

Special Section: Knowing God

Seeing More Of God

What is it like to know God? Each of us has part of the answer.

By David Hazard

When I was in high school, one of my teachers talked openly about being a “born-again” Christian. It was 1971, and the “Jesus movement” was still new in the east. People were genuinely curious. Inevitably the question came: “What’s it like—what does it *feel* like—to know God?”

He didn’t mention finding “peace” or “joy.” In fact, he was a serious man who, some days, fumbled and troubled with his curriculum notes and stuttered. His general answers ran toward simple, sound doctrines, like, “to be a born-again Christian means knowing that your sins are forgiven because of the shed blood of Jesus.”

But we pushed him: *What is it like?* And his specific answer created a photographic plate inside my skull:

“For me, knowing God is like walking on a tightly stretched rope, high over a bottomless chasm of blackness. Below me, I can hear screams of torment. Up ahead of me, somewhere, I know I’ll walk out into the light someday. For now, I pray and read God’s Word, and carefully put one foot in front of the other to keep from sinning again.”

In the sobered silence that followed, there were no more questions: I was glad he’d qualified it as depicting his own experience. I’d been a Christian for a little over a year, and my knowledge of God—shaped in part by the music of people like Kurt Kaiser—made me think of a Creator whose “handiwork” was an inviting, starry night. For me, the darkness was an evening canopy, spangled with twinkling party lights. I was 16.

God in Motion

In June, just before the end of classes, all the tension suddenly went out of the man. The tightly wound fumbling with papers and the stuttering were gone. He totally revised his statement: “God is not a tightrope to me anymore. Knowing God is like resting in an open field.”

A more inviting image, for sure.

Later, I learned that this man struggled with homosexual temptations. I never found out why his experience of God had changed. For a long time I just overlooked the most obvious possibility: that God had showed Himself to this man in a new way—whatever form that “showing” may have taken. Inwardly, his picture of God was changed.

We forget one important fact, I think, about God: We forget that He is actually alive. And He has told us that it’s His business to open our eyes to Him, in His own ways, so that we can know Him.

“My Father is always at his work,” said Jesus. This helps to explain why the truest, mightiest prayer sometimes comes when we still our soul’s running monologue long enough to receive

God as He wishes to give Himself. That in itself could end so much of our boredom with prayer.

“The word of God is living and *active*. . . .” And so is God Himself. God unfolds Himself like an opening rose, and one day a strange new current of air brings a fragrance. The eyes of our souls awaken, and we turn just in time to see Him disappearing into an inviting wilderness . . . out from what we know, into the promise of a new and more intimate communion.

Changing Views of an Unchanging God

My teacher’s revised understanding of God raises several points.

First, when we speak of God as we know Him, we are likely to describe our own inner selves at that time—our selves and our need.

Paul speaks (and so do many great devotional writers through history) of the soul as a “mirror” of God. In ancient times, only the center of a beaten-metal mirror was polished highly enough to give back a perfect likeness. Moving away from this perfect center, toward the outer edges, the image became more and more obscure.

If we are to become “mirrors” that brightly reflect God’s glory, that means we are in the process of being beaten, shaped, and polished. What do we reflect at any point on the way to a perfect shine?

It’s a good bet that my high school teacher needed to know God in the way he knew Him first, as the tightrope over outer darkness. God finds us where He finds us. He is an expert in triage, and runs to the cry of the soul that’s dying. If it’s a tightrope we need, he lays Himself down to become the line. Anything, perhaps, to get us revived and stabilize our condition.

Second, we can expect that what we know of God will change over time.

In his treatise *On Seeing God*, Augustine emphasizes the many aspects of God’s invisible nature. God, he says, is like a many-faceted jewel. We will only see every beautiful facet of God “when we become like the angels.” In this lifetime, what we know of God is what He chooses to show us of Himself. And He has reasons for letting each one of us know some certain aspects of Himself but not all of them.

So, what are some of things that we, together, know about God? If He is living and active, not just in my life but yours, too, this changes the whole game. What are you seeing?

The God of All Comfort

Carole knew Him as the “God of all comfort.” The irony was that almost everything Carole said was abrasive. Whatever you said to her brought a touchy, snapping response.

Her participation in our college Bible study made things uneasy. We were young disciples, with all the answers about God highlighted in our Bibles in green or yellow.

One evening we were talking about what makes a disciple. Someone quoted Keith Green’s song about Jesus judging the sheep and the goats, based on how obedient or disobedient we were—how sin put us on the side of the goats. Carole went unhinged.

“I don’t see God that way at all,” she said angrily. “He understands our weakness. He forgives. He loves us.”

Knowing smiles were exchanged.

“Sure God loves you just the way you are,” someone replied. “But He loves you too much to leave you that way.” This was good for a laugh, until we saw Carole’s face.

Awkwardly, we recovered and went on.

