

Understanding God

John 1:1-18

Within this world, there are different types of knowledge.

- For example, there's scientific knowledge – the sort of knowledge that's done with test-tubes and microscopes and experiments. And if I repeat the same experiment under the same conditions, I should get the same results you got when you did it.
- Then there's historical knowledge. Historical events can't be put into test-tubes and under microscopes. They aren't like experiments you can repeat over and over again. And yet we know about them through the observations of different people and various things being written down from time to time.

What about when it comes to people? How do you get *to know* a person? What sort of knowledge is that? For example, how do you get to know me?

- Can you get to know me in a scientific way? That is, can you get bits of me and put them in test-tubes and add a bit of litmus paper or a few drops of iodine and see how the bits of me react? Can you divide me up into all my different parts so you put the liver over here and the brain over there and stretch out the intestines all over the place? You could do that and you could find out all sorts of information about my body – but at the end of it, could you really say you knew me?
- Can you get to know me in an historical way? That is, could you delve into my history and find out who my parents were and where I lived? Could you find out where I went to school and who my

teachers were and where I went to church and what sports I played and who my friends were? You could do all that and find out all about my background and what sort of influences may have shaped my life – but at the end of it, could you really say you knew me? You'd be a bit closer than with the scientific method, but there'd still be some significant gaps. Not to mention that I may have changed considerably in the intervening years.

To get to know a person involves spending time with them – observing them, listening to them, watching their reactions to different things, hearing what they say about themselves. In many ways, it's a tricky process. All sorts of obstacles may get in the way.

- One obstacle is the person may not reveal much about themselves. Suppose you wanted to get to know me a bit better and invited me round to lunch. Suppose the whole time we were together, the only two words I said were "hello" and "good-bye". You wouldn't get to know me very well, would you?
- Another obstacle can be our preconceived ideas. Sometimes when we meet someone, we already have our own ideas of what they're like – perhaps some third party gave us some information, perhaps we worked it out from where the person lives or how they dress or how they slur their speech. And as we relate to the person, we filter everything they do and say through this preconceived idea. Words they say are misunderstood as we squeeze them into what we think we already know.

How do we know God?

- God's not something we can put in a test-tube. We don't get to know God in a scientific way.
- Nor is God simply an historical event. God does act in history, and historical events do involve God all the time. But you can't actually read the character of God from historical events by themselves.

God's a person, and we need to get to know Him in a similar way to how we get to know other people. We have to relate to Him. We have to listen to what He says. We have to find out what He reveals about Himself.

The verses we read earlier are called the Prologue to John's gospel. They form an introduction to what comes later. They include many themes that John returns to again later; many of the ideas he'll develop more fully as he tells us more about Jesus. So we won't pick up on every little detail of the Prologue this morning. Rather, we'll just concentrate on the main part: in Jesus, God's revealed Himself most fully to us, because Jesus is God.

God's Revelation in Jesus

The Pre-Existent Word

John starts:

In the beginning was the Word

That reminds us of another part of the Bible. Genesis 1:1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

John's prologue has the perfume of Genesis about it – where God speaks and creation comes into being.

- Mark's gospel goes back to the beginning of Jesus' ministry.
- Matthew and Luke go back further to the beginning of Jesus' life on earth.
- John goes much further back than that. He shows

us the beginning of the gospel goes back to before the beginning of the entire universe.

John gives us some further knowledge and understanding about God that we didn't have from the Genesis account. There are some hints in the Genesis account. In Genesis 1:26, we read:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image ...

But we aren't told who the *us* is. People are left wondering. Is it God and the angels? Is it God and some other beings we don't know about? Is Moses just using the royal plural to refer to God – like when the Queen says that *we* have decided to do something or other when she's really only talking about herself?

In the New Testament, after the Jesus-event, John says:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Here's a significant statement that forms part of the foundation for the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. There is only one God, as the Old Testament affirms again and again. But the New Testament shows us this one God consists of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We don't fully understand this – three persons, but only one God. Yet, we affirm this is what the Bible teaches. This is what John – a good monotheistic Jew – teaches here. God, who is one, is eternally in relationship with Himself.

Back there at creation, there's the Father and there's the Word. Both are already in existence. And not only is the Father God, but the Word's also fully God. Within the context of John's gospel as a whole, we discover that the

Word's the eternal Son of God – the second person of the Trinity. As finite beings, we shouldn't expect to fully understand the infinite God – we should humbly realise that complete understanding's beyond us. We simply believe what God's told us about Himself.

Why the title *Word*? Scholars argue about where John got this idea from. Some suggest Plato, others the Stoics, others Philo, and so the list goes on. But there's no need to look further than the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God's Word's very important. God's Word's connected with three main things:

- Creation – it's by God's word the universe came into being. God spoke and it was.
- Revelation – it's God's word that came to Moses and the prophets and that's recorded in the pages of the Old Testament. God spoke that His people may come to know Him and come to know how to properly relate to Him.
- Deliverance – it's through God's word that God rescues His people from calamity – such as the time God rescues them from slavery in Egypt. It's by the same word of God that judgment falls on the nations, including Israel.

