

Knowing God

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[0 : 00] I looked and looked, but I didn't see God. I wonder if you know where those words come from.

On the 12th of April 1961, a man called Yuri Gagarin became the first person ever to leave the earth. He rocketed into space, he orbited the planet, and he returned a hero, a legend.

And when he touched down, it said that he gave the earth a verdict, an answer on one of its oldest questions. No, he said. I didn't see God.

Now, those were probably not the words he said. Those were probably the words of the Soviet propaganda machine at the height of the Cold War. But in any case, do you see the logic there?

A man who has been to space should be able to tell us whether or not God is out there to be found. Now, whatever you believe about God this morning, I hope that you can see that that is nonsense.

[1 : 15] It's a bizarre thing to say. Nobody has ever thought that going into space is the way that we will find God. Yuri has been there is not an answer.

In fact, thousands of years ago, as we have just read, John could tell us that, couldn't he? There in verse 18, no one has ever seen God.

No one has ever seen God. Now, if that is the case, then here is the question. How can we know God? If we can't see him, how can we know God?

How can we know that we know him? Well, that is the question that John puts to us in these great opening lines of his gospel and his answer that we are going to see this morning.

How can we know God is the word? The word was with God and the word was God. And he says the word became flesh and lived among us.

[2 : 22] And we have seen his glory. Now, perhaps, you know, people, perhaps you are a person today who says or has said, you know, this question, how can we know God?

It's just not important. Let's just stop here. Okay, you know, I don't even believe there is a God out there. Okay, but describe to me the God that you don't believe in.

Okay, for somebody to say, I don't believe that there is a God, well, they must have an idea of the kind of God that might be out there that they don't believe in.

Some other people might say, well, we can't know God. It's impossible, even if there is a God, we can't know him. But even then, you end up saying, don't you, well, I know that God can't be known.

See, whoever we are, we all end up saying something about God. So, even if you say, I don't know of any God this morning, well, respectfully, let me say and suggest that you do.

[3 : 35] The question is, the question John puts to us is, is it the true God? Or perhaps, is it the God that you have written off?

Is it a God that you have kind of stitched together in your mind throughout your life? Or perhaps, even a God that you heard about as a child? But perhaps not the God who we have worshipped and prayed to this morning.

How do we know God? How can we know that we know God? Well, these are John's questions for us. And his answer is surprisingly simple.

It wouldn't get an A, okay, in a philosophy course hand in. His answer is, let me introduce you to Jesus.

See it there in verse 18. See, God's ultimate revealing of himself, where God draws back the curtains for us to see, is, he says, Jesus Christ.

[4 : 55] Do you know the one true and living God? Well, says John. Do you know the man, Jesus, who lived and breathed on this earth in history?

That is what this book, John's Gospel, is for as we begin. In the words of one writer, Don Carson, John wants to tell us how 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 revealed. Sometimes at the beginning of reading John's Gospel, people wonder, you know, how could an ancient fisherman, John, you know, how could he have written a book that still grips us, you know, thousands of years later with its power and its beauty and truth?

But if you had known Jesus, if you had walked with him, spent time with him, and if you had had a lifetime to reflect on that experience of who Jesus is, well, isn't this the kind of book you would want to write for the world?

And wouldn't you want to write for the very same reason that you had been there to see it? If you have it open, would you just turn briefly over to John chapter 20 and verse 30?

[6 : 22] It's really good for us to see this as we start looking at John's Gospel. Why did John write this book? Well, he tells us at the end, John chapter 20, verse 30.

Now, Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

See, John wrote this book so that we could see what he saw and so that we could respond as he responded and indeed receive the gift that he himself received so that we, like him, could see and believe and have life.

And really, that is why we are opening it together as a church. Okay, any of us who follow Jesus could pray with the man who said to Jesus, Lord, I believe.

Help my unbelief. John wants to help our unbelief as we look at the life of the Lord Jesus. But, as we considered last week, belief doesn't end with us.

[7 : 38] It doesn't stop at the doors of our church. John wants people to see Jesus who haven't seen him yet so that they, too, would come to believe and to have life in his name.

Isn't that our prayer as a church, that that would be the case? So, then, how does Jesus reveal God to us?

How do we know God in Jesus? Well, firstly, John says Jesus reveals God in creation. Will you read with me again from chapter 1 and verse 1?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. So, straight away, John takes us right back to the opening words of the whole Bible.

Famous words that begin Genesis chapter 1, verse 1. In the beginning. And in Genesis, we read in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

[8 : 41] But notice, John wants to take us back beyond the beginning. Stretch your mind back, he says, before creation. Before time, before heaven, before earth.

