

Knowing God #4

by: Ronald L. Dart

It seems odd to me that man should have a hard time understanding God, after all, we've got a comprehensive testimony of God in one book, the Bible. The book has been well translated into modern English, and anyone should be able to sit down, read it and understand it. Yeah, I know, some people will tell you that the Bible is hard to understand. Well, they are wrong! I understand, some parts of the Bible are obscure, some parts are boring, but if you want to understand God, the testimony is there!

The problem is that religious teachers want to argue over the things about God that are not revealed. What I want to talk to you about are the things that are revealed.

What Does God Say is the Most Important Things to Know About Him?

Now of all the things about God that are important to know, what does God Himself say is the most important? Well, once He spoke to a young prophet named Jeremiah, and He had this to say about Himself. He said in Jeremiah 9 verse 24, "Let him that glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, judgment and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight."

I know that God says we can understand Him and we can know Him. There are three very important things we can know about Him. Now I will be the first to admit though, that there is a superficial problem with this passage. There is a tension, really in our own minds, between a God who exercises loving-kindness on the one hand and a God who exercises judgment on the other because these things often seem to be mutually exclusive.

Take Sodom and Gomorrah, for example, it isn't immediately apparent that Sodom is an example of the loving-kindness of God, after all, the city was destroyed by fire.

Righteousness

Now the tension between the first two aspects of God's character: loving-kindness and judgment is resolved in the third aspect of his character. What's that? Righteousness. Righteousness is an ambiguous word in English, it probably wouldn't be if it weren't for all the religious arguments that revolve around it in the Bible, but righteousness is a little ambiguous in English and in Hebrew it is less so. It comes from a root word that means 'straight'.

God Will Always be Straight with You

What God told Jeremiah that we should know about Him is, that He will always be 'straight' with us. He will not be capricious. He will not be arbitrary. When He tells us a given behavior is right, then we can trust, that it is intrinsically right, not arbitrarily right, not right merely because God said so. It is intrinsically, in and of itself, right and true.

I know that when I was a child and I got an order from my Mom, I commonly said, "Well Mom, why?" Sometimes I got a reason and sometimes she would say, "Because I said so, that's why!"

Now why does a parent sometimes fall back on authority like that? Why don't they always explain to their children? Sometimes the reasons are too complicated for a little mind to understand. Sometimes there isn't time to explain. When Mom says, "Get out of the street Johnny! She doesn't have time to explain that there's an 18 wheeler coming down the road, you know, sometimes it is necessary to reach out and grab him by his shirt collar and drag him back. There isn't time to make it clear to him.

Some of the instructions of God, do not become clear until much, much later, and sometimes after terrible harm has been done. And so consequently we have to depend on God to be 'straight' with us. To be sure, we humans have a hard time walking a straight line, even when were sober and that's where we have to depend on the loving-kindness of God, and something called grace. But the grace and the kindness of God does not mean that He has become less than straight. There is judgment and justice that we must concern ourselves with.

Messiah Will Come to the Temple

One of God's prophets, the last prophet in the Old Testament, named Malachi recorded a statement from God that is fascinating in this regard. It's in the third chapter of the book of Malachi where God says, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom you seek shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom you delight in, behold, he shall come, says the Lord of hosts." A lot of Biblical commentators read this passage and see the Messiah in this. They see the Messiah coming to the temple and beginning to move there. They see Jesus foreshadowed in this passage.

Messiah Will Judge

But the passage in Malachi 3 goes on to say something a little strange, if you're thinking in terms of Jesus' first coming. He said, "I am going to come," says the Lord of hosts, {2} "But who may abide in the day of his coming, who will be able to stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire. He is like launderer's soap." This is two very different ways of purification.

{3} "He shall sit like a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and purge them like gold and silver to make them pure. so they can make an offering to God in righteousness, {4} Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem shall be pleasant to the Lord as in the days of old, and as in the former years. {5} Then I will come near to you in judgment." So here is God speaking, "I am going to come to this temple which you are delighting in, and I am going to come near in judgment. I'm going to be a swift witness against certain categories raised against the people." What are they? "Sorcerers, adulterers, false swearers, those who oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, the fatherless and they that turn aside the stranger from his right. Those people who oppress the hireling, who oppress the widow, who oppress the orphans, and who turn aside the stranger from what he should have and who don't fear me, God says, "I am going to be a swift witness against those people." That is what we mean when we say that God is straight with us.

If you deviate in the areas that He has here, then you're in a lot of trouble.