In this Prologue, John speaks of creation in verses 1 to 5. He speaks of deliverance in verses 10 to 13. But I think the main emphasis is revelation. John stresses that, through the Word, and especially by the Word becoming flesh, God is revealed – and He's revealed more fully than any previous revelation.

And the reason He's revealed more fully is because it's God Himself who's become flesh. Verse 3:

Through Him all things were made; without Him

nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

John highlights the God-ness of the Word. He already stated quite categorically in verse 1 that the Word is God.

- Now He indicates the Word's the agent of creation. Every single thing that's been created was created through the agency of the Word. Nothing is excepted – not even you. Such creation is an act of God.
- And further, the Word's the source of life – our life. Mankind has life simply because of the activity of the Word. Again, life's a function of deity. The ability to give life is something only God can do.

In this way, John strengthens his claim that the Word is God. By doing this, he demonstrates the Word's fully qualified to reveal God – simply because the Word is God. We can't get a better revelation than this.

Many stumble at this point. They ask:

How can God be God *and* the Word be God? Don't you then have two Gods?

And so some want to devalue what John says here. They claim that the Word is *a* god – with a little "g" – but not *the* God. They claim the Word was the first of God's creations. They claim the Word's not eternal. John's claim's bigger than that. He puts the Word on the same level as God. And, as you read the narrative further, you find out the reason he does this is because that's how the Word thinks of Himself. He acts as God. He makes claims only God can make. We may not fully understand this – but this is what the Bible teaches. The Word's qualified to reveal God to us because He is God. So, it's

important not to ignore Him.

The Incarnate Jesus

In verse 14, John tells us this Word became man – that God became flesh – in the person of Jesus:

The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

The name Jesus isn't used until verse 17, but there's no doubt as to whom John means in verse 14. Jesus is the name of the human Word. Jesus is the person who results from God becoming flesh.

It's a staggering claim. For many of us who've been Christians for a long time, we've perhaps lost some of the amazement of the incarnation – the theological term to refer to the fact that *the Word became flesh*.

- That the infinite God, the God who's Spirit, the God who has none of the limitations associated with human existence – that this God should take on flesh and become a man.
- That the Word should leave the magnificence of heaven in order to slum it on earth amidst the rottenness of sinful humanity.

People have struggled for comparisons. Some suggest it's like you or I consciously becoming a cockroach in order to communicate with cockroaches. If there's something you think more detestable and more insignificant than cockroaches, substitute that. Yet even those sorts of comparisons fail to grasp the immense difference between the infinite and the finite.

The obvious question is: Why? Why did the Word

become human? Why did the Word leave the magnificence of heaven to slum it on earth? Several reasons. Ultimately, it's to die on the cross so we could be rescued. And there are hints of that in verses 12 and 13. But the reason John highlights in this passage is the one of revelation – of making God known. Verse 18:

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known.

"The Son of God was sent into the world to become the Jesus of history, so that the glory and grace of God might be uniquely and perfectly disclosed".¹

Sometimes, when you're walking through the park, you see a young man and a young lady sitting together. He has his back leaning against a tree, and she's nestled into his shoulder with her head leaning on his chest. What do you think? Is this young man a total stranger to the lady? Or do you think there's a good chance she knows him reasonably well? She could probably even tell you a few things about him his parents don't know.

That's a pale shadow of the picture here – the One *who's at the Father's side*. The Father and the Son know each other perfectly. They're more than just passing acquaintances. There's more between them than two people chatting at some social function. Indeed, there's more between them than the closest of married couples. They've related perfectly for eternity. Therefore the Son's perfectly qualified to reveal God to us.

How does a person get to know God? Ultimately, we must rely on God revealing Himself. We can gain some understanding from creation. Through creation we can

¹ D.A.Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Leicester: IVP, 1991)111.

see something of God's power and God's great mind in the intricate design of so many things. The greatness of the universe tells us something of the greatness of the God who made it all, and something of His incredible power. But we don't get much more than that. For example, can you tell that God is love simply from creation? There are some aspects to support that theory, but other things, such as cyclones and earthquakes and tsunamis, send mixed messages. The Bible tells us those things come from God's curse on creation because of human sin – but you can't tell that just from creation itself. You must rely on God's revelation to find that out.

The fact we have so many different religions in the world shows you can't know God simply from creation. Each of those religions tries to understand the world we live in. Each looks at the evidence of the world around us. And each reads off a different "god" from their understanding of what they see. It just doesn't work that way.

