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KNOWING GOD BY EXPERIENCE

*This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God,
and the One You have sent—Jesus Christ. (John 17:3)*

EXPERIENCING GOD'S PROTECTION

One day, I was travelling in a mini-van with my wife Marilyn and two men on an extremely busy freeway near Washington, D.C. It was rush hour, and the multi-lane expressway was jammed with vehicles as impatient drivers rushed to their destinations. Suddenly, our van swerved to the left and almost collided with an eighteen-wheeler in the next lane. We all braced ourselves, certain we were about to be crushed by the behemoth. The truck blasted its air horn, and our driver veered back into our lane. But before long our vehicle again drifted into the busy lane of traffic beside us. We asked the driver if he was OK, and he assured us he was. But his driving became increasingly erratic. Finally, we insisted that he pull over and eventually discovered this dear man was having a stroke. He barely knew what he was doing. It had been a miracle we had not had a serious accident.

I had known that God was my Protector since I was a little boy (Ps. 41:2; 121:7). Yet on that day, I *experienced* His divine safeguarding. There is a world of difference between knowing something

to be true in your head and experiencing the reality in your life. When we finally arrived at our destination that evening, I had a profound new, *experiential* understanding of God as my Protector.

Scripture is filled with descriptions of God's character. You can read these accounts and believe them to be true about God. Yet God does not merely want you to read *about* Him, He wants you to *know* Him. For the Greeks, to know something meant you understood a concept in your mind. It was an academic process. For example, a Greek orphan might grow up and know the concept of a father. He could describe what fathers do and what it looks like to relate to one. He could conduct research and know all the nuances of the Greek word for father. Yet a small child who had a loving father would know much more about fatherhood than the expert who had studied the concept abstractly his entire life.

In contrast, for a Hebrew person—like Jesus—knowing something entailed experiencing it. In fact, you could not truly say you knew something unless you had dealt with it personally. The small child who had a father might not understand the various grammatical uses of the word “father,” but he would know a great deal about what it was like to have one. So it is significant that, when Jesus spoke about knowing God, He was speaking as a Hebrew.

When Jesus said eternal life is knowing God—including God the Son, Jesus Christ—He did not mean that eternal life is knowing *about* God. He was not referring to someone who has read many books and attended numerous seminars about God. He was talking about a firsthand, experiential knowledge. We come to truly know God as we experience Him in and around our lives. Many people have grown up attending church and hearing about God all their lives, but they do not have a personal, dynamic, growing relationship with God. They never hear His voice. They have no idea what God's will is. They do not encounter His love firsthand. They have no sense of divine purpose for their lives. They may know a lot about God, but they don't really know Him.

Merely knowing about God will leave you unsatisfied. Truly knowing God only comes through experience as He reveals Himself to you through His word and as you relate to Him. Throughout the Bible, we can see that God took the initiative to disclose Himself to people through their life events.

KNOWING GOD THROUGH HIS NAMES

In biblical days, a Hebrew person's name represented his character or described her nature. Peoples' names gave insight into what they were like.

Similarly, biblical names, titles, and descriptions of God identify how men and women personally came to know Him. The Scripture is the record of God's revelation of Himself to people. Each of the many names for God represents a different aspect of His nature.

THE LORD WILL PROVIDE

Genesis 22:1–18 tells us that God was in the process of developing Abraham's character so he could be the father of a new nation. God put Abraham's faith and obedience to the test by asking him to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. This brought Abraham to a crisis of belief. He had to decide what he really believed about God. Until this time, Abraham had known God by experience as “God Almighty,” for God had miraculously provided him with a son when he and his wife, Sarah, were old and beyond the human limits of childbearing. It was wonderful to know God as “Almighty,” but God wanted to expand Abraham's understanding and his experience of who He is.

The command from God to kill Isaac seemingly contradicts everything we know about God. However, in Abraham's day, people sometimes would sacrifice children on altars dedicated to their idols. They believed that demonstrating such devotion to their gods would earn them divine pleasure and, in return, bring bountiful crops. Nowhere else does the Bible record God ever asking someone to sacrifice a child to Him. Clearly, God was testing Abraham to see if he was as devoted to the true God as his neighbors were committed to their false gods.

