

HOW CAN I REALLY KNOW GOD?

Series: Hosea: Unbroken Love From A Broken Heart

by Doug Goins

Nothing is more important than what it means to know God in a deep, personal way. If we know God as he has revealed himself in the Bible, life can be wonderful. If we don't, we will live with stressful anxiety. Knowing God offers life abundant, to use the words of Jesus. Knowing God is the source of wisdom and strength to endure hard times. Knowing God is the purpose for which we were created. It is life's greatest privilege and our most urgent need.

But knowing God is a gift that most of us have difficulty receiving or responding to. Knowing God is not just knowledge of facts, theories, ideas, or carefully worded theology. It can't be earned. And yet it is the thing in life that ought to demand our constant attention; it ought to be the central focus of our lives. Knowing God is more important than personal power, position, or portfolios. And yet nothing seems to be lacking more in our lives.

Hosea was called by God to prophesy to the northern kingdom of Israel eight centuries before Jesus was born. He was called specifically because this quality of life, knowing God in a real way, was lacking for the nation. Their sins as a nation and as individuals came from the absence of knowing God. As verse 1 told us, the result was that truth was absent, and mercy or kindness was not a part of social interaction anymore. The people were on the brink of destruction because they had rejected knowledge of God. But God, in severe mercy, sent one prophet after another to warn his people that if they didn't repent and turn back to him, they were doomed. During the troubled years before the final Syrian invasion of Israel in 722 BC, God sent Hosea to Samaria, the capital. He was to confront Israel with the sin of idolatry, which was expressed especially in the worship of Baal, the Canaanite fertility god. In lyric poetry and graphic figures of speech Hosea examined the nation's unfaithfulness. He also focused on God's tough, unconditional, and unbreakable love relationship with his people.

His theme of knowing God in a relationship of intimacy and obedience was forged in the fires of Hosea's own personal life, in his relationship with his wife Gomer and the three children God gave them. Hosea's family life as well as his words became the vehicle of God's revelation. The first three chapters of Hosea are a description of the prophet's marriage to an unfaithful wife and of their three rebellious children. It was an illustration of the Lord's relationship to Israel in her spiritual adultery, and the rebellion of the people in their rejecting him and worshiping false gods.

Chapters 4 through 14 combine together a number of sermons that Hosea preached over a fifty-year period of ministering to Israel. They were sermons that denounced Israel's ingratitude, idolatry, brutality, materialism, and immorality. God threatened judgment that was based on love. God won't let us get away with sin; he will confront us. And shot through this wonderful book are promises of spiritual restoration and healing if the people will turn back to the Lord and really examine their hearts.

In the first ten verses of Hosea 4, we will look for the answer to the question, How can I really know God? Let's look at verses 1-3:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;
for the LORD has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land.

There is no faithfulness or kindness,
and no knowledge of God in the land;
there is swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and committing adultery;
they break all bounds and murder follows murder.

Therefore the land mourns,
and all who dwell in it languish,
and also the beasts of the field,
and the birds of the air;
and even the fish of the sea are taken away.

The need for intimacy and integrity

Hosea begins with a summons to listen, to pay very close attention. This call establishes the prophetic, God-given authority and inspiration with which he lived and spoke and wrote. It establishes that what is going to follow is God's powerful, living word. It had an impact on the hearers in Israel, and also on us if we will submit to it and allow it to examine us.

Controversy is a strong word. It has overtones of legal argumentation that God wants to take up with the people. This controversy was very personal---God's people had rejected him and forgotten him. (We need to keep in mind that these were people who claimed to have a relationship with God, to be people of faith.) In chapter 2 verse 13 God talked about how the people decked themselves in rings and jewelry and went after other lovers. "And [they] forgot me, says the LORD." Farther ahead in chapter 4 verse 6, he will say they have rejected knowledge of him. So this confrontation is full of God's pain. We can understand the intensity of these charges if we recall the way God had initiated entering into relationship with the people of Israel, betrothing them to himself in innocence and committing everything of his character and resources to them. This was summarized in Hosea 2:19-20: "And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD." God had said, "I am giving you everything I have---all you have to do is respond in love to me." The anguish that God felt here was immeasurable because his commitment to them had been disregarded.

