

Title: They Shall All Know Me
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Texts: Jeremiah 31:31-37
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They Shall All Know Me

[Proposition: The purpose of the New Covenant is that we would know God, therefore we must make knowing God our supreme desire.]

Introduction

In our culture we spend a lot of time thinking and even obsessing over our goals and desires for our lives. It is not at all unheard of to be asked or to ask, “What is your goal in life?” or “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

But have you ever asked yourself, “What is God’s goal in my life?” Not like the things he wants me to do: he wants me to be a good husband, to live like Jesus, that’s good—but I mean the ultimate thing from which all the rest flows. What does God want for you, his dream and goal for your life?

I want to suggest that the answer to that question (what does God want for your life) is the only real and satisfying answer to your own dreams and goals and desires. The answer to that question, (What does God want for me) provides the answer to our unfulfilled dreams, as well as the fulfilled ones which always seem to satisfy us less than we thought they would.

What God wants most for your life, what he is using all his saving power to accomplish, is for you and I to know him. You can see it in v. 34, the great restoration that comes through the New Covenant is that “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD.”

I. To know God is to find true joy and rest, because he we are made for him.

When God promises in v. 34 that in the New Covenant everyone in the covenant will know him—he is promising to give us the greatest gift possible, and the very person you and I were made for—himself.

The LORD is the Creator – the source of everything good, beautiful, life affirming, and enjoyable. How much more then is he himself to be desired. He is the one who rescued Israel out of Egypt that they might be his treasured possession, and he gave them the Law, and Temple, and Sacrifices so that he could dwell in their midst. He is the Redeemer, refusing to let evil, sorrow, and estrangement from him be the last word, but conquering them all in the death and resurrection of Jesus his Son, that we might all “know the Lord” and find rest in him.

Every good thing we have is a gift from God that should promote in us joy in God not only in his gifts. While we look for and long for the day when God will make all things new and wipe away every tear—the centerpiece of our hope is not the blessings God gives but God’s gift of himself. Revelation 21:3:

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

The Apostle Paul writes to the Philippians:

8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ

And this is all he says in v. 10 “that I may know him.”

Illustration:

There was once a young man who grew up longing for freedom from his cloying mother and his backwater hometown. He moved to a new city to find his calling, and love, and himself, but eventually there too he felt restless. So on to a city where he could prove himself and build a network to get him where he really wanted to be—the capital. When the job offer finally came, the job he’d been dreaming of his whole life, with its accompanying power and influence, he believed he had arrived. “The happy life had a zip code, and [he] now lived there. So why didn’t he feel at home?”

What St. Augustine eventually discovered was that home was not a place but a Person. What he needed was not to find love or joy or success, but to be found by a Father who sent his Son to retrieve him and bring him home. He prays to God:

The “authentic happy life” is “to set one’s joy on you, grounded in you and caused by you. That is the real thing, and there is no other.”¹

I’m sharing Augustine’s story because of how relevant and relatable I find him. He had dreams, and goals, and even vices like yours and mine, and like us he found them ultimately unsatisfying. But when God found him, he found joy and rest.

So whether you lived out the same script, or have always felt you missed out on ultimate fulfillment because responsibilities and life got in the way—the invitation of this passage is that you would come to know God and find our joy/rest in him.

II. In order to know God, we must be honest about the sin that keeps us from knowing him.

This passage promises hope of restoration and knowing God through the New Covenant, but don’t miss the fact that

A. The New Covenant is necessary because of Israel and Judah’s sin.

So, I think it’s important to note when we come to the New Covenant that God does not say, “Sin doesn’t matter anymore,” nor does he simply sweep sin under the rug. Look at how our passage describes sin in verse 31-32:

31 “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, 32 not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring

¹ Smith, James K. A.. On the Road with Saint Augustine (p. 48). Baker Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord.

Those two phrases in v. 32 are important, “my covenant that they broke” and “though I was their husband.”

1. Sin is rebellion.

The first describes sin as rebellion against and rejection of a benevolent King who out of his justice and mercy rescued these people, made a covenant with them, and gave them good gifts. Sin is breaking God’s law and trying to order our lives in a way that is based on my desires and my needs, but ultimately introduces chaos and destruction into my life and the lives of those around me—it ought to provoke in us a sense of the injustice, the objective evil of sin.

2. Sin is spiritual adultery..

The second image is important too. “Though I was their husband,” describes sin as a personal betrayal: Israel is an adulterous wife going after other lovers, while God is the faithful and forgiving husband. Did you get that? This is not just saying “adultery is a sin” it is saying all sin is spiritual adultery. Like Augustine, when we sin we are chasing fulfillment and joy in the arms of false gods and false hopes—and all sin should make us feel the same revulsion we would feel if we were betrayed in this way. And though we are unfaithful, God persists in loving us.

Illustration:

We have a friend who’s spouse did actually commit adultery, and abandoned the marriage. And yet for years our friend felt that God was calling them to not only forgive but continue to seek reconciliation. I’m not saying that is what everyone in that situation should do, but it is a perfect picture of the way God describes his relationship to us in this passage. We are the adulterous spouse, and yet God continues to seek us out to reconcile us to himself.

Maybe these descriptions of sin as straight up evil and revolting are hard to hear. I want to say that is part of our problem, part of what keeps us from really knowing God and thereby finding joy/rest in him, is that we don’t really believe sin is that harmful or empty. We’d prefer to speak of sin in measured language and hushed tones, if at all.

