

Knowing God

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[0 : 0 0] Would you turn with me, well if you have Bibles with you, would you turn with me now to Psalm 100?

I'm going to read this passage, this will in fact be the passage that we're focusing on for our sermon this morning. Psalm 100, it's just five verses, I'll read that now.

As I'm reading it, perhaps I could ask you to count how many commands God gives, how many things does God tell you to do in this psalm. So let's hear God's word.

Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him with joyful songs. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Give thanks to him and praise his name, for the Lord is good and his love endures forever. His faithfulness continues through all generations. May God bless his word.

So when I read through that, I count seven commands that God gives us. Shout, worship, come, know, enter, give thanks, and praise. Now my wife and I have three sons. They say you're never supposed to use your children as sermon illustrations, but they're not here, and I don't think they're watching, so they won't know, so it's okay. We have three sons. There are three teenagers. There's also, there are other people who live in the house with us, so it's a big household. There are lots of things to do, but sometimes our teenagers aren't very proactive about finding things to do. So sometimes I like to help them and encourage them by giving them things to do. If I were to shout one of the people through and give them through and give them a list of seven things to do, that wouldn't result in a very happy teenager. I don't think our children are unusual in that. Seven things might seem like a lot of things, but thankfully, I think really this psalm, we can reduce it to one main thing which God is telling you. And as we consider this psalm this morning, it's a very familiar psalm, isn't it?

[2 : 3 5] Probably after Psalm 23, it's probably the best-known psalm. Many of you will have spent your whole lives singing this psalm. I trust, nevertheless, that as we look at it, even though it's very familiar to us, we will benefit as we consider God's Word. And I would suggest to you three things. Well, I want to highlight three things to you. What it is that this psalm is telling you to do, how you're to do it, and who is to do it. So what, how, and who. What you're to do, how you're to do it, and who is to do it.

So what is it that you're to do? Seven commands, but I think really we can highlight one of them which stands out. If you were to pick one of those seven commands, I wonder which one would you pick, and I wonder why you would pick that one. I would suggest the fourth one. That's verse three.

Know that the Lord is God. The various reasons why I would pick that fourth command, it's verse three, as we have it there. First of all, it's the fourth command. If there are seven of them, that means that it's right in the center, doesn't it? Three commands before it, shout, worship, come, and three commands after it, enter, give thanks, and praise. It's right in the center.

Notice also that the two commands on either side of it, they're almost identical, aren't they? It's less obvious as it's translated here, but they actually use almost identical language. At the end of verse two, it says, come before him with joyful song. In verse four, it says, enter, but it could be translated the same way. It's that same word. Come into his gates with thanksgiving. Right before it and right after it, almost identical commands. Also, it's just very different, isn't it? It's different because it's much longer. Every other command in Psalm 100, it's very short, isn't it? Really, basically one word accompanied by a few things that describe who is to do it or how you're to do it.

Verse three is really entirely different. It's like a small paragraph all to itself. Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. It's much longer than anything else in Psalm 100, and it's also very different in terms of what you're to do, isn't it? Everything else, shout, worship, literally it's the word serve, come.

[5 : 39] Many of these things are very simple things to do, physical things to do. You came into the building, didn't you? We're a free church, so you probably won't be shouting, but we could shout, couldn't we? It's an easy, very direct thing to do. In verse three, knowing. To know something is quite different from all of the other commands that were given. So I would suggest that verse three is the center of the psalm. It is literally the center of the psalm. It's the heart of this psalm. This is the chief thing that God wants you to take away from this passage. What is it that you are to do?

Well, you're to know something. Now, there are different kinds of knowledge, aren't there? Different kinds of things that you could know. We know lots and lots of things, and many of them don't make any difference to our lives, do they? I'm going to make a confession that maybe some of you will be able to sympathize with, but others of you maybe won't be able to understand. I'm not really very interested in football. I have never been very interested in football, but I know that we just had the Euros, and I know who won. Italy won, didn't they? But if I'm honest, it doesn't make any difference to my life. My life is no different after Italy won than before they won. And I'll confess something else. This you might find even more difficult. Even if Scotland had won, it wouldn't actually have made any difference to my life. Okay? Some things, we know them, and they don't make any difference one way or the other. Obviously, the kind of knowledge that this psalm is talking about is utterly different, isn't it? Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his.

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. Know that the Lord is God. That word Lord, many of you will know this. We translate it as Lord, which sounds like a title. It's actually Yahweh. It was God's name.

And when the psalm was written, the people for whom it was written lived amongst nations who worshipped many different gods. So in saying this, know that Yahweh is God. They're saying, I want you to know that he is God, not these other gods. But it wasn't even just that, was it? It wasn't just, we might say, the God of Christianity, the God of the Bible, the God who's revealed himself through Jesus.

