

Special Section: Knowing God

What's Stopping You?

Common hindrances to the pursuit of God

By Jill Briscoe

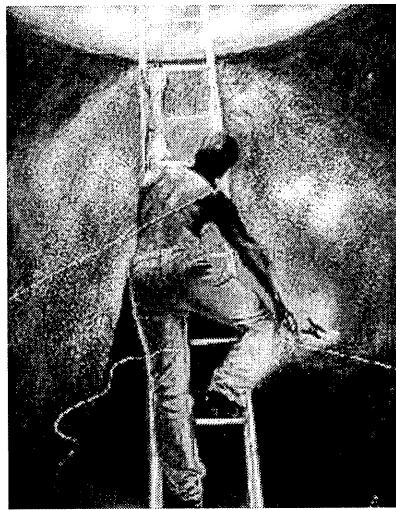


Illustration by Rod Karmenzind

On a typically beautiful British autumn day in 1969, my husband came cheerily into the house, joined us at the evening meal, and announced, “Well kids, we’re going to America!” Our three children’s eyes widened. David glanced a little nervously at his sister, who was staring into her cup. Pete cracked a joke (his way of relieving tension), and my heart pumped furiously. What would it all mean for the Briscoe family? What would life hold for us all?

“I know about America,” David offered. “We did it in school this year.”

It was true David did know a little about America. He had been made aware of its existence through education. But awareness wasn’t “knowing.” In the months of preparation that lay ahead, Stuart (who was already traveling in the United States) would send us photographs, or make wonderfully descriptive audio tapes, adding details to our knowledge. “They move houses on lorries (trucks) on the road?” Judy asked incredulously. “Dad likes walking round shops?” Pete commented in awe, after one tape where Stuart had described the American malls.

Information wasn’t knowing—really knowing what America was all about. But the more we gained information, the more we began to get excited. Dad brought home baseball hats, magnets for my fridge, and a Barbie doll for Judy. But even our warm “feelings” did not constitute a true “knowing.”

On November 11, 1970, we boarded a plane in London and with all our goods packed in two suitcases apiece, flew with our golden retriever, Prince, to Chicago. Now the true knowing

began!

Knowing God, like knowing America, is much more than awareness, information, or emotional stirrings. “Knowing” is “being there.” Too many of us, unfortunately, never get beyond a textbook acquaintance with God. We remain across the sea, content to base our knowledge mainly on what others describe to us. We live on our safe and comfortable islands, never exploring the vast continent, full of wonders and dangers, that waits to receive us.

What keeps us from truly experiencing God?

The Impediment of Ignorance

One of the hindrances is our ignorance. We often do not actively seek a deeper intimacy with God because we do not know it is possible.

The girl who led me to Christ also disciplined me. I hadn't a clue that's what was happening. I thought every new convert, like me, had someone who would assign her Christian books to read and report on; hold her accountable to learn 20 verses (with references) a week; teach her how to pray, study, and witness; and begin her education in world missions. I have since learned that many believers have never had a mentor or helper to holiness.

We all need teachers, and if we are not in an evangelical, teaching church or environment, guessing doesn't do it. We know we should read the Bible, but where do we begin, when do we do it, and how do we rightly interpret and apply what we read? Are there guidelines, rules, skills? The answer of course is yes, but guidelines need a guide, and rules and skills need to be taught. A mentor can remove so many obstacles to truly knowing and experiencing God. Sometimes we need to take the initiative and ask a wise and experienced believer to help us.

We can also learn from reading about giants of the faith. As a young believer I inhaled biographies of men and women who knew the Lord, loved the Lord, served the Lord, and were evangelistic in their zeal to make Him known. Men like Hudson Taylor, C. T. Studd, Adoniram Judson, William Carey, William and Catherine Booth, Mary Slessor, and Amy Carmichael. They generously “shared” their knowledge of God with me from the pages of those books. They had been on the way a lot longer than I, and could help me adjust my sights and “go for it.” These giants of the faith became my mentors. The stories of men and women God has greatly used can let us into the secrets of their “knowing” and enable us to make great progress toward maturity.

The Bane of Busyness

Another thing that can stop us from knowing God is busyness. Some of us are busy doing important things, and some of us are busy doing unimportant things, and some of us are just busy being busy!

There is some busyness that is blessed busyness and there is some that is a bane. I have wrestled many long years with this. As a Christian worker who loves her Lord, I long to hear His “well done” at the end of the day. I fear to hear I have underdone or overdone!

How busy is too busy? Who will tell me? He will! I need to learn the art of leaving things undone.