Later, Carole told me her story. After leaving home to escape an abusive father, she’d fallen in love with a young associate pastor. When she got pregnant, he accused her of trying to “trap”

him and skipped town. The baby girl was adopted out, and Carole would probably never see her again. Her pastor said she should never marry because her “premarital sin” would taint her spouse. Fortunately, she’d found another church.

“Sometimes it hurts so badly,” she said. “I need to know that God is just there for me. I can’t handle anything else—definitely not the ‘judge and jury’ you all make Him out to be. I think I’ve suffered a lot of judgment already.”

We should have listened to Carole in our Bible study, listened and not patronized or tried to divert her from the path she needed to be on. She was slowly being led out of pain, to know the God of all comfort.

Does any one of us not need to know God in this way? If so, then maybe we are too “well.”

The God Who Rules with Rules

Jack was irritating because he insisted that everyone needs to know a God who is the exact opposite of Carole’s—“the God who rules with rules.”

We were working on a Christian book together, and I wanted to discuss how grace works in our lives. About the need to be open with God about all our weaknesses.

“Oh, you’re one of those grace guys,” Jack interrupted. “The Bible talks just as much about obedience, you know. You don’t need to whine and parade all your weaknesses to God. You don’t need these support groups. Just do it. I think that’s a great motto for all these Christians who bellyache about their failures.”

He showed me his daily schedule-planner. “I regulate my whole life around obeying God,” he said, displaying pencilled-in entries. Then he talked about his past—compulsive habits had “backslid” him into cocaine abuse, which led to suicide attempts. “Accountability to God saved my life, my business, and my marriage. Every week I set up my schedule around obedience to God’s rules—and it *works*.”

Should I have argued that this sounded a bit legalistic? God isn’t lenient on sin in His children because sin is not lenient on us. Paul says the law is our schoolmaster. True, Jack was being tough on himself and a bit driven, but he was putting himself through paces and schooling himself, similar to the way behavior therapists achieve success with people who are subject to certain compulsive disorders.

I didn’t argue with Jack’s way of knowing God. Yes, it was a more regimented picture of God than the one I know. But sometimes it’s not bad to be placed within stricter confines for a time so we can understand better why the confines are there. And the bone most severely broken needs to stay in the cast the longest.

In our relativistic world, it may be a very good thing to reacquaint ourselves with the God who, out of love, sets wise, even strict boundaries of accountability—especially in those areas where we’re dangerously weak.

The God of the Wilderness

In another era—when Christian spirituality was more God-centered than man-centered—it was understood that nothing was out of God’s sovereign control. The Church fathers and mothers wrote about knowing God in dry, dark times—about knowing the “wilderness side” of God.

David sang about finding God “in a dry and weary land.” John of the Cross wrote, in *Dark Night of the Soul* and *Living Flame of Love*, that God can lead us into times of intense deadness—akin to depression and despair—until we are certain that every created thing and

purpose is utter vanity, hopeless. The closer God's bright spiritual presence, the greater will be the dazzling darkness that benights our poor soul's weak vision . . . until our inner eyes or faith "adjust," and we recognize the approach of our soul's true Lover.

This "wilderness God" will sometimes require that you go through hellish emptiness so that you may find Him. He is a God who will pull away every toy that once kept you so occupied that you did not know, at first, how to look above this world's plane and see Him. Or how to find the unflinching happiness and life that is only to be found in Him.

Oswald Chambers wrote in *Shade of His Hand*, his study of Ecclesiastes, that wilderness times help us see God in the midst of an empty universe—and in our own dull and vain circumstances. He wrote that when we really understand that everything in this life is passing away, we are freed to look with spiritual eyes to an everlasting God. Real faith dawns only then.

You must cross a wilderness—cross it by a leap of faith—to come to this way of knowing God. But it's worth it in the end, speaking from experience, to come to the far edge of life to meet this "God of the wilderness."

The God Who Keeps Green Pastures

Barb once had lots of pain and too many questions. "But that was—let's see—10 years ago. Before I knew Jesus," she says.

Barb prays boldly every day, declaring with certainty that each of her three children will be completely protected from every evil. "I can't begin to tell you the number of times I've been moved to pray—and found out later that one child or the other was in some difficulty. Or even in danger. But then why should we be surprised? They're His sheep, and He promises to protect them."

It's tempting: You could raise your fist and smash this image of God that Barb knows. We all know that other innocent little "lambs"—even the children of praying Christian parents—are abducted and brutalized. It can be tiresome to hear another Christian dribbling out simple assurances that "God provides." "God heals." "God protects."

But Barb's friends know her as "a real prayer warrior." "That woman knows God," says one of her friends. "And when she prays, God answers." A string of impressive testimonials follows.

Oddly, I learn from the friend that Barb has not had a hunky-dory life. Her husband's business failed, and they once lost their home. (Something makes me want to press her about this.)