Back into eternity. Who was there in the beginning? Now, the answer for anyone who loved and knew their Old Testament when John was alive, of course, was God.

In the beginning, God. That is partly what makes God, God. That he is eternal. He stands out with time. He was there in the beginning. And he brought everything else into existence.

Well, yes, says John, but who was with God? Indeed, more precisely, who is this God who was there in the beginning? Well, in the beginning, he writes, was the Word.

The Word was with God before time, in eternity. Which, of course, means that the Word was God. As the church, the early church was to put it later, God the Father has never been without his Word, God the Son, or indeed, God the Holy Spirit.

[9 : 56] One God in three persons. God is Trinity. You see, for John, meeting Jesus has rewritten the whole story back to the very first words of the Bible.

Even, dare he say it, meeting Jesus has reintroduced him to God. Okay, this is a poor and a flawed illustration. You can talk to me about it afterwards if you want.

But the closest I can get for a comparison is like knowing your teacher in the classroom for years and years. You learn from your teacher, but really, you only know them between the hours of nine and three.

You only really know them in the classroom. But then you see them in normal life. Okay, you can never unsee that. But then, then your teacher calls you up.

And you become friends. And you spend time together. And you get to know this teacher as you have never known them before. Up close and personal. It's the same person.

[11 : 03] It's the same person. But the relationship you have to them has gone from this to this. God has not changed from the first words to the last words of the Bible.

He is the same. But right in the middle, he revealed himself like never before. Uniquely, perfectly, in sending his son.

And so now John is saying to his fellow lovers of the Old Testament, you don't know God until you know his word. His son.

He is our creator. See that in verse three? Through him, all things were made. Without him, nothing was made that has been made. Remember, we have sung, haven't we, about how God created things.

That we phrase in Genesis 1. And God said. God said. God said. God said. He creates by his word. He speaks. And it is.

[12 : 03] So now, says John, God created nothing without the word. His son. He who was with him in the beginning. Everything came through him.

Nothing came without him. Somebody has even said that the breath that is used to deny his existence is given by him.

You might think the nails that hung him to the cross were formed by him. Even the ones who beat him and flogged him and spat on him and nailed him there.

They were known to him. For he saw them in the womb. He saw their unformed substance and knit them together. But even before he came, before that, he was revealing God to us in and through his creation.

See that in verse 4? In him was life. And that life was the light of all mankind. Now, this is still speaking about before he came. We don't get there until verse 9.

[13 : 14] So in what way does his life give everyone light? Well, John is speaking here about what we sometimes call general revelation. The idea that God shows something of himself to everyone through the things that he has created.

Think for a moment about the beauty and the vastness of space. He was reading this week about Voyager 1. Voyager 1 took 36 years to travel 11.5 billion miles only to reach the edge of our solar system.

It didn't even get past the gravity of our sun. And they reckon it would take another 40,000 years for Voyager 1 to get to the next star.

Not even to get beyond that. These are unthinkable, unimaginable distances. That exist in our cosmos. And yet on a clear night, you and me can look up and see countless numbers of stars spread across the night sky.

And we gaze up in awe of the beauty of the night sky. That's one example of the kind of thing that Paul is talking about when he says in Romans 1 that God's invisible qualities, namely his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

[14 : 52] God shows something of himself, of who he is in the things that he has created. And John goes as far as to say that that light that shines and reflects through all creation is the life of God the sun.

The stars and the earth and our very bodies, they beam out the message, in him is life. In him is life.

And nothing, says John, is able to snuff out that light. Verse 5, from the beginning to now to the very end of time, the light shines in the darkness.

And the darkness has not overcome it. When Roman emperors back in the day made enemies, they used to have a practice called damning the memory.

So any inscription or writing of the enemy's name was chiseled away and blotted out. Any statue of the enemy was defaced beyond all recognition.

[16 : 05] And they did that to try to wipe out the memory of this enemy from the face of the earth. Well, says John, the darkness has tried. The darkness has tried, but it cannot erase the name and the memory of the word from the world.

Sin cannot do it. Evil cannot do it. Unbelief cannot erase the memory of the sun from this world.

And this morning, we can take heart in that, can't we? That God cannot be stopped from showing himself. Many are blind to him.

We know that. And we once were ourselves, every one of us. But the life of the sun who was with God and who is God still shines in this dark world.

The darkness cannot overcome the sun. For the light of his life reveals God in and through the things that he has made.

[17 : 12] And the answer to blindness of eyes we see next. Because secondly, we see that God is revealed through witness. You see that in verse 6?

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to bear witness about the light and all that all might believe through him.

He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. So we know God not only through his creation, but through the testimony of real life people.

Three times, did you notice the word witness or testimony is used there? So sometimes when Christians, we use that word witness.

