

THE BEST PANCAKES EVER
Philippians 3:7-8

Anna, Toby's fiancée, was buying a new car. Laurie and I were there with them for part of the process. At one point after they had agreed to purchase the vehicle we were waiting in the showroom because the finance guy who has all the papers you have to sign, was busy. One of the sales people was chatting with us as we waited. He was a very friendly guy. He was very much overweight and out of shape, but very nice. As we were talking I asked him how long he'd worked at the dealership. He said about 18 months. I asked what he did before and he said he was a personal fitness trainer. I almost said, "No, come on, what were you really?" Fortunately I didn't say anything because as it turns out he really was a fitness trainer.

I'd have to say that it wasn't surprising that he was now a car salesman instead of a personal trainer. How are you going to get people to hire you as a fitness trainer when you are so obviously out of shape? There's a definite "physician heal thyself" thing going on there. I mean, really, if I follow your direction I can look like you? Uh, excuse me but being 60 pounds overweight isn't exactly my goal. I doubt if it's anybody's goal except for people who are 100 pounds overweight. This seemed silly. Who would take advice on fitness from someone so obviously out of shape? After all, would you taken fashion advice from a slob wearing a stained t-shirt, shorts from the 70's with black sox and dress shoes?

We learned last week that we are the salt and light in this world. We are to make a difference. But in order for us to do that we are going to have to possess something to offer the world. There is going to have to be something different about us that the world will want. If light is indistinguishable from the darkness, is it light? Of course not. If we are indistinguishable from the world, what do they have to gain from us? We have nothing to offer them. As an out of shape guy is not going to make a difference for others physically, so out of shape spiritual people are not going to make a difference spiritually. At times Christians have decided that this means what we must do is show people we are somehow better than them. So the religious bent is to make up a list of all the bad things the world does and then be proud of the fact that we don't do them. Oddly, the world typically isn't impressed. In fact, they often are just glad they're not like those Christians who seem to be so uptight and judgmental. I believe what is needed and what God wants in our lives is something very different, something much more positive and appealing to any

human being. Today I am going to talk about one thing we must have to offer the world around us. I am going to talk about something that should clearly make us different. Let's look at Philippians 3:7-8.

KNOWING GOD BEATS EVERYTHING

In the immediate context of this letter Paul has just written about all the things that he once was proud of. In his case it had to do with religious heritage and achievement. He was a Hebrew of Hebrews, filled with passion for his religion, and better than anyone else at keeping its rules. That may not sound impressive or appealing to us, but in his culture it was the pinnacle of accomplishment. In his society that was roughly equivalent to being a movie star or rock star in our culture. He was somebody, and he was on his way up in the elite circles of his society. Then in verse 7 he made the amazing statement that all the stuff that he once thought of as being of great profit to him he now considered instead to be a net loss compared to having Christ in his life. That stuff didn't matter to him at all any more.

Laurie had a recent experience that was kind of funny. One of her young vocal students was trying out for a part in a musical and needed a recording of an accompaniment for the song she was going to sing for her audition. Laurie spent an hour working to make sure she had that accompaniment down perfectly and then she recorded it on tape. When the girl came for her lesson Laurie handed her the cassette tape of the accompaniment. The girl looked at the cassette and said, "What's that?" She didn't know what a cassette tape was. She had never even *seen* one. She only knew about recording things on her smart phone. It made Laurie feel a little outdated.

That caused me to reflect on obsolete technology. It occurred to me that's an analogy for what Paul was saying here. Imagine that years ago I accumulated an impressive collection of another kind of dinosaur, VHS video tapes of movies. What if my collection was better than that of anyone I know? Would I take pride in that collection now? Maybe I might convince myself that those tapes are collector's items that are worth something, but if I can now get those same movies on Blu-Ray disks and watch them in high definition, the tapes are pretty much worthless. Which would you rather have, old VHS video tapes for which you no longer even have a VCR you can play them on, or high definition disks of the movies? We still have some of this tapes in our house, but they are junk. At some point when we finally admit the obvious, we'll just throw them out.