The art of leaving things undone is a learned art! Whether it be housework, raising children, church work, or work in the secular marketplace, there is no end to the jobs that need to be done.

Yet I've found that even though there is a world to be won, God expects me to first attend to the mission field between my own two feet. That's my bit of the world and I will certainly be held accountable for it. There are hungry millions to be fed, but God only expects me to offer up

the fish and bread in my own lunch basket. There are children to be trained, but I am peculiarly responsible first and foremost to raise my own, in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. And there are certainly lots of Christians to be discipled, counseled, and helped to keep on keeping on, but I didn't save them, and I don't have to keep them! It's all a matter of the art of leaving things undone.

Jesus knew how to do that. One day He said to His heavenly Father, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4, *NKJV*), and went home to Heaven at the age of 33. Think about that. Think of all the lepers He left behind; all the hungry, maimed, blind, and demon-possessed who stayed hungry, maimed, blind, and demon-possessed because He finished the work God gave Him to do! You may be tempted to ask, how could He have finished the work that needed to be done? Oh, but it doesn't say He finished the work that needed to be done—it says He finished the work God gave Him to do. And that's why it's important to learn the secret of pleasing God! "I always do what pleases him" (John 8:29), Jesus said.

When we please Him by getting on with the work He gave us to do, we will find we stay close to Him. We won't get so busy we get dizzy with doing. We'll be able to come to terms with the dying and the crying and pray more effectively that God would send out other laborers to do the work He's given them to do, while we busy ourselves with our own blessed business. And most important, we won't rob others of the joy of hearing their "well done" at the end of the day. Maybe we should examine our hearts in this matter and make sure we can say, "I do always those things that please Him." If we can strive to do that, we will have learned the art of leaving things undone and find ourselves only doing our part of the all.

The Problem of Pettiness

What stops us staying in touch with God? Ignorance, busyness, and often pettiness. All of us can fall into the pettiness trap.

What is pettiness? Pettiness bothers our heads with whether we are too hot or too cool as we sit in a cushy church sanctuary; whether someone took our spot in the church parking lot, or whether anyone noticed or acknowledged our latest contribution to whatever we contributed to. Pettiness bites and devours our brothers and sisters in the Lord. It stops us ever hearing the voice of God through the pastor, who, pettiness insists, is either "too shallow" or "too deep."

Pettiness stops us knowing God. We should not spend all our energy crossing our T's and dotting our I's. If we do, we will stay small-minded and small-impact people, and may never learn to write Jesus' name freely and creatively in other people's hearts!

I constantly ask the Lord to keep me from having a mini-mindset. From thinking small, easy, below average. When I'm maxi-minded instead of petty, I try to make a significant difference where I live—to be salt, to arrest corruption, and to be light in a dark place.

One day Jesus listened to His disciples arguing about lunch! "Open your eyes" He advised them. "Look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest" (John 4:35). If we have our eyes fixed on the loaf of bread in our hands, we'll never see the One who grew the grain in the first place. In order that the hungry multitudes may be fed, we may find ourselves arguing which bread is best—whole wheat or white! The Lord needs to deliver us from being fascinated and captivated by our lunch. May larger hungers, and the needs of a spiritually starved world lift us above the pettiness that so easily besets us.

The Lure of Laziness

What keeps me from growing close God? Ignorance, busyness, pettiness, and, of course,

laziness will do it. Sheer unadulterated laziness. We simply can't be bothered to be bothered.

Laziness is a willful decision not to go to good extremes. Our excuse for not being "spiritually disciplined" is we don't want to be called weird. We need to be balanced, laziness advises. Do a little bit of this and a little bit of that and a little bit of the other.

Laziness yawns when he hears a talk on laziness. He tunes out easily, too lazy to listen to the application. He's too lazy to concentrate on anything spiritually stretching at all, preferring drama to doctrine and music to mastering the Scriptures. He wants to be entertained, not educated. If electives are offered at church, he carefully selects ones titled "how to find rest for your soul" or "how to pray effectively in five minutes flat," and always arranges to work late at the office during missions festival. It's amazing how hard laziness will work to make sure he's lazy!

Being naturally lazy at heart (the flesh is weak, remember), I find I need to make some commitments to real live people and not just to God. I find someone somewhere to teach (you don't have to be a teacher to do this). Just to make an appointment once or twice a week with someone not quite as far along in the faith as you are (and you can always find one of those) will do it. This means I have to be in the Word so I can pass it along. I will need to have something "new" to say each time we meet. Laziness doesn't like this, but God does.