Of course, any such sacrifice would be horrendous, but putting to death your only child—for whom you had waited twenty-five years—would have been an agonizing assignment. Obeying such a command required Abraham to trust God at a new and deeper level of faith than he ever had before. On the way to the place of sacrifice, Isaac asked his dad, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7). Can you imagine how sobering this moment was for Abraham, knowing his beloved son Isaac was to be the sacrifice?

“Abraham answered, ‘God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son’” (Gen. 22:8). We don’t know all Abraham was thinking as he trudged up the mountain with his son, but clearly he trusted God to provide everything he needed for the imminent sacrifice. He acted on his belief that God was his Provider. He did what God told him to do. When God saw that Abraham did not merely claim to have faith in Him but that he was willing to act out his trust through obedience in this excruciating task, He stopped Abraham and provided a ram for the sacrifice instead. Abraham named that place after the characteristic of God he had just come to know by experience. This is the first time we see the name *Jehovah Jireh* in Scripture, meaning “The Lord Will Provide.” Abraham came to an intimate knowledge of God that day through the experience of God as his Provider.

This is how we, too, grow to know God. As we experience God firsthand, we come to know Him in new and increasingly deeper dimensions. We can learn that God provides as we read this story about Abraham’s walk, but we really know God as Provider once we experience Him providing something specifically for us.

GOD’S PERFECT PROVISION

For twelve years I served as a church pastor in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada. When we started our first mission church, we called Jack Conner as our mission pastor. Although the new congregation needed a full-time pastor, we had no money for moving expenses and no provision for his salary. But we knew God was asking us to invite Jack to come. He had three children in school, so we needed to pay him at least a modest salary with which to care for his family. We began to pray that God would provide for his moving expenses and his salary once he arrived.

Jack had a secure job as a senior pastor in California. Yet we were asking him to move his family to a new country with no guarantee of a steady paycheck. Jack and his wife Bonna prayed, and they, too, sensed God’s hand at work. Jack began to take his family up a mountain just as Abraham had done, without knowing just how his need would be met when he arrived. I did not have an extensive list of contacts I could canvas for Jack’s financial support. I felt the full weight of what I was asking Jack to do, and I began asking myself,

“How in the world will God make this provision?” Then it dawned on me that as long as God knew where I was, He could cause anybody in the world to help me. He could place my need on the heart of anyone anywhere.

Jack was approved by Canadian immigration and began his trek of faith. As he prepared to move, I received a letter from a church in Fayetteville, Arkansas. The pastor said, “God has laid it on our hearts to send one percent of our mission giving to Saskatchewan missions. We are enclosing a check to use however you choose.” I had no idea how they became involved with us at that time, but a large donation was included with the letter.

Not long afterwards, someone called me and pledged to contribute funds every month for Jack’s financial support. That promise brought the monthly financial package to the level we had hoped to pay Jack. When Jack drove into our driveway with his family. I asked, “Jack, what did it cost to move you?” The amount was almost exactly what the church in Arkansas had just sent us.

We began that step of faith by believing what the Bible teaches: that God can use anyone, anywhere, to be His instrument of provision for those who trust Him (Phil. 4:13). We had believed God, and we had followed through in obedience. We already knew *academically* that God was One who provides. But after that event, our whole church came to know *from experience* that God is, indeed, the Provider. Calling Jack by faith and seeing God provide for him led us to a deeper love relationship with an all-sufficient God.

THE LORD IS MY BANNER

The Bible is filled with examples of God helping His people come to know the reality of who He is through their experiences. As Joshua and the Israelites were fighting their relentless enemies, the Amalekites, Moses oversaw the battle from a nearby mountain. While he held his hands up to God, the Israelites were victorious, but whenever he lowered his weary arms, the Israelites would begin to lose.

God gave Israel victory over the Amalekites that day, and Moses built an altar to commemorate the occasion. He named it “The Lord Is My Banner.” A banner was a standard or flag that armies, tribes, or nations carried in their front ranks to identify who they were as

they marched into battle. It could be difficult at times to recognize an army as it marched through dusty fields. But when you saw its banner held high in the air, you could immediately discern if the army was a friend or foe, and you could gain a sense of its strength by understanding which king or nation it represented. The title, "The Lord Is My Banner" indicated that the Israelites belonged to God and that to oppose them was to battle against the power of God.

Moses' uplifted hands gave constant glory to God, indicating the battle was His and that the people of Israel belonged to Him. Israel came to understand God in a fresh and powerful way that day as they realized anew that they were God's people and that He was their defender (Exod. 17:8–15).