Paul said he once thought his collection of stuff that brought him notice and approval in this world was pretty impressive. But now he looked at it like worthless junk because he had Christ, and that was immeasurably better than all that other stuff. In fact, he pushes farther outside the envelope in verse 8 when he says “I consider *everything* a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Everything! Knowing Jesus was better than everything else in the world, not just his religious accomplishments! He didn’t even stop there. He went on to say of everything in the world, all the stuff the world values and claws and scratches to get, he now viewed as rubbish. It goes into the trash can to be put out on the street on Wednesday night so the garbage collectors can pick it up, toss it in the truck and cart it to the landfill on Thursday.

Paul’s language was stronger than just referring to “everything” as garbage. He used the Greek word *skubala*, which if I translated it literally into English I would get into trouble for using bad language. It’s a dirty word today. One definition of it was the portion of food that your body gets rid of because it is not nutritious. It’s the stuff you deposit in the toilet.

Paul says that knowing Christ is so far superior to everything in this world that all that other stuff is like skubala. Now hold on Paul. What if somehow Stephen Spielberg asks me to star in his next movie and promises to pay me \$20 million to do it? Paul says compared to knowing Jesus you can flush that down the toilet because that’s what it’s worth. What if someone gives me a private island in the South Pacific with a palatial mansion on it? Paul says that’s skubala compared to knowing Jesus. What if I could miraculously be endowed with phenomenal athletic ability and could become a starting quarterback in the National Football League? Paul says compared to knowing Jesus that’s a pile of...well you know what. In other words, if he had to make a choice between knowing Christ and being the all-pro QB, he’d take Christ every day of the week and twice on Sunday. Well, how about something that we know is a good thing like being loved by and married to the most amazing woman in the world and having a terrific loving family? Paul says, “No contest. Knowing Jesus wins hands down, even over that.”

Is it bad if Spielberg offers me the movie? Well, the movie would be bad because I can’t act, but no, making ridiculous sums of money for being filmed pretending to be something you’re not isn’t bad. Is it wrong for me to own that island in the Pacific? No. Is being a terrific athlete sinful? Certainly not, as Drew Brees shows. Is having an amazing marriage and family somehow evil? Most definitely not. But as good as they may be none of them are even in the same league as knowing Jesus

according to Paul. He'd trade them all in an instant if necessary to know Jesus. Suffering the lack of all of them would be nothing in light of gaining Jesus. So if he had none of it but he did know Jesus, he would still be joyful!

Is knowing God really such a big deal? Is it really that good? Jesus claimed it was. Listen to what he says in John 17:3. As he was praying to his Father he said, "Now this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." It is easy to speed through that statement that Jesus made and not get its full significance. He said "this is eternal life, knowing God." They are the same thing. To the degree that you know God you experience eternal life.

Yes, but that just means you're going to go to heaven after you die, right? Wrong. Having eternal life as John used it certainly included going to heaven, but it meant immediately beginning to experience the life that humans were created to live. Yes, it is of endless duration, but it is the quality of it that we must understand. It is a kind of life that is what we have always thought exists and wished we had because it is so full and good. What is that life like? It is the life we will have in heaven. We can begin experiencing a taste of it here on earth by knowing God. It is a life without fear. It is a life of peace because one has forgiveness and freedom from guilt. It is a life at peace with God, knowing he loves you and so you need not be afraid of him and what he'll do. It is a life of unfettered joy. Peter called it inexpressible joy, joy so profound it can't be described. It is a life of hope and confidence about what will happen. It is a life full of love. It is a life in which the person who has it knows he has enormous meaning and value and thus the opinions of others do not concern him. It is a life of gratitude. It is a life in which one is never alone because God is always there.

So here's the question: can starring in Spielberg's movie give you that life? No, it can't. Can owning that mansion on that private island give you that life? No, it can't. Can being that incredible athlete or having that terrific family give you that life? No, they cannot. They certainly can make life easier, better, more enjoyable, but they cannot connect us to God, cannot give us strength, cannot make us good, cannot give us meaning, cannot deal with guilt, and cannot give us joy no matter what may happen in life. They most certainly cannot give us eternal certainty. And we all know that if you had the movie star role, the tropical island, the athletic success, the wonderful family, as nice as they may be, there would come a time when they would all be taken from you. You will get old, you'll probably get sick and you'll certainly die. You'll lose them all. But this life, this eternal life, you will never lose. Yes you'll get old and die, but the life will only get better!

