

Study 2

A Relationship

'The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.' (Acts 17:24,25)



Starry Night at La Silla, photo by Håkon-Dahle

Icebreaker

What is the difference between a business and a personal relationship?

Knowledge through creation and revelation

(Read Psalm 19:1-6; Matthew 11:25-27; Acts 17:24-28)

Very few of us will ever experience the heavens as the Psalmist did, because unless we live in a very remote location there will not be the stark contrast between day and night, or such a volume of stars and galaxies visible to the naked eye because of light pollution.

David lived most of his life outside, hence his love for the natural world and the wonder he writes about when considering the heavens. Unlike some, he did not consider the sun and stars as gods, but evidence of the creative workmanship of the God he worshipped, reflecting his power and glory.

In the passage from Matthew, Jesus addresses God as 'Father' and 'Lord of heaven and earth', a title that the Psalmist would no doubt agree with. The emphasis is that our understanding of God is not a simple act of reading the right books.

Many scholars have tried over the centuries and failed to find God this way, but understanding comes through revelation, having our eyes and hearts opened to receive the truth, and that is not dependent upon education or position in society.

Paul in his address to the intellectuals in Athens echoes the words of the Psalmist to those who were seeking understanding through intellectual thought and discussion and yet considered gods might be present in things made by human beings.

Paul tells them to look at the heavens and earth again, because it is all given life and breath by God. 'For in him we move and have our being', says Paul, and this should be the impetus for all to seek the one true God.

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Discussion

Q) Have you gazed up at the sky on a clear dark night? What did you notice and feel, and does it speak into your faith?

Q) How can knowledge about our planet and its relationship to the universe help in understanding our place in God's purposes?

Knowledge through word and Spirit

(Read Hebrews 8:8-13; Ephesians 1:17-19; 1 Corinthians 2:6-12)

The writer of Hebrews uses a quote from Jeremiah, which is a signpost to something new. Historically, God's relationship with his people depended upon the covenant brought to them via Moses, offering the people God's blessing if they would be obedient.

The Old Testament attests to the fact that this relationship faced many points of crisis because of disobedience and sin. Now we hear of a new covenant as God speaks through the prophet Jeremiah to talk of something radically different, not written on stone tablets but in people's hearts, where animal sacrifices are no longer required for the forgiveness of sins, and people would truly 'know' their God and forgiveness of sins.

This only finds its fuller meaning in the light of Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection.

It appears to have been Paul's constant prayer for the Christians in Ephesus that they might know their God in the same way that Jeremiah spoke of, with the help of the Holy Spirit. He talks of wisdom and revelation, but his desire is simply that through the Spirit they might get to know, in the depths of their hearts, the God they worshipped, and receive the blessings that come through that knowledge.

It is a similar hope and prayer for the good people of Corinth who were struggling to come to terms with a way of thinking that differed from Greek wisdom. Paul stayed with them, teaching, and encouraging, for a year and a half, and his argument was that wisdom and understanding come from God's own Spirit, the very same Spirit that the believers have received, so they might also know God and all that he has freely given.

Discussion

Q) Animal sacrifices might seem rather barbaric in today's world, but can you see any benefits for a people at the very start of their relationship with God?

Q) What do the words, 'knowing God', mean to you, and how does some knowledge of the whole Bible help?

Q) Perhaps group members could share information about any resources, physical or online, that they have used to enhance their understanding of the Bible.

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Knowing Jesus, knowing God

(Read Matthew 16:13-17; Ephesians 3:14-19; 1 Peter 1:18-21)

Both the Pharisees and Sadducees refused to acknowledge Jesus as Messiah, and even with their daily experience of being so close to him, the disciples were still on a journey to discover who Jesus really was.

Some thought he was John the Baptist risen from the dead, others Elijah (who was the one they were expecting as the forerunner to the Messiah). But Matthew extends the list of possibilities to Jeremiah or one of the many other prophets.



Calling of the Apostles, Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1481

So, Jesus asks the disciples who they think he is, and Peter, acting as spokesperson, confesses that he at last believes that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God. Jesus' response is that this understanding can only come from 'my Father in heaven'.

Convinced that the Good News was for all people, Paul saw his God-given mission as a call to preach this message and reveal God's grace to everyone, even if it brought persecution and suffering. His wonderful prayer for the Ephesians (which could just as easily be for us) is a real Trinitarian offering, as the apostle asks that they might know the power of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Jesus, and the fullness of God in their lives.

Peter writes of suffering, but he is also reminding his readers of the sacrificial love of Jesus and the true cost of their salvation. A believer's faith should focus on Jesus, within whom we see the bigger picture of God's eternal love and promises for the entire world, which is the hope of all believers.

Discussion

Q) What was it about Jesus that made it so difficult for people to make up their minds who he was?

Q) The Apostle Paul's understanding of the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit informed his life and ministry. It would be over a century later that we read the word 'Trinity' (via Theophilus of Antioch) so how do Paul's words to the Ephesians speak to you?

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God knows us well

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(Read John 20:13-16; Mark 6:47-51; John 16:17-20)

It might seem an odd choice to begin with the first passage from John, but we are thinking about relationships, and with Mary at the open tomb it is not the appearance but the voice of Jesus calling her name that brings recognition. So often the way we address someone we love is unique to us and says something about that relationship.

Mary's response is immediate upon hearing Jesus call her. There are echoes of Jesus' words elsewhere, 'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me' (John 10:27).

Mark brings us a miracle in the calming of the storm, but this is also about the relationship between God and humankind. The constant theme in the Old Testament is a chosen people drifting away from their God into uncharted waters, and God hearing their distress and stepping in to rescue them.

God knows his people well, and that was the situation with Jesus and his disciples, struggling against a strong wind. Jesus would not walk past and ignore them, more

probably he walked alongside the boat waiting for them to recognise him, and at that point he stepped inside, and the wind died down.

We all mess up now and then and struggle with life. We do not always recognise or ask for the help that can come. God knows us well and is there through good times and bad.

We see this also in John's Gospel, as he tells of a confused group of disciples discussing what Jesus might have meant about going back to the Father and not being around, and then coming back again. They seem to go round in circles until Jesus steps in to reassure them that this is not the end of their relationship.

The world might rejoice, and they may grieve at his going, but they will see him again and know God's presence, with the Holy Spirit as their guide and helper (John 15:26,27)

Discussion

Q) Would you say that God speaks into your life, and if so, how?

Q) Is it your normal practice to bring concerns, fears, joys and sorrows to God in regular prayer, or only when circumstances cause you genuine anxiety, and how might a daily routine help?

Q) How do we establish and build up relationships with other people, and does that speak at all into how we might do the same with God?

Further thought

Through the coming week think about the relationship feel you have with God, and what you might do personally to help that develop.