There are two accusations in verse 1. There was a lack of integrity or obedience to truth that God had revealed. And there was a lack of intimacy or deep, personal relationship. Integrity is summarized in two words: faithfulness and kindness. (Your Bible may translate faithfulness as truth, honesty, good faith, or trustworthiness.) There were no longer decent, responsible relationships even between people of faith; there was no moral foundation of integrity on which to build. So people were suspicious of each other; giving one's word didn't mean anything. Motives in relationships were ulterior and devious.

The word kindness is the Hebrew word *hesed* : loyal love, lovingkindness, or faithful love. This quality was gone too. God had given them his loyal love and they were to express loyal love toward one another, but everyone was out for himself. There was no generosity, no forgiveness, no willingness to let people off the hook or to love them in spite of sinful faults and failures. There was an abrasiveness in relationships rather than the oil of loving acceptance and commitment.

The lack of intimacy is summarized in the statement, "There is...no knowledge of God." The Hebrew root of this word knowledge has deeper implications than just understanding information or theories, or even having a personal acquaintance with somebody. It implies intimate, personal relationship. In the Old Testament this word *to know* is used over and over again to describe the physical and spiritual oneness of a husband and a wife, each equally knowing the other sexually, emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually. It speaks of the depth of personal involvement and interaction God created us to experience with him. But tragically, Israel was not willing to open up anymore in relationship with him, to respond to his self-giving and his self-revelation. I have used the English word intimacy because it is a beautiful synonym for knowing God. Intimacy means proceeding from within; inward or internal. It reinforces the reality that knowing God is much more than knowing ideas. It involves everything that we are intellectually, emotionally, and volitionally. The reciprocity of this knowing suggests that God knows all about what is going on inside of us as well; we can't hide from him. In reality, the beginning of our knowledge of God or our relationship with him is when we realize that he knows us inside out. When a stranger says to you, "I know who you are; I know your reputation, your family, what you do in life," that is a great affirmation. And God says that to us. The psalmist David prays in Psalm 139,

"O LORD, thou hast searched me and known me."
He says later in verses 23-24,
"Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my [anxious] thoughts!
And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!"

Both our understanding of God and our relationship with him are based on our response to being known absolutely and thoroughly by him. That is intimacy.

As was suggested in Hosea's first accusation, knowledge of God calls for obedience to truth, or integrity. Integrity means wholeness, completeness, or being undivided. Integrity is congruity of behavior, or consistency between what we believe about God and how we live life in response to God. Intimacy with God, or knowing him as he reveals himself, must be inseparably intertwined with revering his character and obeying his commandments. He has chosen to be our God and elected us to be his people, so then knowing him requires integrity, a life of faithfulness. Intimacy and integrity are important aspects of relationship and obedience to truth, and are the secret of growing in the knowledge of God.

But Israel lacked both of those things, and the evidence listed in verse 2 summarizes a complete breakdown in community life. Going by the list of indictments, in reality the people of the nation were breaking five of the Ten Commandments, the law that had been given at Sinai. Verse 6 will say, "You have forgotten the law of your God." God had built restraints into societal relationships in the Ten Commandments.

Hosea says, "Among you who claim to be people of faith, there is swearing, or cursing." That means they were denouncing others, wishing evil on their brothers and sisters in the community of faith. And they were swearing oaths that they never intended to keep and dragging God into it by invoking his name.

There was dishonesty, lying, or deceit in all kinds of relationships, both in the justice system and in the marketplace. People were being denied their right to fairness in trade and commerce and their right to justice in the courts, in defiance of what God had ordained for his covenant community.

There was even murder motivated by jealousy, hatred, and lust. And this suggests that the whole society was gradually losing respect for the dignity of life. They were usurping God's authority over life, perhaps life on the margin--that of the unborn, the elderly, and the infirm who couldn't contribute as much.

There was stealing, denying an individual's right to the material possessions that God had entrusted to him.

And finally there was adultery, or sexual impurity. The heart of the society was the family unit, and family life was being torn apart by immorality. The security that God designed a man and woman and their children to experience was being violated.

The last two clauses in verse 2, "they break all bounds and murder follows murder," are just summaries of the disintegration going on in that society. Without a knowledge of God as he had revealed himself through biblical truth, people were breaking out of the boundaries that the Ten Commandments had built into their society. The commandments of God defined protection and restraint against sin. But when they were broken, the results were an escalation of violence and an unraveling of the social fabric of the nation.