Let me remind you of the truth of the things of the world by way of comparison. A few years back actor Brad Pitt was interviewed for an article in *Rolling Stone* magazine. He was reflecting on a role he played in the movie *Fight Club*, in which he played a man who seemed to have it all in life yet was unfulfilled. Pitt said, “I know all these things are supposed to seem important to us—the car, the condo, our version of success—but if that’s the case, why is the general feeling out there reflecting more impotence and desperation and loneliness? If you ask me, I say toss all this—we gotta find something else. Because all I know is at this point in time we are heading for a dead end, a numbing of the soul, a complete atrophy of the spiritual being.” The interviewer asked, “If we’re heading toward this kind of existential dead end in society, what do you think should happen?” He said, “Hey, man, I don’t have those answers yet. The emphasis now is on success and personal gain. I’m sitting on it, and I’m telling you, that’s not it. I’m the guy who’s got everything. I know. But I’m telling you, once you’ve got everything, then you’re just left with yourself. I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: it doesn’t help you sleep any better, and you don’t wake up any better because of it.”

That’s why Paul said that to know Christ makes everything else in this world look like rubbish. All of those things are nice things and they can certainly bring us enjoyment. But this eternal life is something that you can be filled with whether you have money, fame and power, or whether you have absolutely none of them. You can have peace, confidence, hope, love and real joy, always. Eternal life is full of true joy and optimism, and you can experience in every conceivable situation you will ever encounter! That’s what it means to know God.

Pitt is right, he’s got everything. You can’t have much more of what the world offers than he does. But listen to what he doesn’t have. He doesn’t have eternal life, the life that Jesus said is like a river of living water flowing from inside a person. Only knowing God can give that, and that’s why knowing God is better than anything else. That’s why though they may not know it, every person you will ever encounter in life wants to know God. That’s why we must have it if we are to make any difference in this world.

KNOWING GOD SETS US APART

Now let’s zoom out for a moment and get a wider view of these verses. In this letter to the Christians in the Macedonian city of Philippi Paul wrote quite a bit about joy. In fact, in Philippians 4:4 he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice.” Considering the circumstances of those people that seems

like an insensitive thing to say to them. We know from 2 Corinthians 8:2 that they were undergoing what Paul called “severe trial” and they lived in “extreme poverty.” They were dirt poor. They lived in poverty beyond anything we can comprehend. I think of going down to Mexico and seeing how the people live. In many cases they live in shacks with dirt floors, no heat and maybe no electricity, trash all around because they don’t have trash service, very little food, only the clothes on their back. Those people would be doing well compared to the Christians of ancient Macedonia, and on top of that they were being persecuted just because they were Christians. Life was grim for them. And Paul said to them, “Rejoice.” Be happy. Be full of joy.

Hey, where’s the empathy Paul? They are living a nightmare and you tell them to be joyful about it? That’s terrible. Ah, but hold on. We won’t see it as insensitive when we recall Paul’s situation. In 2:17 he wrote, “Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” Paul was in jail. He was imprisoned unfairly. He had been falsely accused, tried and found innocent but kept in jail because his judge wanted a bribe and Paul wouldn’t pay it. He had been in jail for years and had finally been sent to stand trial before Caesar, who at the time was that paragon of justice and virtue named Nero! There was a real possibility that he was going to be convicted and executed. That’s what he meant by being “poured out.” Even if he was about to have his life taken from him he said, while in prison, having nothing, being treated totally unjustly, “I rejoice and share my joy with you.” In miserable circumstances that would cause the overwhelming majority of human beings to feel outraged, angry and bitter, Paul was joyful. In fact, joy gushed out of him. This letter reeks of joy.

