

## ***A Worthy Boast: Knowing God***

Jeremiah 9:23-24

A friend loaned me a book entitled *The Art of Travel*. In that book Alain de Botton describes how the anticipation of traveling to some destination is different from the trip itself. Sometimes our travels are flat-out disappointing; other times our travels are merely different from what we anticipated.

He tells the story of how in the dead of London's winter he received in the mail a travel brochure for a vacation in the Caribbean. The beauty of a tropical paradise overruled his skepticism and pragmatism; he "resolved to travel to the island of Barbados." When he arrived in Barbados his senses were assaulted by billboards, traffic, old buildings, flies and crickets - none of which were included in the travel brochure.

But de Botton mentions one other thing that he hadn't anticipated when he went to the island of Barbados. Even though he was in a tropical paradise, he had a sore throat, he was anxious because he realized he hadn't told a colleague that he would be traveling, and he was starting to get a headache. As he was sitting on a "deck chair at the edge of the sea" watching birds fly and listening to the waves on the shore this thought struck him:

A momentous but until then overlooked fact was making itself apparent: I had inadvertently brought myself with me to the island. (p. 19)

That's a great point, huh? You can't travel to Barbados without "inadvertently bringing yourself" along.

I share this little vignette because something similar needs to be said about our relationship with God. Sometimes we are **disappointed** in our relationship with God. He doesn't always do what we want Him to do. Other times our relationship with God is just **different** than anticipated. For example, you may not have realized that when God becomes your Father, all of a sudden you have all these brothers and sisters in Christ - and some of them are really different.

But perhaps the main thing we fail to anticipate about a relationship with God is that we inadvertently bring ourselves to the relationship. I don't relate to God in a vacuum; I relate to God in the context of my past, my experiences with Him and with the body of Christ, my temperament and personality, my circumstances, and my sinfulness. In years past I might have thought that all of these things are the biggest obstacle to knowing God. But I've come to see that these are the places where I experience God the most deeply. God expects me to bring myself to the relationship!

Today as we continue in the book of Jeremiah we are going to see from Jeremiah 9:23-24 that God wants and expects us to know Him - not in spite of ourselves but in the context of our "selves." Here's our text:

23 Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; 24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.

The word translated "boast" is the common word for praise in the OT. We boast about whatever we consider to have the most worth/value. The Lord was challenging them not to "boast in" or value the wrong things. In verse 23 God mentions three things in which people commonly boast. If you and I want to know God we need to make sure we don't value these things more than Him.

### ***Three Inferior Boasts: (Jeremiah 9:23)***

23 Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches;

***"Let not a wise man boast in his wisdom."*** The wisdom in mind here is not the type of wisdom based upon the "fear of the Lord" that we read about so much in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. This type of wisdom is akin to knowledge or "expertise" in some area. The Lord says, "Don't think that your great learning and expertise is the most valuable thing you possess."

Some of you have careers in which you deal with things on a daily basis about which the rest of us are clueless. My younger brother teaches mathematics at a small liberal arts college in Massachusetts. Occasionally I'll ask him what he's teaching or researching. Honestly he has a hard time "dumbing it down" so that I can even understand the topic (much less the content) of what he's doing. Others of you have a type of practical, hands-on wisdom that is astounding. For example, I'm amazed at the breadth of wisdom that farmers build up over the course of a lifetime (weather, soil, livestock, mechanics, accounting, management, etc.). Others of you have incredible wisdom in raising children or gardening or small engine repair.

There is obviously nothing wrong with knowledge; I've always thought that knowledge is preferable to ignorance. The warning, though, is, "Don't think that your expertise is the most valuable thing you possess. Your knowledge of God should define you."

***"Let not the mighty man boast of his might."*** Jeremiah is either referring to military might or personal strength. Either way, such might was nothing to boast about. Israel needed to understand that military might was not the key to security; trusting in God was the only thing that would allow her to continue dwelling in the land.

And on a personal level, we are also tempted to trust in our positions of rank and status. Or we think, "I am a very capable, competent person. I have the resources to take care of myself. I can make a living and take care of my family on my own. I don't need charity or a handout." Consequently we don't really see much urgency in praying (asking God to act) or in treasuring up the Scriptures in our hearts or in pursuing

genuine biblical fellowship. Such a lifestyle indicates that deep down we believe personal strength is enough. But God says we shouldn't pride ourselves on our self-sufficiency.