What we mean is speaking to people about Jesus. But the word witness, it just comes from the courtroom. In court, witnesses are called, aren't they, to come and to speak about what they themselves saw and heard.

[18 : 13] A witness swears, don't they, to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And here we have a witness, another John.

Okay, so we've got John the writer and John the witness, or John the Baptist as he's called, to witness about the light. So he came to say what he heard from God and what he saw in person.

See, John the writer is rooting us in history. What he's writing isn't fiction. It's not even based on a true story.

He claims to be writing an eyewitness testimony of what happened in history. And as we go through this gospel, we see John line up many witnesses and call on many witnesses to tell us what they saw and heard.

John the Baptist is the first witness that we meet. But then others, like John, become witnesses of who Jesus is and what he did, his followers and friends.

[19 : 19] And the witness, the history that these guys tell, is open in front of us. Those of us who were not there thousands of years later.

We can see what they saw. We can hear what they heard. Because the coming of God into the world is actually the world's worst kept secret because it is kept for us in the world's best-selling book.

Whenever we open the New Testament, we are reading the words of men who were there. And that gives us great confidence, doesn't it, as we go into Monday morning, another week, and face the difficulties and challenges of life.

That what is written for us here is true. And it's real in our world. Okay, listen to Peter in his second letter, chapter 1.

Peter says, We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

[20 : 31] Or here's John himself writing at the start of his first letter. That which was from the beginning. That which we heard. That which we have seen with our eyes.

Which we looked upon and touched with our hands. Concerning the word of life. That which we have seen and heard. We proclaim also to you.

Friends, these guys were there. They knew Jesus. They saw him. And heard him. And touched him even. And now they speak to us in these pages.

To tell us who weren't there. It is all true. It's true. The word who is God did become flesh. He did live among us.

And we did see his glory. That's why John came, verse 7. So that through him all might believe. See, God doesn't leave us to our own devices.

[21 : 31] To see if we can find him. Or discover him. Even through general revelation. Through our experience in this world. Our eyes are blinded to him by sin.

So he speaks to us. So that we can hear. So that hearing the witness of the word. We might believe that Jesus is the Christ. The son of God. And have life in his name.

And so, application. Come back next week. And hear the witness of John the Baptist. The first man who was there.

What does he say about Jesus? But until then. Until next Sunday. Brothers and sisters. This week. We can have real confidence in our Bibles.

That what we read is trustworthy and reliable. Now perhaps that is something that you really struggle with. Okay. I've experienced that struggle.

[22 : 31] I would reckon every Christian has. So if that's you. Please never feel that you can't speak about those doubts. Okay. In fact. Please do come.

And speak to me. Or one of the elders. Or a friend. About those doubts. But let me encourage you this morning. That when we put our trust in the God of the Bible. We are trusting the real and living God.

Who came. And who made his glory known. Because even though we were not there. Whenever we open our New Testament. We are listening to those who were.

Because thirdly. And climactically. We see that God was revealed. Ultimately. In his coming. The true light.

That gives light to everyone. Was coming into the world. He came. Now what would you do. If God came. Well. When the Son of God came into the world.

[23 : 31] What did the world do? We see two responses. Don't we? The first is in verse 10. He was in the world. And the world was made through him. But the world did not recognize him.

Okay. He came. And received. Blank stares. Shrugging shoulders. Unrecognition. It would be like the Queen.

Walking through the doors of our church. And someone turning around and saying. Shh. You're interrupting our service. Okay.

Somebody offers her a map of the city. Somebody else asks her name. It's unthinkable, isn't it? It wouldn't happen. It wouldn't happen. And yet. When the creator of heaven and earth.

The King of Kings. And the Lord of Lords. Came to the world. That he made. He was met with blank stares. And glazed eyes. Who are you?

[24 : 30] People asked. Worse still. Verse 11. He came to that which was his own. And his own did not receive him. His own people. Israel. The nation that God had loved.

And chosen. And prepared through the generations. With promises for the coming of the King. But when the King came. His own did not receive him.

God came. The world turned to him. And said. You're not welcome. You know. Perhaps we know people. Who say.

Perhaps you've said yourself. You know. If God just showed himself. If he made it really obvious. Well then I would have no choice. But to believe in him. Well history tells us.

That when God did come. And did show himself. Sadly. That is not what happened. He was turned away at the door. See the problem is not.

[25 : 26] That God hides himself from us. The problem is that we. His people. His creation. Are often not prepared to see him.

When he comes. Believing in Jesus. Is not a question of having more evidence. But of believing the evidence. That is there. Because faced with the same evidence.

The same God. Verse 12. We see some did recognize him. Some did receive him. And believe in him. And we read that. To all who did receive 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. God. Where do Christians come from? Well they come from receiving. God's son.

