

Knowing God

To Know and Be Known

We all have different levels of and relationships with our emotions but everyone of us knows how it feels to be “off.” It’s that feeling that says “this thing, this moment, this interaction isn’t right.” We feel this most palpably in our relationships.

Imagine an argument with a friend that starts one night, you go back and forth back and forth, “You’re not hearing me. You’re not listening. Just take a second to consider my side.” And eventually you part ways without resolving anything, because it’s late and you’re both tired. Whatever, agree to disagree. But this eerie feeling lingers, this tension. And the closer the relationship is, the more unbearable it feels.

But instead of confronting the issue and seeking resolution, we might eat our feelings or drown ourselves in our work or dump our regrets and details on others or try forgetting with smoke and spirits or settle for cheap, quick intimacy or avoid friends altogether or chase something new. No matter how far we bury that “offness” in the back of our minds, it returns when we’re in bed at night and when we wake up. The reality of feeling off in our close relationship will not leave us. What do we do?

Scripture locates the roots of “feeling off” in our relationship with God and with sin. In the beginning, God offered his love to our earliest ancestors and they rejected that invitation, deceived by pride into thinking they could know and do goodness, love, and truth apart from God. That replacement of God is what the Bible calls “sin.”

Since that day, humans have always been tempted to distrust God’s design of what is good or evil and make our own decisions about what is right or wrong. Generation after generation has perpetuated this rift in relationship, this rejection, this sin. And just like our response to the rift with our friend, humanity has tried in countless ways and countless times to avoid, control, escape, numb, or forget sin.

None of us are exempt. We’ve all missed the mark and rejected God’s invitation to love more than once.

But God does not leave us helpless or weighed down by shame and regret. God goes to every length and makes a way for us to participate in his community of love.

Instead of rescinding his invitation when we sin, God doubles down and gives himself.

This is why Jesus changes everything. Jesus took every missed mark, rejected invitation, or rebellion in all of human history and, through his perfect life, sacrificial death on the cross, and resurrection from the grave, tore down every barrier—welcoming us into a community of eternal love. There is no more tension between God and us. Feeling “off” is no longer a required reality of being a human. We are freed to finally experience the very thing we were made for: relationship with God. To know God and be known by God.

John 17:3 says, “This is eternal life, that [we] know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

So what does a relationship with God look like?

Well, if God became human to be among us, that tells us a good deal about him and what it might mean for us to have a relationship with him.

What defines a deep human friendship? Time spent together? Hours of conversation? Unforgettable trips and nights spent awake far too late? The more of these that you share with someone, the deeper your relationship will likely become. The same is true with God.

Jesus spent time with people: he spoke at length with friends, partied with family at a wedding, cooked breakfast on a beach, traveled by sea, ate as a guest at dinner tables, and walked miles with his closest confidantes.

And in the wake of Jesus’ earthly life, God still speaks with us through Scripture and we talk with him through prayer. As we spend time with God, and as we learn more about him and let him into more areas of our life, our relationship with him deepens. We are freed to finally experience the very thing we were made for: relationship with God, to know God and be known by God. Only then can we rightly know ourselves. God’s greatest gift to us is God.

Reflect

Who do you feel knows you best? In what ways has it shaped your understanding of God? How has this relationship shaped your sense of self?

Hearing from God

The Bible is a compilation of 66 individual texts written in three languages by upward of 40 different authors over more than 1500 years and bound together into two volumes commonly called the Old and New Testaments. It's a mixture of history, biography, poetry, genealogy, and legal code sprinkled with parables, dreams, visions, and riddles. It has been translated into over 2,000 languages and is the best-selling book of all time. But how did Jesus view it?

Well, in his most famous sermon, he said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished." Matthew 5:17-18

And 2 Timothy 3 says, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." As we see throughout Scripture itself, the Bible is the word of God written through the words of people—from God, about God, and for his people. These words are meant to shape our beliefs—like who God is, what God has done, who are we as God's people—and our behaviors—what it looks like to live as God's people.

The Bible encourages us in sound doctrine, comforts and strengthens us in times of suffering, and teaches how the good news of Jesus changes the way we live—that we have everything we need from God; we no longer need to fight to create status for ourselves and are instead free to love and serve one another.

After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his followers to spread the good news to the ends of the earth that anyone who believes he is the son of God who died to unite sinners to God would be so united and dwell with him eternally.

Spreading the gospel to all nations naturally involves bringing together people from every culture and background, and the letters of the New Testament were also written to instruct people how, in Christ, we have the greatest thing in common: that we belong to him.

Scripture

In light of this rich, heady understanding of Scripture, how do we read it?

First, because the Bible is actually a book full of books, we can't read it the way we might read any other book. Each biblical text is written to communicate specific truths in a specific way according to the time and place it was written.

But they are also just as relevant to us today as they were to their original audiences. 2 Timothy 3 explains "All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." To read Scripture is, first and foremost, an invitation to hear from God and learn about God, from God to know God.

That said, there are many ways to approach the Bible. We can't cover all of them, but here is a helpful acrostic: **READ**

Read | Engage | Apply | Do

Read

First, read it. Pick up a translation in your primary language that you can understand.

There are many great English translations out there, each intended for a different style of reading or study. The best version for you is going to be the one you read regularly. And just as you would spend time listening to a dear friend on a regular basis, aim to read your Bible every day. Why?

Jesus teaches that we shouldn't live by food alone, but also by "every word that comes from the mouth of God."

Well, how often do we eat? Every day. How often do we face problems, temptations, and pressure? Every day. How often do we need guidance, instruction and encouragement? Every day.

Schedule a specific time and place to read your Bible because other things have a way of coming up if you don't.