Is it not obvious that Paul was able to tell the Philippians to rejoice in their horrible circumstances because his situation was at least as bad as theirs if not worse and he was able to rejoice in the middle of it? Paul knew Christ, so he was experiencing eternal life, which was better even than being free, than being treated fairly, than having plenty to eat, than having his life continue! He had joy because of the life, the eternal life, that was in him, because he knew God! If we know God, if we experience even some of that eternal life now being full of hope, joy, confidence and life even when life is at its darkest, it will be obvious to the world that we have something they know nothing about. We have what they want.

In his classic book, *Knowing God* (p. 20), eminent scholar J. I. Packer wrote about walking with a colleague after that man had just clashed with some authorities by

standing for the gospel of grace and defending it. By so doing he had just destroyed his chances of career advancement. His comment to Packer was “it doesn’t matter, for I’ve known God and they haven’t.” He was saying it was too bad that his career had just been torpedoed, but he knew God and that was so much better that the loss really wasn’t important in comparison! Packer commented that not many of us would “ever naturally say that in the light of the knowledge of God which we have come to enjoy, past disappointments and present heartbreaks, as the world counts heartbreaks, *don’t matter*.” He concludes this shows how little we actually know God.

At its bedrock life is really about relationships. Everyone knows that though we find it easy to forget it. In an interview in *Parade* magazine, actress Penelope Cruz who is attractive, successful and wealthy, said, “without someone to share life with you are nothing.” In other words, being in relationship with a person makes all the difference in life. I had reminders of this when our kids were away at college. I have one clear memory of a Thanksgiving holiday. Toby was at Cal Poly and was coming home for the holiday. That week had been a stressful week for Laurie. She had lots to do, she wasn’t feeling well, and the preparations for the big feast were weighing heavily on her. The day Toby was coming home she was not her usual joyful self. She was weary, not feeling great, stressed out, kind of carrying a banner that read, “don’t tread on me!” Toby wanted to drive late at night to avoid traffic problems in LA, so he was going to get home well after midnight. Laurie was exhausted, so I suggested she just go to bed and I’d wait up for Toby. But she insisted on staying up. When Toby got home the transformation in Laurie was miraculous. She just came alive. She was awake, joyful, animated, positive, and happy. What had changed? She still was tired, still had all the work ahead of her, still didn’t feel her best, but just the presence of her son made all the difference. A relationship changed how she saw everything!

So it is with knowing God. Having a love relationship with the Almighty God who is always with us, who gives us his life, changes everything. In his book, *Wasting Time With God* (p. 15) Klaus Issler says, “What is it like to be friends with God? Bring to mind all of the good times you have had in the company of your friends—sipping coffee at an outdoor café, shopping till you drop at the mall, playing pickup basketball, sharing intimate secrets and so on. Take all these moments, feelings and memories, wrap them up together, multiply them a thousand times, and then we might *begin* to get an idea of what friendship with God is like. It is the best of the best, the cream of the crop. It is worth more than anything we could ever own or accomplish on our own.”

The peace, the joy, the hope, the we have as we know God is what the world is searching for. Every human being wants it. Having it is what sets us apart, just like it set Paul apart when he was full of joy while in chains. He rejoiced, because he knew God.

APPLICATION

PUT FAITH IN JESUS

In John 14:8 Philip, one of Jesus' disciples, said to him, "Lord, show us the Father." In other words, help us to know God. Jesus responded in verse 9, "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." In other words, you get to know God the Father by knowing Jesus. You see this same thing in John 17:3 where Jesus said eternal life is knowing the Father and knowing Jesus Christ. They are the same thing.

Knowing anyone begins with being welcomed into a relationship with them. Knowing God begins by being welcomed into a relationship with him, and that starts with receiving the gift of eternal relationship that he offers us through Jesus Christ. You start this relationship with God by putting your faith in Jesus and what he has done. You tell him that you know he was, as he said, God revealing himself in human flesh, that he died to pay for your sin then conquered death. Then you invite him to be the Lord of your life. That's where it starts.

