

DISCIPLESHIP THROUGH RELATIONSHIP` “MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD”

A. Knowing Father God, His Person and Character

A Moment in the Life of a Disciple (3)

Imagine you've decided to be one of Jesus' first disciples. It's all pretty heady stuff. You've never seen anyone exercise the power He has. Power over the elements; over sickness and disease; over demonic spirits; and over people (the kind of power many politicians would trade everything to acquire). In the beginning, while you could see He was different, you thought it was just his charismatic personality that made Jesus unique. But you've seen leaders in action and know there is something more. Your faith system is full of stories of people who operated with a special impartation of divine power. Old Testament prophets such as Elijah and Elisha had the power of God to perform miracles. But Jesus' power seems to come from within. As the days stretch into many months and the band of disciples continues to travel around with Him, teaching, preaching, occasionally getting into trouble with the religious leaders, you come to realise the key to Jesus' power is His relationship with God. The public side of His life and ministry is just that. It does not reveal the source of His supernatural strength. On one level, He is just a man. He gets tired, hungry and thirsty like everyone else. But when the pressure is on the thing He does more than anything else is pray. Some days he disappears for hours at a time and goes walking through the hills, talking to God. Walking among scorpions, sand, heat and solitude is where the ancient prophets were made. Jesus spends whole nights in prayer. When He speaks about God there is a sense of intimacy you have never detected in others, not even the most pious of the priests. As you look for an explanation, you remember that Moses was called "God's friend". He had a reputation for spending weeks, on Mount Sinai talking to God. Abraham heard from God; that gave him strength as he wandered looking for the place to which God was directing him. Samuel heard the voice of God and became a leader in Israel at a time of national crisis and change. David was said to be a man "after God's own heart". Isaiah had an experience of God's presence that turned his world upside down. It seems the experiences of those men, and others like them, must have been written for our benefit. But Jesus goes one step further. He speaks and lives as though God is tangible and knowable. What's scary is that He calls God his "Father". Not in the sense that we are all God's children, because He made us, but like an earthly father, only more intimately so. The way Jesus modeled discipleship, if you want to follow Him and do the works He did you need a relationship with God as well.

The most important part of Jesus' life was His relationship with God. Likewise, if our style of discipleship does not draw us into a closer relationship with Him it is not discipleship we are engaged in; we are just going for a walk.

"I believe in God the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." (Apostles Creed)

When I lived in Lebanon with my family we attended *All Saints Church*, an Anglican community led by a godly English Vicar and his wife. Most Sunday services involved a liturgy that included the above words, or their equivalents in other creeds (from "believe"). While I do not come from a liturgical background, there was something affirming about starting our corporate worship time each week as Christians by declaring the underlying truths we believed. Over the years I have met countless Christian believers who have not known what they believed, or why.

For many people it is hard to know where to start putting "creed" into life. Where does it fit? Do we really know God? Is He relevant to our business or home life? How do we live in a society where most people *don't* want to know God and are indifferent to Him? Concerning ancient Israel God said, "'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.'" (Romans 10:21).

The Bible tells how the Children of Israel were delivered from slavery in Egypt; saw God's power in action judging the Egyptians, opening up the Red Sea and providing for them in the desert; but did not want to know Him. Instead, they pled with Moses, "You go and meet Him, then come back and tell us what He is like" (Exodus 20:18, 19). How's that for gratitude? They kept their distance. So only Moses got to know God, a little. He realized that, without God's presence, the expedition was doomed to fail (Exodus 33:12-17). While the tribes saw God's acts Moses learned about His ways (Psalm 103:7). Only a handful of those whom God wanted to call His People were interested in this dimension of relationship. For centuries in Israel knowing of God was a commodity in short supply.

Even in the Christian era, people continue to ask professionals to be their intercessors, to meet God on their behalf. This surely grieves the heart of Father God, who wants us all to know and love Him for who He is.

More than textbooks

What do we understand about God's nature? Is He high above the heavens, untouchable and unknowable as images portrayed in the Sistine Chapel and taught in the Muslim Koran? Or is He an inscrutable being who only visits occasionally bearing gifts, like Santa Claus.