I also fight laziness by choosing a day (mine is Sunday) when I promise the Lord and myself I'll jot a note, scribble a letter, make a phone call, or send something to encourage or build up someone, somewhere, somehow. Having a certain day of the week helps me to avoid laziness's suggestions of procrastination. I've noticed laziness's favorite day of the week is "tomorrow." Laziness negates the importance of today. Yet we all need to live today as if we had no other, knowing full well tomorrow may never come.

The Fear of the Cost

Ignorance, busyness, pettiness, laziness . . . all these can keep us at an arm's length from God. But perhaps the biggest obstacle to knowing God is that we fear the cost of it all.

Jesus called Peter to follow Him. Peter "knew" Christ. Andrew had introduced him to the Messiah and Peter had been hanging around Jesus in his spare time. But today was different. For Peter this call was to leave everything and follow Jesus.

What did that mean for Peter and his family? It meant leaving his business and security, his home and environment, his trade, his independence. Peter must have feared the cost. But because he experienced the power of Christ in the miraculous catch of fish (Luke 5:6) he fell at the Lord's feet. True, he didn't say "take me with you" but rather "go away from me" (Luke 5:8). But his heart was captured and his mind convinced that Jesus was Lord. When he heard the Lord's words, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men" (Luke 5:10), he beached his boat and began a "knowing" God experience he could never have had without paying a price.

In my own journey of faith, fear has often kept me from beaching some particular boat and getting on with it. But I learned like Peter to "do it scared"—to follow anyway. Someone has said courage is "fear that has said its prayers." I have come to realize saying my prayers will not banish fear, but courage will overpower the fear that prayed, pack its bag, and set off with the Master. Courage will leave the safe, familiar, and even loved people and things behind for the sake of His Word and the gospel.

There is a cost to knowing God. There has to be. Because the more you know, the more you long for others to know too. And that longing could well take you not only across the street, but perhaps even around the world!

When the church invited us to leave England and move to the United States, they asked us to

“beach our boats.” We came with the clothes we needed and that was all. It was hard—but necessary—and there was some cost involved. Up to then we had known God as provider, now we were invited to know Him in a new and deeper way. But there was a cost. All of us were afraid, but we followed Him and in the doing, left our boat in England. Sometimes I long for it. Sometimes (very occasionally) a great wave of nostalgia sweeps over me for my “Galilee”—the quiet meadows and serene peaks and golden daffodils. But that’s how it is—it’s part of the price. The cost of obedience, however, is totally outweighed by the depth and joy of a new “knowing” of the Lord.

Slaying the Sinful Self

So what in the end can keep me from coming closer to God? I can! In the final analysis it is that sinful self—the flesh—I have been describing. My fallen nature knows how to be hostile to God without anyone telling me how. The main problem is I don’t want to be like Jesus, I want to be like me. That’s the essence of the flesh. Self is all for getting, not giving; living, not dying; controlling, not releasing. What stops Jill Briscoe staying near to God? Jill Briscoe! And you know, it never gets any easier.

Paul talks about this in Romans 7:21–24. The battle that rages within will rage till it’s over and we are home in Heaven. We have two natures warring inside of us. It’s a bit like the English bird that lays its eggs in its nest and sets about hatching them. Along comes the cuckoo bird (a lazy fellow). It can’t bother building its own nest, so it plops its egg in the nest already occupied. Two natures in one nest! The diligent bird hatches all the eggs. Now the cuckoo baby—bigger, and nasty—grows and grows, snatching the food and taking over. Eventually the cuckoo tips the little rightful owners out and reigns supreme.

What a picture of the fleshly nature! The nature we feed will control life in the nest!

So whether it’s ignorance, busyness, pettiness, laziness, or the cost, it’s our innate selfishness that needs to be hammered to the cross of Christ moment by moment and day by day. Who will take the hammer and fasten me to the cross? Someone has! For as in Christ all died, so in Him will all be made alive. There it is! I can reckon myself dead indeed unto sin but alive unto God. That’s a mindset that begins in my head, then captures my heart, and finally sets my feet dancing with delight. I find that dying to self is not such a dreadful idea after all, for such a death releases me into the power and pleasure of His daily presence and delivers me from me. So what keeps us from knowing and experiencing God in a more meaningful way? Whatever it is, it’s not worth a wasted life.

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Entering The Holy Of Holies*

» **See Also:** *Sidebar: Are You Filled With Good Intentions?*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JILL BRISCOE is known throughout the world for her Bible study and speaking ministry. She is the author of numerous books, including a series of Bible studies published by Victor Books. Her most recent work is *De-Baiting the Woman Trap* (Baker).

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