God Doesn't Change

Then He says something very important, in Malachi 3 verse 6, "I am the Lord, I change not, therefore you sons of Jacob are not consumed." Both His justice and His kindness are illustrated in one characteristic of God. He doesn't change. He is consistent. He is straight. He is always compassionate. He is always kindhearted, but He is always just. That means His laws are not capricious. It is not arbitrary or made up. There is a rationale behind it, even when we don't get it.

One of the most classic examples you'll ever see of this, lies in the often repeated Christian idea that the Old Testament laws are somehow abrogated and have no meaning to Christians. That's easy to say, but what does it mean in the real world?

What does it mean to say, "Well the laws of the Old Testament are all abrogated and they don't have any meaning to Christians?"

AIDS in Africa

The ignorance of Old Testament laws is leading to a great human disaster on the continent of Africa. AIDS has decimated the population of some countries and continues to spread. There are quite literally millions of children in Africa who are orphans because of AIDS. Many of whom have AIDS themselves and the disease continues to spread. The tragedy that is stalking Africa is worse than your worst nightmare, and what no one seems to understand is, that AIDS could have been prevented entirely had the nations of Africa, been directed by the laws of the Old Testament.

Even a superficial reader of the Old Testament will recall that there is a steady thread through the law, having to do with blood. Many people look at it and may think, "Well, it just old ceremonies going way back to the heathen times that may have been adopted in the

Old Testament." No, No, No! People should understand, that between the laws governing what foods you can eat, the treatment of bodily fluids and blood, who you can and can not have sex with, there's a comprehensive program for the prevention of AIDS.

Now, the Bible doesn't say it's an AIDS prevention program, but the truth is, you can follow the trail right through the Old Testament and you can find laws sequentially, that had they been followed would have prevented AIDS, and probably a lot of other plagues in Africa as well.

And yet, a lot of people who claim to believe the Bible, want to argue that the law of God is abolished, abrogated, done away with! They believe in God, they just aren't persuaded that God is 'straight', that He is constant, but the reason why He gave these laws in the first place was for the good of mankind. They believe, I guess, that God just did them arbitrarily because people needed a good idea for something or other, that they needed laws, so he gave them laws.

Old Testament Laws

People don't understand that, how many of the Old Testament laws were basic hygiene, sanitation and health laws. We are scientific these days, we have our own health laws, we have solved a lot of those health problems, and that is true. But much of what we do, has its roots in things Moses told the Israelites thousands of years ago. We simply understand the science behind it today and we apply it in more modern ways, but the basis, the basis is the same, but because we reject the basis of it, those things we haven't figured out yet are continuing to plague us. The painful truth is, the plague of AIDS in Africa and in this country has come about because of promiscuous sex, something the Old Testament didn't allow! Think about that!

Now I think it is fair to say that there are many Old Testament laws that we cannot apply today. There are others that we can apply, but not in the same way they did back then, we have to apply them in different ways. Basically, our culture is different, our science is different, and consequently the application of the law is different, but the law is still there, providing a straight line, acting as a compass, revealing that there is a difference between right and wrong in telling us what the difference is.

This is what Jesus was driving at, in the sermon on the Mount, where He made a statement which must be problematic to some people who read His words. Jesus said in Matthew five verse 17, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill. {18} I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass, not one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, until everything has come to pass." Now when you think about this in relation to what I've been talking about, that if you start erasing jots, tittles, sentences, paragraphs, laws out of the book, you have started erasing parts of the straight line of God, and as a result, you're making God inconsistent.

What Africa needs right now is a good, strong dose of what we call the Old Covenant, be it a straight line and they need some discipline in following that straight line, and that's what the Mosaic Covenant did for Israel. Africa needs a God who is straight, who exercises righteousness.

We Need Exercises

The choice of God's words says that "He is one who exercises these things in the earth," is interesting because sometimes we need exercises. We need push-ups to make our arms strong. We need knee bends to strengthen our legs. In other words, some of the things that God gave to Israel, were exercises, disciplines, in order to help them become focused on right and wrong. Merely because, let's say a person today, at least theoretically, has the spirit of God to help them understand right from wrong doesn't change the nature of right and wrong. This, somehow, gets lost in a lot of the rhetoric about the law.

God's Law is a Treasure

The psalmist who wrote the 119th. Psalm, understood God's law in a way that many people have long since forgotten. In verse 161 of this long Psalm, David said this, "Princes have persecuted me without a cause, but my heart stands in awe of your word. { 162 } I rejoice at your word as one that finds great spoil." The image he draws for us is someone who has come to a place and found a Bible or found the books of the law and he picks them up, and he says, "I'm so excited because I have got this, I have found a treasure."