Verse 3 says the land itself was in mourning. Human beings were languishing instead of thriving with vigor, but there was also decline in the natural world--the beasts, the birds, and the fish of the sea. I thought back to Genesis 1:28 and the creation orders. When God gave humanity dominion over the animal kingdom, he gave us responsibility for stewardship. The harsh reality here is that when we forsake God and his word, not only does the human community suffer, but also the natural world. The ecological balance that God built into it is destroyed. The Scriptures view the whole world as interconnected and interdependent.

Tragic consequences of not knowing God

The suffering and mourning are expanded in the next section. Verses 4 through 6 talk very specifically about the destruction that comes from not really knowing God. God says,

Yet let no one contend,
and let none accuse,
for with you is my contention, O priest.

You shall stumble by day,
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night;
and I will destroy your mother.

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;
because you have rejected knowledge,
I reject you from being a priest to me.

And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.

The dramatic controversy in Hosea's words has become a contention---an even stronger word---between God and the nation. The nation was to have been a priest to God. When God had given the nation the law at Sinai (see Exodus 20:1-17), he said, "You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." But it is clear in the indictment in these three verses that they had lost the right, privilege, and ministry of priesthood, and there was nothing they could say. They couldn't blame God or one another for the social disintegration they were experiencing. Each individual was responsible before God.

There are two accusations in this paragraph, both in verse 6. God says, "You have rejected knowledge." God was saying, "You have rejected the personal, intimate relationship that I have called you into. You have chosen to cut yourself off from communication with me, to isolate yourself from me." The second accusation is, "You have forgotten the law of God." That is the law given at Sinai; revealed truth that called them to obedience, accountability, and a lifestyle of integrity. Little by little their awareness of biblical truth had been eroded until now they couldn't remember it anymore. It is just as true in a nation like our own and in our individual lives that there is erosion of our awareness of truth when God's character, commands, and personal commitments to us gradually recede into the background of our lives.

In recent days I have been involved with a number of folks---long-time friends and fellow travelers in this path of faith---who fit these descriptions, who have chosen to reject the God who loves them, saved them, and has been faithful to them. It has gotten to the point that biblical truth doesn't make sense to them anymore. Things they used to know clearly, they don't know anymore.

There are four tragic consequences in verses 5 and 6. First he says,

"You shall stumble by day,
the prophet also shall stumble with you by night...."

They had not only a priestly calling, but a prophetic calling. Prophets were to reflect or shine truth on people. Truth is a light that shows us where we are going. Moses himself in Numbers 11:29 had said, "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, that the LORD would put his spirit upon them!" They were to be a nation of truth-tellers, to show the nations all around them how to live life, to make the truth of Scripture relevant to their neighbors. But because they were disregarding truth, they were stumbling and falling flat on their faces. They couldn't be a help to anybody because they couldn't even apply truth to themselves. They ended up being an embarrassment to themselves and to their prophetic calling.

The second consequence is destruction. Twice, in the last line of verse 5 and the first line of verse 6, that word is used: "...I will destroy your mother," and "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge...." Throughout this book, Hosea uses his wife Gomer, the mother of their children, as a picture of the nation as a whole. That is consistent with all of Old Testament revelation; the nation was a wife to God and the mother of individual men and women in the nation. The people of Israel considered themselves spiritual children of the nation. The promise here is that there would be judgment--destruction and ruin; they would perish. This is a reminder that the nation was going to be sent into exile for judgment--not to end everything, because judgment is meant to purify, but to bring the people back to spiritual reality.

The third consequence in the middle of verse 6, as we already saw, was that they were going to be rejected as a nation of priests. A priest was to lead people to God, to live a life that was so attractive that people were drawn not to them but to the Lord. Priests were to be committed to revealed truth--to love it, to communicate it, and to be controlled by it. Priests were called to judge on issues of biblical morality. They had to know right from wrong and not get confused, even though the society around them was confused. They had to guard truth: to never forget it and to never allow it to be tampered with or changed. Priests were called to hallow the Sabbath; that is, to live a lifestyle of worship and rest and gratitude that people were drawn into. And the apostle Peter said in 1 Peter 2:9 that now we too are a nation of priests; this is our ministry. But the passage shows us how none of these responsibilities were being carried out--they were being undermined by the lifestyle of the people, so that God was taking the responsibilities away from the nation.

And the fourth consequence is found in the final poignant statement at the end of verse 6:

"And since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children."

