

Special Section: Knowing God

Rediscovering The Glorious Gospel

The cross gives us an intimate glimpse into God’s heart.

By Jerry Bridges

I “rediscovered” the gospel one night in an Atlanta hotel room. It had not been a good day. I had spent most of it trying to get ahead of a spring snowstorm that threatened to shut down the Denver airport. Hours of waiting on standby had finally ended when I got the next-to-last available seat on the last flight out of Denver.

I was on my way to speak at a conference on personal holiness, but I didn’t feel holy at all that night. Rather, I was painfully conscious of my anxiety arising from my failure to trust God, compounded by impatience and resentment toward the airline personnel who had seemed so undisturbed by my plight. I hadn’t exactly displayed the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, or patience—that day.

Finally, alone in a hotel room, I came face to face with my sinful attitude. I realized I had dishonored God by my failure to trust in His sovereignty over my schedule. I knew I had blamed airline personnel for a situation over which they had no control. How could I possibly teach on holiness that weekend when I was so unholy myself?

The Love of God

In an effort to regain my spiritual composure, I opened my Bible and began to read Paul’s letter to the Colossians. Soon I came to Col 2:13 and read those wonderful words, “He forgave us all our sins.” Joy flooded my soul as I realized that my sins of anxiety, impatience, and resentment had been forgiven because of Christ. That is the glorious good news of the gospel.

What does this have to do, though, with getting to know God? It is obvious that we can get to know another person only to the extent that person wants to know us and is willing to open his or her heart to us. The same is true of our relationship with God. We cannot come to know God in a deeper, more intimate way unless He opens His heart to us. The truth is, however, that God has opened His heart to us in the Scriptures, especially so in the gospel.

Hebrews 1:1–2 tells us that God spoke throughout the Old Testament era in various ways through the prophets, but today He has spoken to us by His Son. Jesus Christ is the final, complete revelation of God to us. Through Christ God opened wide His heart of love to us so that we can know Him in a personal way.

God spoke by His Son. It was not so much the words of Jesus, important as they are, but the work of Jesus by which God spoke to us. Romans 3:25 tells us that God sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. That is, God sent His Son to suffer in our place so that the just and holy wrath of God might not fall on us. That act of the Father in giving His Son to suffer in our place speaks volumes to us. That one act said more than a billion statements of “I love you.” In Christ’s atonement God fully opened His heart to us so that we might know Him as the God of

love and compassion and grace.

The Justice of God

The gospel, however, reveals to us not only the love of God, but also His justice. If our knowledge of God is based only on our awareness of His love, we really don't know the God of the Bible. God is not only loving, He is also holy and just. And if we stop and think about it, we wouldn't want God to be only a God of love without at the same time being a God of justice.

Suppose the governor of your state granted a pardon to someone who had been convicted of a heinous crime merely because he felt sorry for the criminal. How would you respond? I suspect you and I would both be incensed or even outraged. Why? Because we would know that justice had been violated. We applaud compassion but not when it results in a gross violation of justice.

What is true about justice on a purely human plane is much more true with God. God could not allow sin to go unpunished. He could not simply forgive us our sins at the expense of His justice. Justice must be satisfied. And in the death of Christ, God devised a way whereby both His justice could be satisfied and His love and mercy expressed.

We like to say, "God loved us so much that He was willing to sacrifice His Son for us." That is true. Such love should lead us to worship and adore Him, and then to obey and serve Him. But there is another side to the cross that we need to keep in mind. God guarded His justice so much that, in saving us, it was necessary to sacrifice His Son to satisfy it.

We can never fully appreciate God's love unless we also appreciate His justice. God is infinitely holy and righteous. He does not wink at or overlook sin. Our sin must be punished, or God's holiness and justice would be violated. There is no forgiveness, no salvation, apart from the satisfaction of God's justice. If we are to get to know God in a more intimate way, we must know Him as the One who is infinitely holy, righteous, and just, as well as the One who is loving, compassionate, and merciful.

Here, though, is the marvelous wonder of the gospel, the truth that should set our hearts aflame with adoration and praise. God's justice was completely satisfied by the death of Christ in our place. The punishment we should have borne to satisfy God's justice was borne by the Lord Jesus Christ. The wrath of God that should have fallen on us fell on Jesus. When Jesus said, "It is finished" (John 19:30), He was saying God's justice was satisfied, the penalty for our sin was fully paid.

It is this truth of the satisfaction of God's justice that gives meaning and substance to Paul's words in Col. 2:13, "He forgave us all our sins." That is why joy came over me that night in a hotel room in Atlanta. It was more than someone saying, "Okay, I forgive you." It was God saying, "My justice is fully satisfied, and on that basis I have freely and completely and irrevocably forgiven you of all of your sins."

