

KNOWING GOD

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A recent survey by Barna found that 50% of Americans want “to know God better” (<https://www.barna.com/research/state-of-the-bible-2019/>). What does that mean and how can we know God better? The most common answers are usually excellent ones, such as advising people to study the Scriptures while worshiping in fellowship with other Christians. The more dangerous answers are those that are subjective and relative, such as telling people to depend on feelings and emotions or random life events as indicators of God’s presence and guidance in their lives. In this article we will explore a key way of knowing God that is found in the Scriptures.

In the Bible the Hebrew mind views mankind’s knowledge of God in a manner quite different from Greek philosophy. As Alan Richardson explains, “The knowledge of God comes not by contemplating his being and attributes but by obeying his commandments, and the OT knows nothing of a ‘theoretical’ or even mystical vision of God....The prophets of Israel had indeed a knowledge of God, but it was not attained either by mystic vision or by philosophical speculation; it had been won through their obedience to his will at the crises of their nation’s history” (*An Introduction to the Theology of the NT*, p. 39).

T. C. Vriezen argues in a similar way that knowledge in the OT is unlike that in our Western world, influenced by Greek philosophy. Westerners think of knowledge as using reason to understand and analyze something. In the OT, knowing someone referred to a close relationship. “This knowledge of God embraces much more than

a mere intellectual knowledge, it concerns the whole of human life. It is essentially a communion with God, and it is also faith;...its vital demand is that man should act in accordance with God’s will and walk humbly in the ways of the Lord (Micah vi.8)” (*An outline of Old Testament theology*, p. 154).

Through philosophical reasoning and pondering of the glories of nature, man could discern that God existed and could deduce some of his attributes (Ps. 19:1–6). God’s existence and moral law were apparent to all; therefore, the nations were accountable (Rom. 1:18–25; 2:14–16; Jer. 10:25; Amos 1:3–2:3). Even more so, God should have been known by Israel, since they possessed the Law and the message of the prophets. But frequently the OT prophets declared that Israel had a lack of knowledge. “My people are foolish; they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding” (Jer. 4:22; cf. Isa. 1:3; Jer. 2:8). The essence of this lack of knowledge was disobedience, because the verse continues: “They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to go good.” Similarly, Hosea declares, “There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land” (Hos. 4:1; cf. 5:4; Jer. 14:18).

If disobedience led to a lack of knowledge of God, it should have also been true that obedience was a key to knowledge of God in the Hebrew mind. Therefore, God commended Josiah for acting justly and righteously, judging fairly the cause of the poor and needy, saying, “Is not this to know me?” (Jer. 22:15–16). Alan Richardson explains, “In the OT ‘knowledge

of God’ is virtually a synonym for obedience to God’s will (e.g. Hos. 6.6), and to know God means to exercise lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness, as Yahweh himself does (Jer. 9.24)” (*Theology of the NT*, p. 40). Similarly, in the NT Paul wrote, “Come to a sober and right mind, and sin no more; for some people have no knowledge of God” (1 Cor. 15:34).

How do we explain this principle of knowing God through obedience? Imagine a small boy who has never eaten chocolate ice cream. If you taught this boy about the properties and attributes of chocolate ice cream, would he know chocolate ice cream? In the Western sense of intellectual knowledge, he would. In the Hebrew mind, he would not know chocolate ice cream yet, not really. Let him eat a bowl of chocolate ice cream, and the Hebrew would say, “Now he knows! Look at him smile and lick his lips.” Apply the same approach to learning the virtue of compassion or the practice of forgiveness. You can immediately see how it works.

If we only learn some intellectual truths about God—God is eternal, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, loving, gracious, holy, compassionate, and forgiving—we do not really know God. We only know about God. However, if we believe in and obey God, acting like he does,—“I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness”—then we will truly “understand and know” God (Jer. 9:24). What is God like? Believe in him, study the Bible, and obey God’s word. You will find out what the Lord is like. “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps. 34:8).