***"Let not a rich man boast of his riches."*** Throughout Scripture riches/money is depicted as a rival to God. Jesus said, "You cannot serve both God and mammon [money]. You cannot serve two masters." The temptation of those who have abundance is to substitute trust in God with trust in money. In a land with such prosperity, it is very difficult to evaluate our own lives objectively - whether or not we boast in our riches in subtle ways. Israel found out that her riches could not protect her or give her security. And we need to realize that whether we own a little or a lot (compared to others), riches will never bring security or peace. Riches will always disappoint.

Three inferior boasts: wisdom, strength, and riches. Of course this doesn't mean that there is anything inherently virtuous about being ignorant or weak or poor. It is a matter of the value we place on wisdom, strength, and money. If these three things occupy a place of supremacy in our lives we won't value knowing God; and consequently we will live small, cheap lives.

There is also a warning here for us as a church corporately. As a church we would be foolish to boast in the wrong things. A church shouldn't boast in its buildings or its attendance or its budget. A church shouldn't boast in its influence or status in a community. As a church everything we have and everything we do is an expression of the grace of God. We are what we are by the grace of God (see 1 Corinthians 15:10).

[The book of Ecclesiastes is something of a case study in how Solomon tried to find satisfaction in wisdom, might and riches. Eventually his world came crashing down and he realized that he was foolish to build his life upon such things. You and I can learn this lesson by looking at the disasters of other people, or we can find out for ourselves.]

The good news is that there is another boast, a worthy boast, that will never disappoint.  
***A Worthy "Boast": Knowing God (Jeremiah 9:24)***

24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.

Instead of a shallow, superficial understanding of God and His ways, our greatest boast should be that we have a growing comprehension of who God is, that we are cultivating deeper insight into what God is like. Our boast should involve the intimacy of our relationship with God. Instead of being impressed with the things we notice in ***ourselves***, we should boast in things we notice in ***God***.

This is a theme we find throughout Jeremiah. Earlier in Jeremiah 9, God had lamented that the people had willfully, intentionally not known Him. In Jeremiah 9:3 we read:

3 “They bend their tongue *like* their bow;  
Lies and not truth prevail in the land;  
For they proceed from evil to evil,  
And they do not know Me,” declares the Lord.

The implication is that if they really knew God that they wouldn’t be so enamored by evil. As Edward Welch says, “Whatever wins our affections controls our lives” (*Addictions*, p. 175). God’s appeal in verse 24 is therefore:

24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.

God wants and expects us to be able to say, “The defining quality of my life is my experiential knowledge of God.” As we’ve mentioned before, “to know” God doesn’t merely involve storing up information about God; it involves an experiential knowledge of God.

And this is where you might be stuck. You might be thinking that your past, your sin, your personality, your dysfunctions disqualify you and doom you to a superficial experience/knowledge of God. It’s like someone saying, “I can never enjoy the island of Barbados if I have to take myself along. I think I’ll just look at travel brochures and web sites **about** Barbados; I won’t actually go there.” In the same way we might think, “I can completely see how other people can know God . . . people who don’t have the issues I have. . . . I should probably stick to reading **about**, talking **about**, and thinking **about** God - instead of actually trying to know Him myself.”

God addresses this line of thinking in Jeremiah 31. He is talking about the new covenant He would make with His people, the very covenant that was inaugurated by Jesus’ blood.

34 “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

God was talking about every single one of us who trusts in Jesus alone to take away our sin. We will “all know [Him], from the least to the greatest.” Knowing God is part of our birthright in Christ Jesus. Honestly, living after the cross and resurrection we are living in days of fulfillment; because God has sent His one and only Son to pay for our sin we can all know God.

While it is true that we do bring ourselves to our relationship with God, we somehow need to avoid being self-centered. Instead of being fixated on how inadequate and unworthy I am to know God, I need to be fixated on what God has done through Jesus and how He has made it possible for me to know Him. The longer I walk with Christ the more I see my own sin; there are layers of sin and self-centeredness that go deeper

than I ever imagined. But that's also the place where I've experienced God the most deeply - not merely in the realm of the hypothetical but in the actual details of my life.

Specifically, the Lord wanted them [and us] to know:

24 but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things," declares the LORD.