Know that he is God. But it's not just to know that that's true, is it? It's to know that in a way that makes a difference to your life. We might say, to acknowledge. Acknowledge that Yahweh is God.

[8 : 50] And notice specifically how it is that you're to know him as God. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. What does it mean to acknowledge that God is shepherd? What does it mean to acknowledge Jesus uses that language, doesn't he? Jesus says, I am the good shepherd. Lord willing, this evening, I want us to think more about what it means for Jesus to be shepherd. But just now briefly, what would it look like practically in our lives to acknowledge Jesus as my shepherd?

to acknowledge God as my shepherd? Well, if you think of the image that's being used there, what do sheep do with regard to their shepherd?

Sheep, well, I grew up in a farm in America. We had sheep. Sheep are profoundly stupid. I think that's part of the image, actually. But in real life, at least the sheep that we had, they're not very clever animals. They're utterly helpless. You may argue that maybe I'm being too hard on sheep. But as I say, even if sheep were cleverer than that, in terms of the way the image is used in the Bible, sheep is used to describe people who are utterly helpless. To be like sheep without a shepherd is to be hopeless. What is it that sheep do with regards to their shepherd?

Well, sheep trust in their shepherd, don't they? Sheep are utterly dependent on their shepherd for what they drink. We live in a country that there's lots of water. The climate that this psalm was written in, finding water was at times hugely difficult. Sheep were dependent upon their shepherd even for the water that they drank, for finding the food that they ate. They were dependent upon their shepherd for protection from predators against whom they would have no protection by themselves.

They were utterly dependent upon their shepherd, and therefore they needed to trust in him. And if we are acknowledging that God is our shepherd, that Jesus is our shepherd, it means that we need to trust in him.

[11 : 17] One of the positive things that might come out of what's happened in the last year and a half, gone through circumstances that we would never have chosen, but so often we can take things for granted, can't we?

We live in a relatively prosperous, comfortable country, and we take so much for granted. One of the upshots of what's happened during the pandemic is that maybe we come to appreciate that our lives are not as predictable as we thought, that we can't take things for granted.

Perhaps that has been tremendously difficult for us. But maybe through that, God will be pleased to teach us how dependent we are on him, how much we need to trust in him. There is one thing that I would particularly single out that we need to trust in Jesus for. We need to learn to trust in him for everything, for what we eat and drink and the homes that we live in, for everything. But there is one thing in particular, forgiveness. As we think about our relationship to God, one of the biggest, the biggest problem is our sin.

And you'll be aware of that, won't you? Because we all have a conscience. We recognize that there is a creator, we know that there is a God who made us, but we also recognize that our lives are not the way they should be.

How is it that we can approach this God? We read in Hebrews chapter 2 that he's a consuming fire. How can we come into the presence of this God? If you look back in Psalm 99, there in verse 8, Lord our God, you answered them. You were to Israel a forgiving God.

[13 : 28] Maybe this is another one of those things that we take for granted. We take for granted maybe sometimes that God is merciful, that he's forgiving. He's not bound to be, he's not obliged to forgive us, but he has promised that through Jesus he will.

And you trust in Jesus for your forgiveness. Sheep trust in their shepherd. Sheep also need to follow their shepherd.

That's also part of the image, isn't it? A sheep that's gone astray, as sheep maybe want to do, that would be a disaster for him. But very often sheep tend to do that.

We tend to wander off from Jesus, don't we? But if we are acknowledging Jesus as our shepherd, then it means that we need to follow him.

It means very simply that we need to seek to live our lives in the way that he has taught us to live them. Sheep trust and sheep follow.

[14 : 36] In a nutshell, that's what it means for us, to know that the Lord is God, to acknowledge that he's God.

It means that we trust in him. It means that we follow him. There's a second thing I'd like us to consider as we look at this psalm.

I suggested to you that there's one command that particularly stands out. I would suggest also that there's one attitude that stands out. If you were to read through this psalm, if you were to pick one word that describes the atmosphere created by it, the attitude that is suggested by it, I wonder what that would be.

I would pick joyfulness. Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness. Come before him with joyful songs.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, his courts with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name. How is it that we are to acknowledge God?

[15 : 52] How is it that we're to know him? What effect should that have on us? We should be a joyful people. That first word that's used there, shout for the Lord to joy.

I was trying to think of an illustration of that, and I mentioned the football tournament recently. If you think of that, we have an Italian friend. She sent us a video of people back home in her home village after Italy had won the cup.

Everybody was out in the streets. All of them were shouting and dancing and rejoicing. Imagine watching a match. I don't know if you're a football supporter.