Look up a textbook on systematic theology (*theos* = God; *logos* = word) and you will find the facts, as we know them.

- the Oneness of God – there is no other
- the creative power of God; He is eternal, self-existent and infinite
- the great attributes of God (all knowing, all powerful, ever-present, unchanging)
- the love of God – God IS love

- the mercy of God – He doesn't deal with us as deserve, but is always ready to forgive and restore those who fall
- the grace of God – receiving what we don't even deserve, because He is good and Jesus has paid the price
- the holiness of God – sin can't abide in His presence
- the fear of God – respecting God and knowing that it is a "fearful thing to fall into His hands" (Hebrews 10:31)
- the personality of God – He is not just a "power" or a "force", but a person, who has emotions and wants a relationship with His people

So much for fine textbooks. In today's world we are flooded with head knowledge and ephemeral information. With the Internet we have any conceivable opinion and interpretation at our fingertips. It is essential on one level but only a stepping stone in discipleship. Knowledge alone will not build a relationship. We all know that. The devil can read textbooks. So can non-Christians. A former Governor-General of Australia, Bill Hayden, used to say that he read the Bible for its philosophical value. Former Communist cadres in Yugoslavia told me they read the Bible in order to be able to argue with Christians. Knowing God involves much more than being able to describe Him. Theological descriptions alone are like ingredients; nothing like the complete product. On one level, we need Biblical scholarship, so that we can assemble truth and make it readily digestible and distinguish fact from awful fiction. But "knowing about" God does not train the disciple. God is a Person, not a doctrine.

How to know God – where do we start?

You and I exist to have a relationship with God. It is true that His ways and thoughts are higher than our own (Isaiah 55:8, 9), but that shouldn't stop us wanting to pursue a relationship with Him. That is the essence of discipleship. From what Jesus said, we ought to know Him. Jesus modeled relationship with God as a Heavenly "Father" as normative for the Christian life. His entire life and ministry were tied up in knowing God and carrying out the Father's will. Nothing more. Nothing less. If we are serious about following in Jesus' footsteps and representing Him in our world, we must have a similar relationship.

Jesus said that eternal life was related to knowing God (John 17:3), and that only He could reveal the Father to us.

"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God'. Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me." (John 6:44-45)

But there's one catch. Knowing God is not like a file on a diskette inserted into the computer or downloaded from the Web. It comes by revelation.

No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father. (John 6:46)

Apart from Jesus, God is unknowable. Apart from God, Jesus is unknowable. Our first reaction to that statement is, "Show us what God is like".

Evangelical Christianity celebrates sinners repenting (changing their mind about sin and turn from it) and coming to God through faith in Jesus. We invite people to prayer with us to give their lives to Christ; then we tell them they have become children of God. That much is true. All too often, though, the transaction stops there. People pray the Sinner's Prayer but stay where they are. The journey doesn't go much beyond that. The train remains in the station, as it were.

Discipleship involves getting in step with Jesus Christ and getting to know God through strengthening the relationship, talking to God, getting to know His voice, living in obedience to His will, learning His ways, becoming like him. Discipleship is transformational. It is about more than facts and data, philosophy and epistemology. One thing is certain, if we are keen to know God we must be prepared for lifestyle changes (2 Peter 1:5-9; Colossians 3:1-10). This is the litmus test. God hates sin; have your attitudes toward sin changed? God is love. Do you love others the way Jesus did? And so on.

God has revealed Himself through His Son.

The writer of the book of Hebrews (in the New Testament) described the effort God has gone to to make Himself known. First, he created the world and continues to uphold it by the word of His power. Everything exists because of Him. You can ignore Him, but you can't live without Him. From the first men and women He has sought relationship with the human race. When that seemed to fail, He spoke to individuals and sent them in His name, to urge others Him and live His way. Most of those messengers were rejected and abused; many were killed outright. Lastly, He sent His Son, made in His image, living by His side, with a specific mandate to represent Him in the world. The Son was treated worst of all. The world that He made rejected Him. The chosen people who were blessed with a special relationship over two thousand years rejected Him. Only a few people wanted anything to do with Him. But to them He gave special power, to become His children. Sounds logical; it is tragic that so many miss out?