He is talking here about much more than "book knowledge" about the attributes of God. God wants us to understand that He is a God whose **attributes** are manifested in His **actions** here in this world.

**Lovingkindness** is very similar to the NT concept of grace; it denotes God's covenant love toward His people: his willingness and faithfulness to show us kindness even when we don't deserve it. The people of Judah in Jeremiah's day were oblivious to God's lovingkindness; they didn't see how gracious He had been in giving them the land in which they lived, in causing the crops to grow, and even in sending them the prophets to warn them.

As well, God wants us to know that He "exercises . . . **justice, and righteousness on earth.**" God's justice is based upon His righteousness. His righteous [i.e., upright, true] standards are the basis of His judgments **on the earth**. The people of Judah in Jeremiah's day didn't understand this. They didn't consider the fact that God manifests His character on the earth. They thought that since they were God's chosen people and since they had the temple for worship that they were immune from any judgment or discipline. Because they didn't know God, they didn't know any different.

The ultimate example of God's lovingkindness, justice and righteousness being exercised **on earth** is the cross of Jesus Christ. These three attributes of God converged at the cross. God's lovingkindness compelled Him to send Jesus to become a man and die for our sins. Because of God's justice, He couldn't merely dismiss our sin without it being atoned for. The righteous standards of God were satisfied in Jesus Christ. And so the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are the foundational expression of his lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness. If you want to "know and understand God" you have to begin at the cross. This was Paul's experience. In Galatians 6:14 Paul made this statement:

14 But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

We too can "boast in the cross of Jesus" because it most fully expresses the character of God.

**Application.** I have two suggestions about how we cultivate this knowledge of God.

First, **Look for God in the Word.** This may sound like an obvious point, but we need to be reminded from time to time that the Bible is about **God**. If you read the Bible carefully you will see that God really wants you to know Him and that He doesn't ask you to ignore who you are or what you've been through in your life. Unlike that travel brochure for Barbados, the Bible gives us a comprehensive, honest, transparent understanding of what we should anticipate in a relationship with God. The Bible assumes that you and I will bring ourselves along as we get to know God.

For a specific example of this, consider 2 Corinthians 11 and 12. There Paul is answering false teachers who were trying to influence the Corinthians away from "the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ." They were exalting themselves and putting Paul down. Paul found himself in something of a no-win situation; it is almost impossible to defend yourself against such accusations without sounding prideful and self-important. And so Paul argues that even though he **could** boast in his spiritual knowledge (11:6), sacrifice (11:16-33), and even visions (12:1-4); but that wouldn't be profitable.

He describes how he was given a "thorn in the flesh" (some weakness) to keep him from exalting himself. He prayed 3x that it would go away, but here's the answer he got from God:

9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 10 Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul gladly boasted about his weakness because that's where He experienced the power of Jesus; that's where he experienced God's strength. We are told about Paul's experience so that we can experience the same.

What is your "thorn in the flesh"? What is your greatest weakness right now? It might be some physical ailment, some temptation/sin you're battling, some relationship that has you tied up in knots. Instead of thinking, "If I didn't have this problem I'd really be able to know God," realize that your point of weakness is exactly the place where you can experience God most deeply. There you can experience God's power, God's grace, God's discipline/correction, and God's righteousness. If you look for God in the Word, He will show you how you can know Him experientially - not in spite of yourself but in the context of your self/life.

Second, **Look for God in the world.** Look for ways in which God is manifesting His character in everyday life. Let's say that your thorn in the flesh involves some experience in your past that tends to dominate your life. Perhaps that experience makes you doubt yourself and doubt that God really wants a relationship with you. Look for ways that God displays His power in your weakness. Look for ways that God gives you grace in relation to that weakness.

I find that God's power (in relation to my weakness) often comes through other people. I have close friends who tell me, "Steve, God really does accept you as a son because of Jesus. God wants to do in your life what you're always telling other people He wants to do in their lives." In some ways I'd love to be so strong and so confident that I don't need those kinds of simple assurances; but the fact of the matter is that I'm not that strong and confident. God's grace often comes to me through other people. I'm coming to understand through others that God really does exercise lovingkindness on earth - even in my life.

As you come to understand God through the Word, look for God in the world, in your life. Taste and see that the Lord is God. God wants and expects us to know Him. And God has made it possible through Jesus.