Will skepticism keep me—and keep you—from allowing that Barb may know "the God who keeps green pastures"?

Can God choose to reveal the watchful, quick-answering side of Himself to an everyday woman like Barb?

I have to recognize that it would be a choice to doubt it, just as it is a choice to believe it.

Because God is Spirit, to describe Him in comparison with anything in this physical universe automatically ruins the definition.

Opening to All of God

Some say God—if there is a God—is too full of contradictions. How can you know Someone who is so capricious? Who plays a game called Now-you-don't-see-me-and-now-you-really-don't-see-me?

But is He contradictory? Or is He just big enough to embrace opposite-seeming attributes because His nature exists in a dimension even the wildest quantum physics hasn't dabbled in?

Can He be a God of empowering grace, who also sets protective rules? Who leads some to Himself in spiritual deadness and meets others on Sunnybrook Farm? Who answers homey prayers for some and tells others to look to eternity for answers?

Charles Finney knew “the God who moves us to act in society,” and he helped to foment the anti-slavery movement. Theresa of Avila knew “the God who makes the soul a sanctuary, an interior castle of beauty,” and she helped to reform the spirituality of the Catholic Church.

A young state trooper knows a tough God of swift justice. An elderly prison minister knows the God who looks beyond the fault to see the need.

A psychiatrist knows the God who blesses research by revealing new chemical compounds and the secrets of brain chemistry, thus relieving suffering. A faith healer knows the God who instantly delivers from “demon possession,” or psychosis—call it what you will.

A newly converted friend leaves his liturgical church because he “came to know God” in a blue-collar Bible church. A friend who has written bestselling Charismatic books weeps with the sense of God’s presence while attending the most solemn Catholic Mass.

Who Knows God—Really?

Who knows God? No one? Or do we each know something of God, depending on the particular door He chooses to knock on when He wants something more of Himself to be known? You open yours, I open mine—and, who knows, sometimes we may even see the same thing.

John of the Cross looked up and saw God one day—and the best he could do was to describe Him as “an endless abyss of light,” like looking up into an arching universe glittering with God. Each light issued like waters from a fountain of grace, pouring a different “virtue” or aspect of God into this world.

But the fact that he was forced to use this delightful description frustrated the great mystic reformer. Because God is Spirit, John said, to describe Him in comparison with anything in this physical universe automatically ruins the definition. John knew that we get too easily stuck, picturing God as we like to see Him. Besides, God changes the way He approaches us, it seems, and does so in order to move and change us: The moment we say we know His supernatural side, He shoves us face-first toward mundane and thankless service so we can know His sacrificial passion.

As God wills, we could say, each one of us knows some aspect of the gracious and bountiful nature of God. Each one sees a fragment . . . just before He calls us on to another place. You see an approving wink here, the corner of a winsome smile there. I may feel a finger tapping on my conscience—or a knuckle rap.

God, I believe, made us to need each other. And He did so by setting up a system in which it is impossible for you or me, on our own, to know all that can be known about Him. That is also to say we can know more about Him by listening to each other’s experience. And that can require us to “willingly suspend our disbelief” sometimes.

That in itself is an incredibly useful talent, once you know how to use it. I am not a Roman Catholic, as John of the Cross was, but the way he saw God works for me.

If I want to know Him better, I cannot dismiss you and what you see of Him in the obscure edges of your mirror—that is, not if I want to escape my self-centeredness. When I learn to stop ignoring you, I suddenly see a new depth to Him. This is a system only God could have thought up.

On our way, as we seek to know more about this God—who can shift like the wind, barrel through loud as a toddler, or stun us with the subtlest of artistic brushstrokes—we can help

ourselves along by doing the simplest thing: We recognize that there are others here, somewhere close, stumbling along on parallel paths. And each one has been given a piece of a map. Are we calling out to find each other through the blinding trees and the dusk?

I begin to find my way deeper into God when I stop insisting I know exactly what He is about. It is biblical good sense to lose myself, so I can stay found. Simply put, I can listen and be more honest with you if you'll do the same for me. We can pool our knowledge of the quadrants.

We have a God who works to be known, and from the looks of it He works at it pretty hard. What if we became His fully awakened people?

More than once I've been sure of myself, only to have a gracious friend reach over and turn my spiritual map rightside-up. I learn to take it good-naturedly. Perhaps you will awaken me next time, and give me correcting quadrants.

God knows that I need it.

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: The Way To Intimacy*



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Writer DAVID HAZARD consults with Christian publishing companies, nonprofits, and ministries. He edits the "Rekindling the Inner Fire" devotional series, featuring the work of classic writers such as Amy Carmichael and Andrew Murray.

David attends Cornerstone Chapel in Leesburg, Virginia, where he helped to establish county-wide youth ministries and a crisis pregnancy center. Someday he'd like to climb in Tibet and Nepal.