Engage

You can **engage by trying out a reading plan**. You can find different plans in your Bible app or through a quick search online. Bible reading plans can help you avoid

confusion by guiding you through the story of the Bible instead of jumping in at random points on any given day.

Engage by reading both the Old and New Testaments. You'll find some books of the Bible exciting and rapturous to read, while others might feel like a slog of unpronounceable names or will leave you wondering. All this variety is equally important for understanding God, God's story, and our place in it.

The Bible will intentionally provoke you to ask questions—write them down and discuss them in community with other Christians.

Engage by remembering that context matters. Some of the most commonly quoted verses in the Bible are often taken out of context, meaning that they are removed from their place in the story, and their intent becomes unclear.

For example, *Jeremiah 29:11*—"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope."—is not God just promising you a nice life. It was written to people taken into captivity and exiled from their homeland for 70 years.

When reading a particular verse in Scripture, consider what is happening in the surrounding verses, consider the main narrative of the book it's in, and consider where that book falls in the overall story of the entire Bible.

Take time to identify a passage's literary genre. Major genres found in Scripture are history, biography, poetry, genealogy, legal code, wisdom sayings, parables, and letters, and some books will be a combination of more than one.

Learn the Bible's historical and cultural background. Scripture was not written to 21st-century, Angeleno audiences, but was most often written to ancient Jewish audiences.

Study Bibles are extremely helpful for learning this kind of background.

Engage by letting Scripture interpret Scripture. To interpret something is to understand the meaning of it. If you find yourself asking "What does this passage mean?", you will know you're on the right track with a possible meaning if it doesn't contradict other parts of the Bible.

If this seems challenging at times, take heart! Even the apostle Peter acknowledged that some of the apostle Paul's writings were hard to understand. In sum, the clearer parts of Scripture help interpret the less clear parts.

And finally, engage by remembering Jesus will always be at the center. On more than one occasion, he affirmed that the Scriptures refer to and are fulfilled in him. As you read and interpret Scripture, be mindful of the ways it points to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as the love and work of God.

Apply

Third, after reading and engaging the Bible, apply it! As we've already suggested, one of the best ways to apply Scripture and, even more specifically, learn how what we read in the Bible relate to our lives, is to ask questions.

A few questions especially helpful for understanding how what you're reading might apply to your life are "What truths about God's character do I see in this passage?", "In what areas of my life can I increase my trust in God?", "What sin does this passage reveal?", "Is this a sin I can confess in prayer?", "Why might some parts of this passage be harder for me to accept than others?" and "How does this passage inform my relationships, work, and character?"

Finally, after wrestling with the answers to these questions personally and among community, then do.

Do

James 1 says we are called to be hearers *AND* doers of the word. God's word not only shapes what we know about God but also what we know about being God's people. We go from reading and discussing the Bible and venture into our families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and city carrying this good news of God's love.

We don't just read Scripture to be informed, but to be transformed.

Reflect

List two or three things you do or need every day. What is the impact if you miss one or two of those things? Where is the Bible on that list?

Prayer

We've been focusing on the practicalities of learning to read, engage, apply, and be doers of Scripture, but let's not lose the forest for the trees: the purpose of all of this is to know God and be known by God.

God is far more than an author and our relationship with him is beyond comparing to any human relationships. God is not only our friend but our creator, our savior, our father, and our king. This is not cold, self-centered religion, where we obey the rules to keep God happy, but a loving, gospel-centered relationship that infuses all of life with meaning and purpose.

In addition to getting to know God through God's word, we also cultivate intimacy with God through prayer.

Since we've been speaking of knowing God through Scripture, there are 650 prayers in the Bible. 150 of those are in *Psalms*, often called the prayerbook of the Bible. Jesus himself prayed frequently in many different ways and Scripture continues to show us today what prayer looks like in all seasons of life.

Another simple acrostic can remind us of prayer's many rich dimensions and keep us from getting stuck in a rut: **ACTS**

Adoration | Confession | Thanksgiving | Supplication

Adoration

First, adore God by speaking out about your love for God. Praise him by declaring who he is, by sharing God's goodness, and by proclaiming his awesome acts.

Confession

The next one is, confession. In confession, we agree with God about the nature of our sins and turn from them in repentance. Confession also means agreeing with God about the gospel and that any sin we confess has already been answered in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Thanksgiving

Third, thank God for the things he's done and goodness he has shown you. Adoration and thanksgiving lead us to worship. We all worship something. We were made for it. But adoration and thanksgiving lead us into the right worship of

responding to God with our lives because of who God is and what God has done for us.

Supplication

And fourth, and certainly not last, supplication, to make requests. Ask. Supplication is the act of asking God for something and intercession is the act of asking God for something on behalf of someone else.

Remember, prayer is a living conversation and no two conversations are ever the same. Practice praying out loud, silently, indoors, outdoors, through song, or even with movement.

And know you're not required to do this alone. Just the opposite, in fact. One-on-one time with God is precious beyond compare, but so is getting to know God together. When God makes us a new person he places us in the community of a new family—the church—whose relationship with and mission from God is a mutual one.

Through the gospel, we can know the king of the universe and are called friends of God. We are made right with God through the cross, but we we cultivate deeper intimacy with him over the entirety of our lives by spending time listening to God through his word and by sharing our lives with him in prayer.

While it may take a lifetime to understand Scripture, we begin with simply reading it. And while prayer involves asking things of God, it also includes bringing to God whatever we are struggling with, whatever we are feeling, whatever praise, lament, thanksgiving, or questions we have.

God listens. God has closed the distance created between us and him by our sin and initiated conversation with us. Let's take him up on his invitation.

Reflect

In what ways does having a relationship with God shape how you might approach prayer?