Imagine watching your favorite team, and they score a goal. How do people respond? They shout out, don't they? It's a victory shout. That's probably the nearest equivalent that we have to the word that's used here, shout for joy to the Lord.

It's a victory shout. As we serve the Lord, as we acknowledge him as our God, the effect that that should have upon us, or the way in which we should do that, we should be a joyful people.

[17 : 06] And why is it that we should be so joyful? I suggested earlier, maybe is there, at least seemingly to us, a seeming conflict between lots and lots of commands and joyfulness.

Maybe we don't like being told what to do. Maybe we have a natural resistance to that. But nevertheless, with this psalm, over and over and over again, the effect that these things have are to produce joy in people's life.

Why is that? Well, I'd suggest two things to you again, and these correspond to the last two things. Remember, I was saying sheep trust in their shepherd, and they follow their shepherd.

If we think of those two things again, perhaps it helps us to explain why we should be so joyful. Why we should be celebrating. First of all, out of gratitude, I was saying that we trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins.

Think of that song that we sang, The Servant King. One of the things that's so fascinating about that song is the way that it draws together these seemingly contradictory things, whose hands that flung stars into space were pierced with nails.

[18 : 32] When you think about who Jesus is and what he did, it's mind-boggling, isn't it? Remember Peter's response, the Gospels.

When Peter began to understand, Jesus was explaining to Peter what he was going to do, and he was saying to him that he was going to be crucified and died.

What was Peter's response? Again, we take that for granted, don't we, that Jesus was crucified and that he died. When Peter was told, one of Jesus' closest followers, when Peter was told that he was going to do that, he said, no, you can't do that.

That's absurd, Jesus. What are you talking about? It should be almost inconceivable to us when we realize who Jesus is. He is the eternal Son of God.

Through him, the universe was created, and yet, he came into this world and he became flesh, he became human, not so that he could be a good example to us, not merely that he could be a good example to us, so that he could die for us.

[19 : 48] That is how much he loved you, that he gave himself for you. Why should we be joyful? Peter initially thought there's no way that Jesus can do this.

Eventually, Jesus, Peter, came to found his whole life upon that. That's our whole basis for hope that Jesus has done that for us.

What greater possible reason could we have for rejoicing than when we consider the extent to which Jesus has loved us? So why so joyful? Well, first of all, out of gratitude, as we think of what Jesus has done for us.

Secondly, I would suggest that following him, sheep follow their shepherd, yes, I would suggest that following Jesus is the best thing for us.

That's very important to emphasize, isn't it? Because very often, people have this assumption that serving someone, that serving God, serving Jesus, that that would somehow limit our freedom, that it would somehow spoil our lives.

[21 : 02] But notice in verse 3 who God is. Who is it that you're serving? It is he who made us. God made you.

And if he made you, that means that he knows what's best for you. Doing what he tells us to do isn't somehow going to ruin our lives.

Doing what God tells us to do is the thing that enables us to become fully human. So often, the problems in our lives, they're of our own making, aren't they?

Not always. Sometimes people suffer because of what happens to them. Sometimes people suffer innocently. Very often, though, the problems in our lives are ones that we have created or that have been created by our rebellion against God.

It's a little bit like the demon-possessed man that Jesus met out in the tombs, isn't it? As we read through the Gospels, one of the accounts of people that Jesus met was a demon-possessed man who lived in a graveyard.

[22 : 18] He lived in a place of death. He was naked. He cut himself. He screamed all day. His life was one long, waking nightmare.

That was literally true for him. Very often, that becomes a symbol, though, of what our lives are like apart from God. That's not freedom. That's the worst kind of slavery.

Knowing God and living the way God calls us to live, that gives us true freedom. It enables us to be truly human.

And therefore, it gives us a sense of joy. So what is it that you are to do? God calls upon you to acknowledge him.

How are you to do this? Joyfully. Then lastly, who should do this? This is very clear, isn't it, in verse 1 of the psalm.

[23 : 24] Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth. Everyone should do this. Now, that seems fairly obvious to us, doesn't it?

I would suggest to you that if we take a step back for a moment, there is reason to see that as a surprising thing. I think as we consider this psalm in its original context, it is perhaps a surprising statement.

And then as we think about it in our own context, it is perhaps surprising. So first of all, in its original context, it's surprising. Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth.

And remember what it is that they were to do. What is it that all the earth, that all nations, what are they being told to do? To acknowledge that Yahweh is God, that he made them, that they are his, his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Some commentaries, commentators, people who've written Bible commentaries, some people say, this is so strange that verse 1 can't mean what it seems to mean.

