

Submission to MIT Magazine
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“Knowing God Better”

How well do you think you know God? How well do you want to know God?

To develop a deeper relationship with God takes time. It takes effort. Spiritual growth is something God produces in us, but God does not force it on us. We have a part to play, too.

I. Determine your spiritual priorities.

When you think about all the needs in church and society, how will you decide how much emphasis to place on your relationship with God and how much on active service?

When God called me to prioritize our relationship

One day as my family and I were walking the 500 miles across northern Spain on pilgrimage, I had an opportunity to walk alone for two hours. I loved it. It was great to just let my thoughts flow wherever they wanted to go. At one point, I got into an internal dialogue about my relationship with God. I was surprised by where I ended up.

The conversation began when I suddenly blurted out that I was fairly satisfied with my spiritual life. I told myself, based on what I know about God and spirituality, I would rate my spiritual life a nine out of ten. Sure, there is probably a tremendous amount of knowledge about God available throughout the universe, but I suspect that most of it is well outside of my grasp. I like where I am spiritually, and trying to increase my satisfaction level probably wouldn't be worth the effort required.

In fact, perhaps my energy would be better applied elsewhere. After all, isn't active engagement in the world more important than personal spirituality at a certain point? I've already made a huge commitment to my relationship with God. I'm here on pilgrimage, aren't I? When it comes to everyday life, don't the huge needs everywhere call for Christians to roll up their sleeves and devote themselves to action? After all, as the hands and feet of Christ, isn't it up to us to attend to concrete, this-world concerns?

Made sense to me. Christians are needed everywhere to meet human needs and to help develop solutions to local and world issues. The more I thought about the scope of human suffering, the more my answer seemed self-evident: stop worrying about becoming more spiritual and devote more time and energy to helping out!

>Yet, almost as soon as I reached this conclusion, something shifted within me. Paul's words to the Philippians came to mind. He said that nothing mattered more to him than knowing Jesus Christ and the power of his suffering and resurrection (Phil. 3:7-14). Paul was actively involved in the "real world" as a church planter, evangelist, fundraiser for the poor, author, public speaker, and teacher. Yet, he insisted that his first priority was to be well-grounded in a solid relationship with God in Christ and then passionately pursue a deeper relationship with Christ on an ongoing basis.

His words struck home.

I suddenly realized that perhaps I was not engaged in simple introspection and reflection. Perhaps God was part of the conversation, too, and I was being led down this line of thinking for a purpose. I needed to think through what made sense to me logically, and then be redirected to a different conclusion.

Would God truly want me to risk "wasting" my life, my time, my energy seeking a deeper relationship with God, pursuing what is beyond me and may very well be unknowable? The answer that came to me was now clear: "Yes."

II. Make use of the resources available to you.

There are a number of different ways that we can come to know and love God better.

- A. Perceive God in nature (e.g., Psalm 19:1-3; Romans 1:20). Take time to look at the moon, watch a sunset, sit by the lake, walk in the park, gaze at the stars, or just marvel at the beauty of creation in humans, animals, birds, and sea creatures. When our hearts and minds are open, nature will naturally lead us to praise and worship of God.
- B. Know God via Scripture—Father (Creator), Son (Jesus Christ) and Holy Spirit (e.g., Exodus 34:5-7a; Romans 5:8). Scripture is the most important means of knowing God better, because it is through Scripture that we can know the specific attributes of God. We can know that God is "compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Exod. 34:6). We will discover that God is the initiator toward us, and that God's love precedes any interest or effort on our part to know, love, or serve him. As Paul put it, "God demonstrates his love for us in this, that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).
- C. Know God through experience.
 1. Start by reflecting on what you have already experienced. One exercise that we always do when I conduct Spirit-Led Living workshops is to make a list of all the ways you have seen God at work in your life. Usually, the participants start out with only a couple of things on their list. But the more they think, the longer the list usually gets.

Think about it for a moment. How do you know God from your experience? Do you remember when you first were convinced of God's love for you? When you first experienced being convicted for your sins. When you first experienced forgiveness? When God spoke to you through sermons, Scripture, pastors, teachers, family members, friends. When God showed you some act of kindness or provided for you in some way.

Sometimes, something happens, and we suddenly realize that we believe in God in a new way. For example, when I held my newborn son in my arms, I suddenly believed in God as the creator of life in a whole new way. When I saw what a beautiful work of creation that little baby was, my faith in God suddenly went from head to my heart.

What you put on the list is all from the past, but reflecting on those experiences will help solidify in your mind who God is. It will help you to know God better, because you will start to see patterns and you will gain confidence in God's love, kindness, and generosity to you.

2. Ask God to reveal himself to you through experience.

In addition to looking for God in nature and in Scripture, we may also ask God to help us to see him in our experience.

Sensing God's delight in me when I was walking with Tim

Though my wife, Jill, questioned my sanity, Tim (my elder son) and I took an alternative route over the mountains and met up with Dan and her twelve hours later. The scenery was spectacular. The experience was the best of the pilgrimage so far. Poorly marked trails; long, steep inclines; midsummer heat; and a painful, final stretch downhill all made for a fabulous, memorable adventure. Hours in silence or simple conversation, in such beauty and hardly seeing another soul, created a peaceful, joyful feeling that was so deep neither of us could imagine ever feeling otherwise.