Remember that Israel's children were the individual members of its society. God says to them, "I will step away from you and let you go. I will turn my back on you. I will let you live the way you want to live." It is a frightening thing as a believer to come to the place where God has removed his resources and let us go. All four of these things--coming to a place where we're stumbling and being dangerous to ourselves and other people, being punished for sin in our lives, having our priestly ministry of leading people to the Lord taken away because our lives are so inconsistent and contradictory, and then living in a place where God's resources aren't even available anymore--are very frightening. I went through a two-year period in my life when every one of those things was painfully real. It is an awful place to live.

The critical role of spiritual leaders

There is a final indictment in verses 7 through 10. At the heart of this whole section was the anguished cry of God, "My people are destroyed!" (verse 6). They were destroyed because they didn't really know Him. Now verses 7 through 10 lay part of the blame for that at the feet of the spiritual leaders of the nation. Working through these verses was very difficult for me, because I had to examine my own heart; my own calling, responsibilities, and priorities in life as a shepherd here at PBC. Listen to what God says through Hosea about the priesthood, or the clergy:

The more they increased,
the more they sinned against me;
I will change their glory into shame.

They feed on the sin of my people;
they are greedy for their iniquity.

And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways,
and requite them for their deeds.

They shall eat, but not be satisfied;

they shall play the harlot, but not multiply;
because they have forsaken the LORD to cherish harlotry.

The priesthood of Israel had been entrusted to teach Torah, to lead the nation in worship, and to lead them to the Lord. But there are three words in verse 7 that summarize what the priesthood had come to. The first one is wealth, or increase. Second, they had sinned, which speaks of perverting truth and not standing for biblical reality anymore. And third, they would be shamed, which talks about degeneracy of life and ministry.

During the early part of Hosea's ministry, the nation knew incredible prosperity under the reign of King Jeroboam. It was the wealthiest period in the nation's history. There was stability economically and politically, although there was a growing disparity between classes. The upper class got rich, and the priesthood benefited from this wealth. So they uncritically supported the king and the upper or ruling classes of the nation. They indulged the people's syncretism, or blending of the worship of Baal with the worship of *Yahweh*; they cooperated with it and didn't call it what it was. Nor did they preach against the selfish, acquisitive materialism of the land. They couldn't, because they were benefiting too much themselves. For the people generously gave tithes and donations out of gratitude.

There is a dangerous principle here that struck me as a spiritual leader. More abundance of resources and wealth can create a false sense of security. I grew up without very much of anything, but the more financial and material resources I have now, the greater temptation it is to trust in them, and even in the people around me who contribute and support me in that way. The problem is that false security logically means that you think less and less that you need the Lord. You abandon him in terms of meeting your needs. The result is a spiritual life that is degenerative, that isn't true anymore.

The hearts of the priesthood are exposed in verse 8. This is an ugly, horrible picture. Instead of teaching the people the nature of righteousness by holding up biblical truth in the Torah, or the Pentateuch, and motivating them to seek righteousness, the priests were really prospering from what was the Old Testament equivalent of the Middle Ages practice of selling indulgences. They were misappropriating the sin offerings and sacrifices that the people brought to the temple. The indictment is that they were greedy for sin! The more guilt-driven people were, the more offerings they got. They ate better and their lifestyle improved. There is an awful picture of gluttony for the sin of the people: "Don't preach against it, let them come and unburden themselves, because we're getting fat off it."

Verses 9 and 10 summarize the tragic consequences. It says basically that the priesthood was going to suffer the same judgment that the nation would experience, which was described in verse 6. But the phrase in verse 9, "like people, like priest," was for me a blunt reminder that people emulate their leaders. It was tragic that the people were willing to be led in the wrong direction, but you can't really blame them, because without consistent biblical truth there wasn't any objective standard by which they could know right from wrong. By the priesthood's failure the people ended up being victimized.

Personally, this is really an awesome challenge for me as a spiritual leader. People are going to rise or sink to my level spiritually. I can lead people only as far as I've been willing to travel in my own spiritual pilgrimage. The best things any of us as a pastor-teacher, elder, or minister can do for you, to whom God has called us to minister, is to constantly move deeper into the Scriptures; examining our own lives in terms of radical discipleship in following the Lord Jesus, and rising higher in our vision of what God wants from his people right here and now. My calling among you is not spiritual superiority, and it is certainly not to benefit personally from this place and this ministry.