But

B. ...if we persist in sin, we will not know God, but face judgment.

Over this season in the Story of God, we have seen the effects of sin in God’s people: the kingdom is divided, the worship of other gods (which includes sexual immorality and violence, as well as child sacrifice) is rampant, and injustice is everywhere. For years the LORD warned Israel and Judah through the prophets like Jeremiah of the impending judgment for their sin (as reflected in Chapters 1-29). Whether you are an ancient Jew, or a 21st century American, the only outcome for sin is judgment.

As we pick up in our passage, we’ve jumped ahead to the fulfillment of that judgment—the period of the Exile. The Northern Kingdom, Israel, is now long gone, its capital Samaria was destroyed in 722 BC and the people were carried off into captivity in Assyria. The Southern Kingdom, Judah, has fared slightly better because it has had a few kings who were faithful to the LORD, but by the time of Jeremiah, Judah too is on the verge of destruction at the hands of a

foreign invader. Chapter 34-45 of Jeremiah will describe in detail the coming of that judgment in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem and the associated horrors.

Notice in v. 31, God says “the days are coming” when he will establish a New Covenant—it is in the future. And while chapter 30-33 speak words of hope, they speak words of hope not to the generation listening to Jeremiah’s prophecies, but to a future generation. The judgment of Judah at this point is sure—not because God is unwilling to receive repentant sinners—but because the people of Judah’s sin has become so entrenched and solidified in their hearts that now the only possible outcome is judgment.

That is a difficult but sobering word: now is the time for repentance, lest your heart become hard and you face judgment. Turn from your sins and to Christ that you might know God and find rest in him.

Illustration:

Imagine you went to a doctor for some illness. She examines you and runs various tests, and discovers you do have a life threatening condition. But she doesn’t share that information with you, instead just says “You’re fine, just keep doing what you’re doing, you’ll eventually feel better.” Would that doctor be a good doctor? Would that be a doctor you’d like to see? Like a good doctor, God describes with clarity the predicament we are in because of our sin, and it’s consequences.

But now flip the illustration, imagine your doctor explains the condition, the consequences, and prescribes a remedy—would you take it?

Because the passage also teaches us

III. In order to know God, we are dependent on God’s generous gifts of grace.

A. To know God is not something we can accomplish on our own.

Notice how the passage describes it verse 31: “Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, **when I will make a new covenant** with the house of Israel and the house of Judah” and v. 33-34:

*33 For this is the covenant that **I will make** with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: **I will put** my law within them, and **I will write** it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For **I will forgive** their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”*

1. Not through personal piety.

The New Covenant is something God is going to do, not something Israel or Judah is going to accomplish for themselves. Isn’t that at the center of the Gospel: No one can ever come to God on the basis of something they have done—sin makes that impossible. Whatever good thing you might present to God to make yourself acceptable is imagined by a sinful mind and given by

sinful hands. Only on the basis of Jesus—the sacrificial Savior God provided—only on that basis can we come to God, and only then through Jesus do your gifts to God become pleasing and acceptable to him.

2. *Nor by controlling “external” realities.*

We’re good Protestants, we know that, but this passage also challenges something we struggle with as well, an overvaluing of external realities: things like political control, wealth, power, etc. Notice v. 32: the new covenant will not be like the one God made with their fathers coming out of Egypt. That old covenant established the nation of Israel, their political, religious, and legal system and that covenant failed. Why? Because of a fault in God or in his Law?—NO! Because of sin in the human heart. And yet, we tend to be very focused and anxious about those sort of external things.

The New Covenant forces us to face the fact that the problems in our world go far beyond the external, they run deep into our hearts. We ourselves are part of the problem, and whatever good we might do here, it is likely to be more costly than we expect and its fruit may not be seen until Jesus comes back and sets up his perfect kingdom.

This is why Jeremiah tells us

B. To know God we need a new heart.

Look at verse 33:

33 For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

God promises to bring them back into relationship with him by “writing his law within them...on their hearts.” Deuteronomy speaks of the circumcision of the heart, and the prophet Ezekiel says God will give a “new heart, and a new spirit” removing the “heart of stone” and giving a “heart of flesh.”

These passages are all describing something spiritual that happens by God’s grace where your heart comes alive to trust Jesus, to want to know him, to realize that he is your joy and rest—and this is of God not ourselves. It’s what Jesus told Nicodemus when he came to speak with him: “You must be born again.” And it’s like the wind, it blows where it blows.

In the New Covenant, unlike the Old Covenant, all who are members of the covenant will have new hearts and the Spirit of Christ living in us so that we forsake the false gods and false hopes and cling to Jesus the Bridegroom, who empowers us to will and to do according to God’s good pleasure. Not perfectly, but truly.

And the last gift of God this passage describes

C. To know God we need him to provide forgiveness.

Look again at verse 34:

34 And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,

declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

That word “For” tells us the reason, the foundation, of how we can know the Lord: God provides forgiveness for the sins that separate us from him. Jeremiah and his first hearers couldn’t have imagined how strange the fulfillment of that promise is. All the sacrifices of the Old Testament were but a picture of the greater reality which was to come.

The Son of God came into our world, becoming like us in every way, though without sin. Jesus, Fully God and Fully man, perfectly fulfilled the covenant that Israel had broken, perfectly loving God and neighbor. He told his disciples that his death would be the blood of the new covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. He rose again to new life triumphing over sin, death, and the devil.

And he welcomes us by faith into his covenant, the New Covenant, that we might know God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and find joy and rest in him.