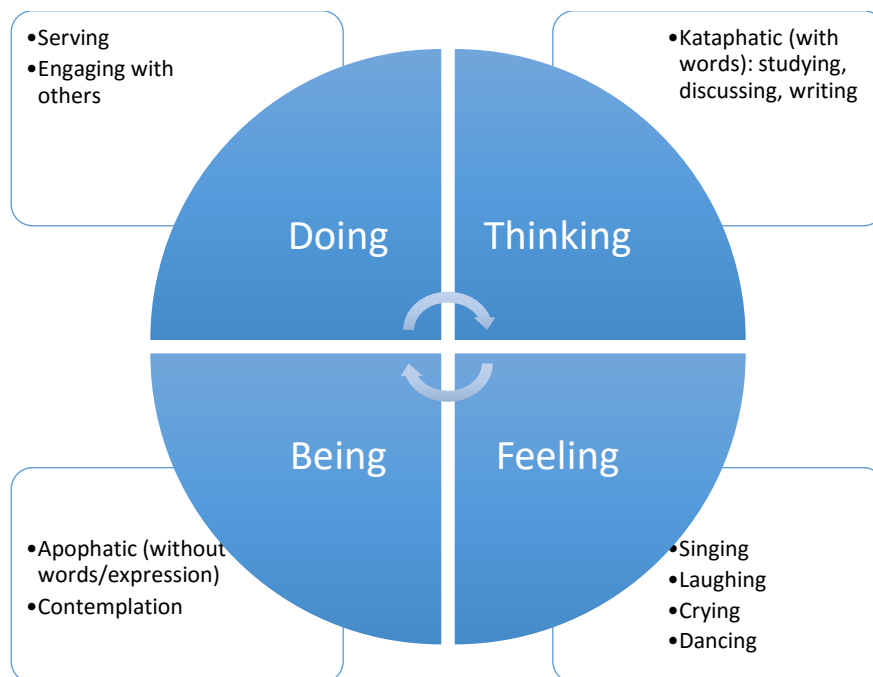
>Yet, the best part of the day for me was simply being with my son. The joy did not come from what we did or said as much as it came from being in his presence. We both felt completely free to be ourselves and to enjoy the experience together. I watched as Tim stopped to photograph the sunrise slowly splashing light into the valley hundreds of feet below us. I smiled when I heard joy in his voice while he marveled at centuries-old tree trunks or stooped to pat a dog that ran out of nowhere to greet us. I laughed when we had to duck to get out of the way of a horned cow that suddenly took an unhealthy interest in us. I growled with him as we inspected our long

scratches and bleeding legs. Treacherous thorn bushes had left their mark after we were forced off trail on our final descent into the third steep valley of the day’s hike.

>What a great experience! I cannot put into words the depth of the joy I feel. And I realized something about God the Father that had never sunk in before, too. If God loves me as I love my son, surely God delights in just being with me as I was delighting in being with my son. If I can feel such joy just seeing Tim so happy and peaceful, I have to think that God—whose parental love must far exceed mine—must be thrilled to be with me at such times, too.

III. Know yourself.

Apart from many shared experiences among Christians, each of us feels closest to God in different ways, depending on our personalities and preferences. We can group these different ways into four broad categories as follows.¹



•If you gravitate toward “thinking” as a way to worship and develop your relationship with God, you may seek to know God better by reading Scripture, studying, discussing theology, or writing in your journal or by writing essays.

•If you are most aware of God’s presence through your “feelings,” you may seek to function in the company of God by singing, listening to music, playing music,

¹ This diagram was adapted from the work of Corrine Ware.

dancing, or engaging in some other feeling-producing activity that lifts your heart to God and opens your heart to the Holy Spirit.

- If you are "doing" or action-oriented, you may prefer to develop a greater awareness of God's presence as you serve or in fellowshiping with others.
- If you are drawn to seek God through simply "being", then you may most appreciate the practice of contemplation, in which you seek to commune with God and to become aware of God's pervasive presence without using conscious thoughts or words.

You may go for a long walk, sit in a chair and stare out the window, or gently gaze at an object that helps us to focus on God (perhaps a statue or painting of Jesus; the cross; or a beautiful landscape)—not in any way as an "idol," of course, but as a reminder of God's love and activity on behalf of humanity. The goal is not to meditate with specific thoughts, but to stay in the presence of God, apart from distractions, without trying to think about anything in particular. We disconnect from our normal ways of thinking and engaging with our world in order to let our sense of connection to God consume our consciousness.

You can see that there are really many different spiritual practices available to each of us. And each of us gravitates to one cluster of activities more than another. The place to start is usually wherever you are naturally drawn. Then, to keep expanding and growing, seek to know and experience better in some other ways, too. Perhaps, there are some neglected aspects of your personality and relationship with God that you could explore, if you set your mind to it.

In the end, the methods are less important than your vision for knowing God better, your intention to seek God, and your willingness to actually do something with the means at your disposal. In my experience, I've found that taking extra time to develop my relationship with God has not taken away from my ability to serve church and society. On the contrary, the time I spend with God only increases my motivation and my ability to serve energetically, faithfully, and fruitfully. Making my relationship with God my highest priority does not take away from service, but equips me to serve effectively at a whole new level.

To return to the questions I asked at the beginning of this article, how well do you know God? How well do you want to know God?

What's your next step going to be?