- [24 : 37] It can't actually mean all nations. Why is it that they find it so strange? If you bear with me, if you have your Bibles there, if you look at Psalm 79, so we're looking at Psalm 100, and it uses this expression, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

The image of God as shepherd, that's relatively common in the Bible. That specific expression, we are his people, the sheep of his pasture, it's not actually that common.

It only occurs three times in the Psalms. The first place that it occurs is in Psalm 79. At the end of Psalm 79, it says, then we, your people, the sheep of your pasture, will praise you forever.

There's that same expression being used. Again, connected with praising God. It says that then they will do that. When? When is it that his people will do this?

Look in verse 10. Why should the nation say, where is their God? Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants.

- [25 : 58] May the groans of the prisoners come before you with your strong arm, preserve those condemned to die. Pay back into the laps of our neighbors seven times the contempt they have hurled at you, Lord.

Okay, bear with me a moment. In Psalm 79, the sheep of his pasture, his people, it was his people, and the nations were the ones who were persecuting God's people and who, as a result of that, were going to know God's judgment.

Okay, so in Psalm 79, same expression is used. The sheep are God's nation. The other nations are those who are going to be condemned. Justly because of the wicked things that they had done.

Then we come to Psalm 100, and the sheep are those nations. Those nations are being told to acknowledge that Yahweh is God and that they are his people.

That's why that is perhaps so shocking in its original context. Now, I'm not suggesting that there's a conflict between the two Psalms. The answer is actually in Psalm 79 itself.

- [27 : 17] The worst thing that those nations had done was not that they were persecuting God's people. That was bad enough. But in verse 6, pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you.

Literally, that do not know you. Same language as Psalm 100. On the kingdoms that do not call on your name. Their problem, in addition to the fact that they were persecuting God's people, is that they refused to acknowledge God himself.

When we come to Psalm 100, it's not in conflict with that because it's telling those nations to stop doing that. It's calling on them to turn from that sin, to acknowledge Yahweh as God, and it's promising them that if they do that, they will know all of the blessings that belong to God's people.

In its original context, Psalm 100, when it calls on all the earth to do this, it would have been shocking to its first readers. Now, we are used in the church as Christians, we are used to saying that Christianity is for all people, but still, perhaps, if we're honest, maybe this is surprising to us.

Maybe it's surprising because sometimes do we write off certain people? Maybe you've written yourself off. Now, you're here today, or maybe you're listening online, so you're not a complete skeptic, you haven't completely written off Christianity, but maybe, if you're honest, you suspect that it's not really for you.

- [28 : 55] Maybe you're not a very religious person, whatever that means. Maybe you're not a very spiritual person, whatever that means, and you're tempted to think this whole church thing, the Bible, and Jesus, and all of that, it's not really for me.

That would be the biggest mistake that you could make because Psalm 100 doesn't say that it's for religious people or for spiritual people, whatever those things may mean.

Psalm 100 says that it's for all the earth. God made you, and this God who made you calls upon you to know him through Jesus, and he promises that if you do that, you will know all of the unimaginable blessings that belong to God's people.

This is for everyone. Maybe you're tempted to write yourself off. Maybe, if we're honest, we're tempted to write other people off. We come, and we reckon ourselves to be Christians, and this is great for us, and we're God's people and the sheep of his pasture, but if we're honest, we tend to look at the society around us and we think, they're not going to be interested, are they?

Maybe if we're very honest, at times, we get angered and we don't really want them to know because of the way they behave, because of the way they have treated God's people.

[30 : 27] Again, that would be a huge mistake because the message that we have is the best possible news ever when we think about what God has done for us through Jesus, and this is a message he tells us, not only for us, not just for the people in this building today or the people who may be listening online, it's a message for all of the people of Aberdeen, for everybody that you're in contact with, because God made them, and he calls on them to know him, to acknowledge him, and part of what it means for us to follow Jesus is to be involved in making that message known.

So, what is it? All seven commands in this psalm, a very familiar psalm to us, what is it that God is calling on you to do?

God is calling on you to acknowledge him in Christ Jesus. As you do that, he calls on you to do it joyfully, and importantly, he calls upon all of us to do that, because this is a message for all people.

Will you bow your heads with me as we pray? Our Father in heaven, we rejoice in your goodness and your mercy. We ask that you would be pleased to take the words of this psalm and that you would write them upon our heart.

Enable us to know the truth of them, perhaps even more than that, Father, we ask that you would give us a joyfulness as we consider who you are and what you have done for us in your son.

[32 : 17] And we ask, Lord, that you would be pleased to make us a blessing to those around us. We pray that you would indeed build your church and draw more and more people to yourself.

Hear our prayers and forgive our sins. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.