Verse 163, "I hate and abhor lying, but I really love your law." Why? What was it about the law that has somehow touched this man in such a way that he realized he had found a treasure chest.

Great Peace Have They that Love God's Law

Continuing in Psalms 119 verse 164, "Seven times a day," he said, "I praise you because of your righteous judgments. { 165 } Great peace have they that love your law and nothing shall offend them." Here we have a world where people are torn up, frightened, scared, depressed and he says this, "Great peace have they that love your law and nothing shall offend them." What is he talking about? He is talking about a book that describes a way of living, that tells you where the rocks are, where you are going to hurt yourself, where you're going to fall down if you do this, where you're going to hurt other people without perhaps even realizing it. It tells you these things and the result of obedience is great peace.

Testimony of God

Continuing in verse 166 of Psalms 119, "LORD, I have hope for your salvation, I have done your commandments. { 167 } My soul has kept Your testimonies and I love them exceedingly."

Testimonies. What does that mean? What is not well understood, I guess, is overlooked in many cases, by Bible readers, is a little passage back in Exodus chapter 31 verse 18. It says, "God gave to Moses, when he made an end of communing with him on Mount Sinai, two tables of testimony, tables of stone, written with the finger of God." Now if you have read the Bible at all, you will know immediately what he is talking about is the two tables of stone which had the 10 commandments written on them. In fact, you are going to know that if you saw the movie with Charlton Heston playing Moses in the movie, the Ten Commandments, or maybe even the recent animated version, the Prince of Egypt, you are going to understand that the two tables of stone are the tables of the testimony of God, which are the Ten Commandments.

Now it is rare to hear people speak of the Ten Commandments as the testimony of God, but that's what they were originally called, and the first name of the Ark of God was not the Ark of the covenant, it was the Ark of the testimony because it contained the testimony of God. Now if that idea seems strange to you, consider this, the Ten Commandments are not arbitrary laws given to control man, they are a revelation to man of what works and what hurts. What works and what doesn't. After all, that's the fundamental meaning of righteousness. What is right and what is wrong. God's testimony to man is that these are the laws that work. They are written into nature. They are written into the genetic code of man, and they are written into the world around us,

The man who wrote Psalms 119, understood this very well. He said, {168} "I have kept your commandments, and I have kept your testimonies, for all my ways are before you. {169} Let my cry come near before you, O LORD, give me understanding according to your word. {170} Let my supplication come before you, deliver me according to your promise. {171} My lips shall utter praise, for you have taught me your statutes, {172} My tongue shall speak of your word, for all your commandments are righteousness."

All of God's Commandments are Righteousness

Let's repeat this memory verse in Psalms 119 and verse 172, "My tongue shall speak of your word, for all your commandments are righteousness."

Generations, millennia ago, it was established with man that righteousness is the commandments of God. God exercises righteousness in the earth. He draws a straight line. He reveals that line to man, and says, "This is the way you should live your life, live this way and it will work. Deviate from it and you're going to get hurt."

The psalmist went on to say in verse 173, "Let your hand help me, for I have chosen your precepts." Every possible synonym for law that you can imagine is found in Psalm 119, precepts, words, statutes, commandments. {174} "I have longed for your salvation, O LORD, and your law is my delight."

You know, in a lot of ways, saying that is like saying, "This flashlight in this very, very dark place is a real delight to me. It's a lifesaver," because that's what the law is. It's a lamp to your feet, and a light to your path so you don't fall down and hurt yourself.

Rejoice in God's Word as One That Finds Great Spoil

Verse 175 of Psalms 119, "Let my soul live, and it shall praise you, let your judgments help me. I've gone astray like a lost sheep." I am out here in the dark, all by myself. "Seek your servant, for I do not forget your commandments."

Now the psalmist said something very interesting in this passage, and I wonder to what degree you caught it? It is in Psalms 119 verse 162 where he said, "I rejoice in your word as one that finds great spoil."

Imagine yourself finding a life changing book. There's a book on the market today that makes a claim like that called, 'The Prayer of Jabez.' Now I will tell you this much, it was a life-changing book for the guy that wrote it, because he has certainly found great spoil. The book has been on the bestseller list and has made the author a lot of money.

But life is a little more complicated than the 'Prayer of Jabez' and one needs a book with a few more details, a book like the Bible. Consider the implications of finding out that there really is a secret to living a life, after all, there is a book that opens doors that tells you where the pitfalls are, it leads you down the secret passageways and opens the way to health, long life and prosperity. You see, that's what the psalmist thought he had found in the law of God, the way to live a life, and that's why he said, "I rejoice in your word as one that finds great spoil."