We can never begin to appreciate His love unless we also appreciate His justice. God Himself has said, "But let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight" (Jeremiah 9:24). So we see that God Himself wants us to know Him both in His justice and His love, and both of these are set forth in the gospel.

A Deeper Knowledge of God

How can the knowledge of this gospel help us to know God at a deeper, more intimate level? We all readily recognize the difference between knowing about a person and truly knowing the

person. Further, we would all agree that there are different levels of “knowing” people.

For most of us, there are probably only a few people whom we really know. Those are the people with whom we spend more time and share our hearts, and above all, with whom we experience life together. This same truth applies in our relationship with God.

Unbelievers may know about God but they do not know Him. Believers by definition know God (see John 17:3), but some only know Him at a very superficial level. Those who know God at the deep, personal level we are considering here are those who spend time with God, share their hearts together, and experience life together.

Obviously we cannot experience life together with God in the same way that we do with other people. What we can experience, though, is the reality of God in our lives. We can, for example, experience the reality of His faithfulness when He meets some special need or delivers us from some difficult circumstance in ways that go beyond His ordinary providential care of us.

One of the chief ways in which we experience the reality of God in our lives is through the forgiveness of our sins. Guilt is one of the greatest hindrances to relationships. This is true in our relationships with other people and it is certainly true in our relationship with God. Now it is through appropriation of the truth of the gospel that we experience God’s forgiveness. When we by faith lay hold of Christ’s death for us, the Holy Spirit bears witness in our hearts that we are forgiven. And this heartfelt assurance of forgiveness draws us closer to Him. We want to know more intimately and love more deeply this God who has so freely forgiven us through Christ.

That is what happened to me that night in the Atlanta hotel room. I felt guilty and estranged from God and wondered how He could possibly use a sinner like me to do anything, let alone teach on the subject of personal holiness. Then I read Col. 2:13, “He forgave us all our sins.” Immediately the Holy Spirit bore witness in my heart that those sins were forgiven because of Christ’s atoning death for me.

I knew I could teach on holiness that weekend, not because I was holy, but because I had come to know the God of love and forgiveness a little bit more. God had once again opened His heart to me and said, “I love you.” And in the assurance of His love I went forth to urge people to be holy as He is holy.

This is why the daily application of the gospel is so crucial to our relationship with Him. It is through this use of the gospel to deal with our sins that the unfathomable love and grace of God become so very real to us. It is through the gospel that we experience His love.

Unfortunately, however, we don’t focus on the gospel very much. Most believers unconsciously look on the gospel as a message for unbelievers. Once we trust Christ as our Savior, we don’t need the gospel anymore, so we seem to think. Nothing could be further from the truth. The fact is, we need the gospel every day of our lives because we sin every day, in fact many times a day.

We teach new Christians the assurance of forgiveness based on the promise of 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” What is it, though, that underlies that assurance of forgiveness? It is the gospel, the good news that Christ bore on the cross those very sins we are confessing. That is why God can be just in forgiving our sins. His justice has been satisfied.

This is why I say I “rediscovered” the gospel that night in the Atlanta hotel room. I hadn’t lost it or forgotten it. I just held the all too common view that the gospel is for unbelievers. But that night I discovered it is also for me, a practicing Christian, and even a conference speaker.

The Apostle John wrote, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). The cross of Christ is the one irrefutable expression of God’s love. It was at the cross that God opened wide His heart to us

and said, "I love you." It is only through the gospel, however, that we "hear" God say that to us. So if we want to draw closer to God and experience a deeper relationship with Him, we must rediscover the grandeur of the gospel and keep it before us each day of our lives.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: A Daily Dose Of The Gospel*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JERRY BRIDGES has recently retired as vice president of corporate affairs for The Navigators. But as a popular conference speaker and author Jerry has plenty to keep him busy.

The author of six books, most notably *The Pursuit of Holiness* (NavPress), Jerry's newest release is *The Discipline of Grace* (NavPress).

On Your Own
A Daily Dose Of The Gospel

The gospel “gets us saved,” but what does it have to do with knowing God better?

Find out for yourself. Take time each day this week to read a passage of Scripture that summarizes the gospel message. In the space provided, jot down notes of what the passage reveals about God.

Monday (Romans 5:1–11)

Tuesday (Ephes. 2:11–18)

Wednesday (1 John 4:9–10)

Thursday (Romans 3:21–26)

Friday (Col. 2:13–15)

Saturday (Phil. 2:5–11)

Sunday Review your week’s notes. How has your relationship with God deepened as a result of “rediscovering the gospel”?