What is God like? Take a long, hard look at Jesus Christ. Relationship with God is what makes Christians different. We are living in the world, but we no longer think or act like everyone else. We have new wiring. We are motivated by more than an intellectual interest in knowing about God. We know Him.

God still speaks

"Today, you will hear His voice." (Hebrews 3:7, 15; 4:7)

After three years of instruction, Jesus closest followers didn't seem to understand what He was talking about when He said they could have a relationship with God. "Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us" (John 14:8). Apparently, they still didn't "get it".

Jesus was dumbfounded: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father" (John 14:9-13).

Knowing God is more than praise and worship; more than reading the Bible; more than meeting with other Christians, more than world evangelism; more than participating in a Christian leadership seminar. These are helpful in making us stronger believers. But they are not a potion. Our liturgy (whatever format) is not a pill we take to become more godly. Relationship is not formula-driven. If we want to grow as Christians, the key is deepening our relationship with God Himself.

Our relationship with God can be distorted by things in our past. The concept of the "Fatherhood" of God can be complicated by our memories of our own fathers. What if we had abusive, distant or manipulative fathers? Does the word conjure up memories of difficult times and feelings we prefer to forget? We must allow the Holy Spirit to bring about renewal in areas that have been damaged, so that the way we relate to God is not cluttered by baggage from the past. Sometimes we need the support of fellow-Christians to work through the issues. That's why we have the community of God.

How do we grow in our relationship with God?

Let's answer that question by looking at some steps we can take.

- Believe that He is there (Hebrews 13:6)
- Surrender your life to Him
- Seek Him (Jeremiah 29:13)
- Develop a life where prayer is important (John 15:7) – listen to God and talk to Him about everything. Nothing is too big or too pedestrian. Prayer is like our lungs, as we breathe in God's life.
- Read His Word (Acts 17:11) – get instructions and information about His character and priorities first-hand
- Allow the Holy Spirit to direct and empower your life (Galatians 5:16, 17, Acts 1:8) – more about that in our next segment
- Live in obedience to His will (John 14:21) – please Him by doing what is right in His sight
- Trust him with your life, moment by moment (1 Peter 5:7) – put the relationship to the test
- Mix with other people who know God and are serious about that relationship (Hebrews 10:25) – get support, mentors and encouragement to keep you on the path

Feelings are not trustworthy. God is trustworthy. Feelings cannot be allowed to become the ultimate authority or arbiter in our lives.

The evidence of those who know God is that they will think godly thoughts, live godly lives, pursue godly priorities. They will have an inner strength to do God's work and to reject the Devil and his ways (cf Daniel 11:32).

Relationship in the marketplace

Jesus' relationship with Father God so influenced His lifestyle choices that, in a narrow window of just three years, He was able to finish His work on earth declaring that He had done *everything* the Father had asked. In spite of a fickle marketplace that turned hostile and ended up being homicidal nothing was left undone, no words were left unsaid, no mandate unfulfilled.

As Jesus' disciples, how do we relate knowing God to daily life in the marketplace, the six and the quarter days we are not "at church"? Certainly not in badges, slogans, advertisements or competing affiliations. People want to see what "works".

What do we do when the "rubber hits the road"? When we are alone with our thoughts, fears, doubts and questions? How does relationship with God impact our family life, employment, industrial relations, race relations, management of stresses and pressures of modern life, marriage or singlehood, education, money matters, sexuality, relationship peaks and troughs, class differences, health and sickness and the way we cope with disappointments?

Christianity is more than two hours in a church building every week. Make that four hours for really dedicated people who go twice on Sunday. Or six for those who attend a Bible Study or Home Group during the week. However you compute the figures (even if you include a few hours for people who are not "too busy" to set aside time to read the Bible and pray), it does not take an Einstein to realise that very little of our lives is actually spent in activities that are explicitly and overtly Christian. The average believer has a lifetime but does not manage to read the Bible from cover to cover. I meet Christians who admit they find it hard to pray, harder still to share their faith with their friends.

Knowing God is easy, if that is what you really want. "Draw near to Him and He will draw near to you" (James 4:8). Accept the challenge of getting to know your Heavenly Father. You will find He is even more keen than you are to deepen and broaden the relationship. He will show you the way.