[26 : 22] Believing in Jesus Christ. Notice that's not the same as asking. Where do babies come from? John says it's not about natural descent. Human decision.

A husband's will. You some of us were born into families. Do you love and honor and worship the Lord Jesus. That is something precious to be so, so thankful for.

And some of us have taken hold of those promises. Held out to us from before we can even remember. Made that faith our own. And put our trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Praise God for that. But friends. If you are here this morning. Because of the faith of your parents.

Or your grandparents before you. Well look what John says. It is those who believed in his name. To whom he gave the right to become children of God.

[27 : 22] Those who believe in Jesus. Belong to God. Whatever family we were born into. Whatever the circumstances. Our birth does not make us children of God.

We become children of God. When we receive his son. And so if you have not received him. Will you receive him today?

Jesus here is throwing the doors open to all. Whoever we are. Wherever we have come from. Into whatever family we were born. He says come belong to God's family.

By believing in his son. For he has come and shown us God for all that he is. Look there in verse 14. The word. Who is with God.

Who is God. Became flesh. And made his dwelling among us. Literally. He pitched his tent in our camp. John is comparing Jesus with God's tent in the Old Testament.

[28 : 23] The tabernacle. And just like in the tent of old or God people saw his glory. So now John says when we saw Jesus. We saw the glory of God.

Face to face. In the face of Jesus. He came. He came. He came. So that we might know and believe in him. And have a life in him.

Because finally we see he reveals God in full. Verse 16. Out of his fullness we have received grace upon grace.

That's a strange phrase. What does it mean? Well John tells us straight away. For the law was given through Moses. Grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. So there was grace in the law.

Okay. Maybe that's a surprise to some of us. But the law was grace. Because in its sacrifices and rituals and rites. And through its types and shadows.

[29 : 25] The people could know God. But only from a distance. Okay. Nobody could come to the tent without a sacrifice. Nobody could go into the tent.

He wasn't a priest. Nobody could go into the holy of holies. The presence of God. He wasn't the high priest. And only on one day of the year. But now says John.

God has torn open the curtains. So that we all might come to him. Okay. Back in verse 1. If you remember. John said the word was with God.

God. That word could be translated. The word was towards God. Or facing God. It's a picture of the word. Eye to eye. With God from the beginning.

Now Moses had a sense of that. We read in Exodus 33 11. When Moses went into the tent of meeting. The Lord would speak to Moses. Face to face. As one speaks to a friend.

[30 : 23] But then Moses would leave the tent. And that face to face relationship with God. It was just like a mere glance. A glimpse of him compared with the word.

Who has been forever held in the gaze of God. Face to face. Eye to eye with him. Forever. Centuries. Millennia.

Roll past. Ages go by. Back into eternity. Still. That gaze goes on. Moses knew God.

And he gave the law. And that was grace. But that grace. Says John. Has been infinitely outdone. By the one who came from God's eternal gaze.

Out of his fullness. To give grace upon grace. Grace and truth. Before Jesus is saying. We lived in a room.

- [31 : 20] With the curtains closed. Tight shut. But now those curtains have been torn open. The room is flooded with light. Because the one who has forever been. Face to face with God. Turned. So that he. Might be face to face. With us. Brothers and sisters. We are not standing at arm's length.
- From God. Today. Rather. If our trust. Is in Jesus Christ. We are gazing into his eyes. He has turned his gaze on us.
- That we. Might turn our gaze. On him. And trust in him. And have life with him forever. How do we know.
- That we know. God. God. While the word. Became flesh. And lived among us. God. No one has ever seen God. But the one and only son.
- [32 : 18] Jesus Christ. He has made him fully. Perfectly. And completely. Known. And so. Let us look forward.
- To seeing more of him. As we go through this gospel. And let us worship him together now. As we pray. Let us pray together. God. Father. God.
- Our father. How we thank you. That you have not left us in the dark. About who you are. That even in our sin. In our rebellion.
- You sent your son. So that we might know you. And walk with you. We thank you for this great gift. That we today are in right relationship with you. Through him.
- And that our father. When we cry out to you. We know to whom we cry. We thank you father. That you did not ask us. To climb up to you.
- [33 : 17] On our own efforts. And with our own works. That you. The Lord Jesus. Came down. That we might belong to you. Be part of the family of God.
- Not by our works. But through faith in you. And so we pray. Our father. That as we have heard from your word. So you would root it deep in our hearts.
- And that we would go into this week. Full of assurance and confidence. That if we have Jesus Christ. We have all of God. All of you. Father.
- Son. And Holy Spirit. With us. And for us. We thank you in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Amen.