelicals are rediscovering him through the efforts of several authors (John Gerstner, Iain Murray, Harry Stout, and others) and publishers (Banner of Truth, Soli Deo Gloria, and Crossway). Stephen Nichols offers Jonathan Edwards “as an introduction, a gateway into the vast and rewarding life, thought, and writings of Jonathan Edwards.” This book is for anyone who wants to read Edwards with a little help.



RECOMMENDED READING

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God* (InterVarsity Press, 20th Anniversary Edition, 1993)

For over 40 years, J.I. Packer’s classic has been an important tool to help Christians around the world discover the wonder, the glory and the joy of knowing God. In 2006, Christianity Today voted this title one of the top 50 books that have shaped evangelicals. This edition is updated with Americanized language and spelling and a new preface by the author. Stemming from Packer’s profound theological knowledge, *Knowing God* brings together two important facets of the Christian faith— knowing about God and also knowing God through the context of a close relationship with the person of Jesus Christ. Written in an engaging and practical tone, this thought-provoking work seeks to transform and enrich the Christian understanding of God. Explaining both who God is and how we can relate to Him, Packer divides his book into three sections: The first directs our attention to how and why we know God, the second to the attributes of God and the third to the benefits enjoyed by those who know Him intimately. This guide leads readers into a greater understanding of God while providing advice to gaining a closer relationship with Him as a result.