What God calls me to is to simply make obedience to him and his word my priority.

Jesus---the way, the truth, and the life

That was Hosea's passion in life, his central focus. He agonized over a people who had lost that focus. Look ahead to Hosea 6:3, where he calls Israel, and us today, to both intimacy and integrity, to a deepening relationship with God, and obedience to God: "Let us know, let us press on to know the LORD...." And remember, pressing on to know the Lord is predicated on the fact that God has initiated relationship with us.

To know him is his gift to us. Every discovery about God and his nature is really our response to his revelation.

The people of Israel were being destroyed because of a lack of teaching by the priests about God and about his written word, everything he had revealed of himself to that point in history. But today our problem is not a lack of information about God, or even misinformation about God. Our problem is a lack of really knowing him as he has already revealed himself.

It's easy to talk superficially and glibly about knowing God, or to talk mechanically as if it were a matter of following a set of formulas. But the apostle Paul said, "Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion...." (1 Timothy 3:16). There is something almost unfathomable about knowing God. Yet the way God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ is awesome, profound, overwhelming! In Christ, God opened up and revealed his intrinsic, essential, innermost heart. God dwelt bodily in Messiah, Paul wrote in Colossians 1:19. The eternal God was revealed in human history for all time and for all people. Nothing was left out, nothing held back. Jesus said, "He who has seen me has seen the Father...." (John 14:9).

God came to his people who had been drawn into the seduction of secondary rites and rituals about him, but who didn't know him personally. That was Hosea's heartbreak. But they didn't listen to the prophets; one prophet after another was rejected. So God sent Jesus. Out of unreserved love he offered himself in the person of Immanuel, "God With Us." John says in John 1:14, "In him was the life, and the life was the light of men." The Light of the World revealed both God and man, and in that illumination we see God as he is and we see ourselves in desperate need of him. "The only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known" (John 1:18). It was God himself who came to us in Christ his Son, the divine *logos*, God's Word. And Jesus is the redeemer, the reconciler, and the restorer of man to God. So our knowledge of God and our relationship with God begins, and never ends, in Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

In the prayer that Jesus prayed for us in John 17, we see again the intimacy of relationship with God combined with the call to integrity to live in obedience to his revealed word. Jesus prayed, "And this is eternal life, that they know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (17:3). There is the intimacy, the deep and personal relationship. He also prayed, "Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me" (17:7). Later on in verse 16 he prayed, "...Thy word is truth." And there is the call to integrity, to live in obedience to biblical truth.

The same dynamic was at work in the life of the apostle Paul. Paul was a stubborn, hard-hearted Jew who lived a life of tremendous contention with God until he met the resurrected Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus. Paul grew in that relationship as he grew in his knowledge of Jesus Christ. He wrote this about his purpose in life in his letter to the Philippians (3:10), "...That I may know him and the power of his resurrection...." He wrote to the Corinthians about his priority in life (1 Corinthians 2:2): "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He wrote to Timothy about his passion in life (2 Timothy 1:12): "...I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to him until that day."

How can we really know God? Knowing God is about our hearts. It is about a life of prayer and a life in the Scriptures. This is how God reveals himself to us and communicates with us. Knowing God is also about cultivating relationships with men and women who are equally serious about knowing him. There are many who will settle for superficial relationships with the Creator and Savior God. Find men and women who are serious about going deeper in knowing him.

There is a great book I commend to you that J.I. Packer wrote about twenty years ago entitled *Knowing God*. I found it just after I got out of college, and I have read this book three times since then. It always calls me back to the essentials, reminding me who this God is and how urgently he wants to know me. Packer wrote:

Do we desire such knowledge of God? Then---

First, we must recognize how much we lack knowledge of God. We must learn to measure ourselves, not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts. Many of us, I suspect, have no

idea how impoverished we are at this level. Let us ask the Lord to show us.

Second, we must seek the Saviour. When He was on earth, He invited men to company with Him; thus they came to know Him, and in knowing Him to know His Father...The Lord Jesus Christ is now absent from us in body, but spiritually it makes no difference; still we may find and know God through seeking and finding His company. It is those who have sought the Lord Jesus till they have found Him---for the promise is that when we seek Him with all our hearts, we shall surely find Him---who can stand before the world to testify that they have known God.

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