Blessed are They Who Keep God's Testimonies

The person who wrote the 119th. Psalm, it is more like a song than anything else, but it is an attempt in his way to explain to us why it is he loves the law of God, how it is that he came to this depth of understanding. He begins this Psalm by saying, "Blessed are the undefiled in the way who walk in the law of the LORD. {2} Blessed are they who keep his testimonies, and seek him with their whole heart." And right from the beginning, he makes the point that the law of God is the testimony to man about life, about how life works, about how life doesn't work, about things that will help and the things that will hurt. He said, "Those people who seek God in their testimony with their whole heart," {3} "They don't do iniquity. They walk in his ways, {4} You have commanded us to keep your precepts diligently." "Oh," he says, "I am really frustrated by my occasional failures to keep the law. {5} I wish my steps were always directed to keep your statutes, {6} Then I shall not be ashamed when I have respect unto all your commandments"

I have to make a small confession, as I think back over my life, over the occasions when I have had opportunity or occasion to be ashamed, it is inevitably a situation where if I had

just paid more attention to what God said, I would not have done the thing that caused me shame. And so the value of being able to walk through life with your head up and without shame is enormous.

"This young man says, "It's like a treasure I have found. I am not going to have to ever be ashamed as long as I have respect to the commandments of God." Now I have to ask a question, If you tried to tell this fellow, "Don't worry about that law, it's been done away with." He would think you're crazy, because he goes on to say in verse nine, "Then how shall a young man cleanse his way?"

A young man comes to you and says, "I want to clean up my act. I'm tired of living the wrong way. I want to change my life." What do you do? He answers it in verse 8, "By taking heed thereto according to your word." Now remember, in this context, your word is another synonym for the law, {10} "With my whole heart have I sought you, O don't let me wander from your commandments."

Memorize the Scriptures

Continuing in Psalms 119 and verse 11, "I have hid your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." What is he talking about? He means he has memorized the law of God.

How shall a young man clean up his life? How can he straighten up his act? By starting to pay attention to what he is doing in accordance with the word and the law of God.

To memorize the scriptures, to memorize those principles which show you how to live and how not to live, it makes all the difference in life. It makes a difference between poverty and wealth, health and sickness, destruction and life itself.

Meditate On God's Law

Let's continue in Psalms 119 verse 12, "Blessed are you, O LORD, teach me your statutes. {13} With my lips I have declared all the judgments of your mouth. {14} I have rejoiced in the way of your testimonies, as much as I would in all riches, {15} I'll meditate on your precepts, I will have respect unto your ways." The word 'meditate' is interesting in this context, because it's true, when you read through the Old Testament laws, you're going to come across any number of laws, that you are simply not going to understand.

In many cases, you are going to think, "I don't think this is right. Could this law be applied today? How can this law be applied today? What is the spiritual concept behind this law? When you come across something like that, it's time for some meditation. It is time to put your feet up, lay your Bible down on your lap, stare off into space for a while and think your way through the problem, because as you think these things out, that straight line of God's righteousness will slowly become clearer to you and become a part of that which directs your life and the choices you make, and that will be the difference between life and death.

God's Law is the Law of Liberty

Later in Psalms 119 verse 44 he says, "So shall I keep your law continually for ever and ever, {45} and I will walk at liberty, for I seek your precepts." Now this is fascinating because what he is saying on this occasion is that the law is the law of liberty. Now it's unfortunate that so many people, and I don't know where they get this impression, a mistaken idea of some of the things Paul said, that they look upon the law as a burden, as a yoke of bondage, as shackles, as chains that keeps them from doing the things that they like to do. Whereas, this young man, reading through the law of God, writing his psalm says this, "I walk at liberty because of these laws." These are the things that actually guarantee my freedom. He didn't think they were a yoke of bondage. He didn't think they were controlling. What they were was a straight bright line about how to live a life, a straight bright line that pointed toward the place that he really wanted to go.

Why would he want someone to erase the line, to blot out portions of the line, to obscure the line, to take the line away? When the line led right to where he wanted to go.

What are the Most Important Things to Know About God?

Of all the things we want to know about God, God has told us what the important things are, that He is the God who exercises loving-kindness. It is important to know that He is a God who exercises judgment and justice in the earth, and that He is a God who exercises rightness, as the psalmist said, "All your ways are straight." These are the things that winners know about God. Until next time, I'm Ronald Dart and you were Born to Win!

This article was transcribed with minor editing from a message given by
Ronald L. Dart titled: Knowing God #4 (KG4) 11/8/01
Transcribed by: bb 6/25/13

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