Rather, we need God to reveal Himself. And the claim of the Bible is that He has. And that the Bible itself is that revelation of God to us. In the Old Testament we have a partial revelation of God. But the more full revelation comes in the person of Jesus – because Jesus is God Himself. That's the thrust of verses 16 and 17:

From the fullness of His grace we have all received one blessing after another. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament was a gracious, partial revelation of God. It was a true revelation, but it wasn't complete. Now, however, we have the completed revelation in the

person of Jesus. He is God. He's been with the Father for all eternity. Thus, He's able to reveal God to us perfectly. He can tell us all about God. Therefore we must pay careful attention to Him. If you shut the door on Jesus, you shut the door on truly knowing God.

Responses to God's Revelation

Rejecting God's Revelation

The way John puts it, it all sounds so simple, doesn't it? However, not everyone accepts this revelation of God in Jesus. Why not? Is it because of an imperfection in the revelation? Is there something wrong with the way Jesus reveals God to us? No. The problem's in the preconceptions people have. It's in our sinful rebellious natures. Verse 10:

He was in the world, and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognise Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.

This especially refers to the Jewish people – the people amongst whom Jesus lived and walked. These people were "His own" in the sense that they'd been prepared by God for the coming of Jesus. God revealed Himself to these people in a way He hadn't done with the rest of humanity. They had the writings of the law and the prophets. They had what we call the Old Testament. God told them what He was like. He'd worked in their history and explained how He'd worked in their history. Further, God had told them He was going to do something even more special in their future.

But most of these people didn't recognise Jesus. They weren't expecting an incarnation. They weren't expecting

God to become man. And further, Jesus didn't fit in with their ideas of what God was like and how God should behave. Jesus mixed with the common people rather than the important religious leaders. Jesus mixed with known sinners and social outcasts rather than those considered godly at the time. Jesus spoke of forgiveness to flagrant sinners while saying some fairly disapproving things of the morally upright religious leaders. Jesus came from the racially inferior area of Galilee – an area where people weren't much better than non-Jews. And there was a big question mark over the legitimacy of His birth. It wasn't the sort of behaviour they expected from God.

And so they rejected Him – despite the evidence. They claimed His teaching was wrong because it challenged their official understanding of the Old Testament. They claimed His mixing with notorious sinners showed He couldn't be from God. They claimed He did His miracles by the power of Satan. His own people arranged for His execution on a Roman cross.

And it remains the same today. By and large, the world doesn't recognise Jesus. They know the name – they even use it as a swear word. They even go so far as to acknowledge He was a good man – a moral man who gave wonderful teaching (which is more than the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day said). But to say He performed miracles is beyond the evidence of modern science. To say He was God become man – that's going a bit too far. To say He died for people's sins is offensive. To say He rose from the dead because as God He has power over death is too much. Most people simply won't accept it.

And so they reject Him – not as a man, but as the Word

become flesh. They reject Him as the true revelation of God, because they reject His claim that He is God become man.

Receiving God's Revelation

However, that isn't the complete picture now and wasn't the complete picture then – for there were some who recognised who Jesus is. Not all rejected Him. There were some who received God's completed revelation that came in the person of Jesus. Verse 12:

Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God – children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

For those who'll receive the revelation of God through Jesus there's this wonderful promise. They're adopted into God's family. Incredible privilege. Perhaps in your fleeting fantasies you've imagined what it'd be like to be Prince Charles. Or perhaps you've imagined what it'd be like for Queen Elizabeth to adopt you as a younger sister for Prince Charles. And perhaps your mind's wandered around the luxuries of Buckingham Palace. Or maybe you're a committed Republican and don't approve of such decadent fantasies.

The reality for Christian believers is infinitely better. We're adopted into the very family of God. That's a far higher privilege. And it comes about simply because we acknowledge Him as God in our lives. That we recognise He's the Word become flesh – and we treat Him as such.

Conclusion

How do you get to know God? You must pay attention to what God reveals about Himself. And especially you must pay attention to what God reveals about Himself in the person of Jesus. There's no other way. Jesus is the most God-like person who's ever lived on this earth – because Jesus is God become man.

There are all sorts of claims around today. Some people make up their own god. They invent a god that suits their own tastes. Or they find a god who doesn't make too many demands of them and basically allows them to do as they please. They devise a god who suits their own ideas about what's right and wrong and who fits in with how they think a god should run the world.

Some people look within themselves in order to find god. They claim each of us has that god-aspect within us. Some even go so far as to say we're all gods and we only have to search within ourselves to find the truth of their claims. There are many willing to teach you, for a fee, how you can achieve your own godhood.

The Bible says if you want to know God then you must look to Jesus. He's God become flesh – and the rest of John's account will tell us more of what that means. Jesus is the most complete revelation of God available to us. If you reject that revelation, then you won't know God. You may make up your own god and try to relate to that image – but it won't be the real God. And thus you'll be numbered among those who didn't recognise Him and you'll continue your rebellion against God.