GET TO KNOW ABOUT HIM

I'm going to confess to some pride here. I am proud of the Christmas present I bought for Laurie. I love to surprise her with gifts that she really likes. Most of the time I do pretty well getting her stuff she enjoys and doesn't expect. This year I bought her a coat. That doesn't sound especially romantic, but the moment I saw this coat I instantly knew it was a coat that was just her. It was her style, it would look great on her and she would love it. She had not mentioned wanting a new coat so it was a bit of a gamble. But she loved it. The reason I was able to do that is that I know her. I have paid attention and I know what kind of presents she likes, I know what kind of clothes she likes, I know her style, I know her size. Part of knowing her is knowing things like that about her. If I had bought her a new coffee maker for Christmas, even though she needed a new one she would not have been happy, because that's not the kind of gift she enjoys. I know that about her. I know

those things because I have made the effort to get to know about her. That's part of having a close relationship with a person.

Part of knowing God is knowing about him. It is learning what he is like and what makes him happy. How do you get to know about God? I am amazed at what people believe about God. They say things like, "I think God is like this..." And I ask, "Why do you think that? What is the source of your information?" Very often they will say, "It's just what I think." Well that's certainly an unimpeachable source. You just made up in your own mind what you think God is like and you believe that's a reliable source of information?

Do you do anything in your life that way? How would you feel if you were boarding an airplane and you learned that the pilot had not studied and been trained how to fly. He was just going to do what he thought was the way to fly. Would you board that plane? If you blew out your knee and had to have surgery, would you be all right with a surgeon who had done a little reading about ACL reconstruction and had his own thoughts about how it should be done and was going to go with just what he thinks. Obviously no, not even if he stayed at a Holiday Inn the night before. *When you form your opinion about God on the basis of what you think, he'll end up being and thinking a lot like you.*

So make it a life quest to learn about what God is like. What we do here on Sunday morning is part of that. But go to the source. If you want to know what someone is like pay attention when they tell you. God has revealed himself in the Bible and most of all in Jesus. Look at those two sources to learn about him. Then talk with him. Spend time with him in prayer just like you would spend time with a friend. It is rare in our society that we just take time to be quiet and be with God, listen to him, reflect on him. How close is your relationship with someone going to be if you don't take time just to listen to them?

BE ROOTED CONTINUOUSLY IN GOD'S GRACE

Ephesians 2:8 is a familiar verse, and a profound one. It says, "It is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God." Verse 10 goes on to say, "For we are God's workmanship." What brings us into God's favor is his kindness, his grace in Christ. It is not something we do. It is not up to us.

One of the biggest obstacles to knowing God is believing that what causes him to welcome us, to want to be in relationship with us, to love us, is something we do.

That's what we're used to in human relations. We think, and usually it is true, that people will want to be our friend because they find something attractive in us. That's how human relations begin, and that's how they are maintained. If I am beastly to you, you will not love me and want to be my friend. There's a conditionality to our relationship. In a sense I have to earn the right to be your friend and be loved by you, and I know if I offend you, hurt you, disappoint you, there's a solid chance I might lose your friendship. We transfer that thinking to God, and in so doing lose the power of knowing him. That's not how God is. Our relationship with him is not conditional on anything we do. We have that relationship and we keep that relationship because of who he is and because of what Jesus has already done for us. And what Jesus has done is completed. It is finished and it doesn't lack anything. There is nothing we must add to it.

Laurie and I love Hungry Jack pancakes. They have a pancake mix that you just add water and you're ready to cook pancakes. Often we fall into the trap of thinking the good news is like that. God didn't almost all the work, but he left out one ingredient. Just add water. Here's the news, his pancakes aren't like that. They're like the pancakes at Richard Walker's Pancake House downtown. They are the best pancakes I've ever had. You don't add anything to them. You just receive them and eat them. You and I don't add anything to what Jesus has done for us. We just receive it. That means at every moment of life as we relate to God, we are just receiving his grace. We add nothing.

This means we can be totally free in his presence. God wants you to be with him every moment of your life. Your failures don't change a thing. You think when you fail you've left something out of the recipe. You need to fix it. But that's not true. You don't add anything to it. You just receive the pancakes! This freedom causes us to want to be with God. If we don't have that freedom we will so busy trying to fix the recipe that we won't actually experience knowing him.