I AM WHO I AM

When Moses encountered God in a burning bush, he asked, "If I go to the Israelites and say to them: The God of your fathers has sent me to you, and they ask me, 'What is His name?' what should I tell them?" (Exod. 3:13).

"God replied to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exod. 3:14). By this God was declaring, "I am the eternal One. I will be what I will be." In essence this declaration held a promise: "Whatever you need me to be in your life, that is what I will be. I am everything you will need." During the next forty years, Moses came to experience God as Yahweh, the Great I AM. God was everything Moses and Israel needed Him to be.

A RELATIONSHIP—NOT JUST A NAME

Whenever God reveals His nature in a new way, *it is always for a purpose*. He created you for a love relationship with Him. When He encounters you, He is allowing you to know Him by experience. Encounters with God are always an expression of God's love for you. Jesus said: "The one who has My commands and keeps them is the one who loves Me. And the one who loves Me will be loved by My Father. I also will love him and will reveal Myself to him" (John 14:21).

If you have a love relationship with God, you will experience Him actively working in and through your life. For instance, you

could not truly know God as the "Comforter in sorrow" unless you experienced His compassion during a time of grief or sadness.

The various names of God found in Scripture can become a call to worship for you. The psalmist said: "Happy are the people who know the joyful shout; LORD, they walk in the light of Your presence. They rejoice in Your name all day long, and they are exalted by Your righteousness" (Ps. 89:15–16). Acknowledging God's name amounts to recognizing who God is. Calling on His name indicates we are seeking His presence. To praise His name is to exalt Him. God's name is majestic and worthy of our praise.

SUMMARY

The names of God in Scripture reveal something of His nature, activity, or character. You come to know God by experience—at His initiative—as He allows you to learn something new about Him. As you experience God, you grow to know Him more intimately and personally. As you grow in your knowledge of Him, you will naturally want to express your praise, gratitude, and worship to Him. One of the ways to worship Him is to praise and honor Him by acknowledging His names.

EXPERIENCING GOD TODAY

Watch for ways God may bring you to a deeper knowledge of Him through the experiences of your life. Then take time to worship God as you have come to know Him. To worship is to revere and honor God, to acknowledge Him as worthy of your praise.

The list below and on the next page may help you recall some ways you have come to know God better. As you review the many ways the Bible describes God, try to remember experiences in your life that similarly helped you to know God. Perhaps you will discover some characteristics of the Lord you have not yet acknowledged or experienced, but it may surprise and encourage you to realize the numerous facets of God's nature you have experienced.

Names God has revealed to me:

- my witness (Job 16:19)
- bread of life (John 6:35)
- Comforter in sorrow (Jer. 8:18)

- my hope (Ps. 71:5)
- Wonderful Counselor (Isa. 9:6)
- defender of widows (Ps. 68:5)
- the strength of my salvation (Ps. 140:7)
- Faithful and True (Rev. 19:11)
- our Father (Isa. 64:8)
- a sure foundation (Isa. 28:16)
- my friend (John 15:14)
- Almighty God (Gen. 17:1)
- God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3)
- God who avenges me (Ps. 18:47)
- God who saves me (Ps. 51:14)
- our guide (Ps. 48:14)
- our head (2 Chron. 13:12)
- head of the church (Eph. 5:23)
- our help (Ps. 33:20)
- my hiding place (Ps. 32:7)
- a great High Priest (Heb. 4:14)
- Holy One in your midst (Hos. 11:9)
- righteous Judge (2 Tim. 4:8)
- King of kings (1 Tim. 6:15)
- our life (Col. 3:4)
- light of life (John 8:12)
- Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15)
- Lord of the harvest (Matt. 9:38)
- mediator (1 Tim. 2:5)
- our peace (Eph. 2:14)
- Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6)
- my Redeemer (Ps. 19:14)
- refuge and strength (Ps. 46:1)
- my salvation (Exod. 15:2)
- my help (Ps. 42:5)
- the Good Shepherd (John 10:11)
- Lord (Luke 2:29)
- my stronghold (Ps. 18:2)

- my support (2 Sam. 22:19)
- Good Teacher (Mark 10:17)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What are some characteristics of God you have come to know by experience?
2. Which name of God currently seems most significant in your life? Why is that?
3. What is one aspect of God's nature you would like to experience more fully in the coming days?