It is when we understand that God wants us to be with him, loves us and will never stop loving us, delights in us with all our faults, that we become eager to be in his presence. As we do this and learn of him that our respect for him, our reverence for him deepens. As we learn of what he is like we learn to trust all things to him and to invite him into all that we are and all that is occurring in our lives.

EXPECT AND HAVE FAITH

In the introduction to their book, *Experiencing God* (p. 3), Henry Blackaby and Clyde King wrote, "You may have been frustrated in your Christian experience

because you know God has a more abundant life for you than you have experienced.” I think many Christians want to know God in a way that is more tangible. In other words, they wish God was more real to them. The aim of Blackaby and King was to enable readers to “hear when God is speaking to you, clearly identify the activity of God in your life, believe him to be and do everything he promises... see a direction that he is taking in your life...clearly know what you need to do in response to his activity...experience God doing through you what only God can do!”

Most Christians would say, “that’s exactly what I want.” But sometimes that’s a sort of vague thought. When we talk about knowing God more we’re not clear on even what we mean by that phrase. Some of the time I think though we may not express it we might mean that we want to *feel* something, though we’re not even sure what it is we would feel. There’s a little statement tucked away in Galatians 4:9 that we easily miss. Paul is calling on the Galatians not to be fooled by people who are giving them a bunch of laws they claim you have to live by to be in God’s kingdom and to know him in addition to believing in Jesus. He says, “But now that you know God—or rather are known by God—how is it that you are turning back to those weak and miserable principles?”

Knowing God is really about being known by him. It means we can go through life knowing that God knows who we are and cares about us. It means he has chosen to be in relationship and loves us. Knowing God means living in the reality of that truth. Yes, but shouldn’t I *feel* something? Emotions are gifts from God. They make life more vibrant in so many ways, and they are critical for enabling us to understand ourselves and others. But they are not always reliable guides to what is true.

Here’s a story that is a reminder of that fact. In his book, *Jesus Among Other Gods*, Ravi Zacharias tells about reading an interview in one of the New York newspapers with the wife of a New York Yankee. In the interview she talked about when her husband was a free agent. He was offered a contract for \$89 million by the Yankees. He deeply wanted to keep playing for the Yankees. But he was offered \$91 million by another team. So he and his agent went back to the Yankees and tried to negotiate for more money. They wouldn’t budge. In the end he signed with the Yankees for the \$89 million. His wife said when he came home that day she immediately knew that the Yankees hadn’t upped their offer because he was so down. Then she said, “*It was the saddest day of our lives.*”

They experienced an emotion. They were deeply sad. Was that a rational emotion, a reliable guide to reality? Yes, I understand that they felt sad that the Yankees didn't value him as much as another team, but was it reasonable? The emotion they should have been experiencing was incredible joy. The Yankees did want him, and they were willing to pay a king's ransom for him to play a game! Kill the fatted calf and let's have a feast! That's an absurd sum of money. They will be wealthy for the rest of their lives. What's to be sad about? The point is, we feel what we feel, but our feelings typically say more about us than they do about what is real. They often reveal where our thinking is skewed and our priorities are completely out of whack. They teach us about ourselves more than they do about reality. In the end, yes, we should feel something, and we will at times, but what we most need to do is live by faith. Live by faith that God knows us and loves us and never stops working in our lives.

So look for God at work in your life in the world. Ask him to lead you, then be open to what he is doing. We all know that when we ask God to lead us and we listen for his voice, he will do so. We get those promptings that we should talk to a particular person, write a note, give a call to encourage them. We need to act when God directs us. But be aware that if you want to know God more and you want to see him at work it may be hard sometimes. Blackaby and King in *Experiencing God* also give a caution. They write (p. 36), "God's invitation for you to work with Him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action."

In order to get you to know him more, he will have to take away some of the things that distract you from him, and that may be hard. He will bring trials and difficulties into your life where you will have to trust him, meaning believe when there is no evidence of him. One of the ways we most display the reality of our God is when we trust him in the times that are the hardest. Job's story is in the Bible precisely because of the tragedies that befell him. God will bring you to places where you will have to act and simply don't believe you are able to do what is required. In such situations all you will have is trusting him. It is in those situations that you will begin to truly know him as he strengthens you or works in ways you could never imagine.