

1 Preamble

Readings:

- 1 Samuel 2:1-10
- Luke 1:46-55

Speaker: Neil Brown.

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2 Introduction — How can we know God

A question to consider: How can we know God? He is so much bigger, and purer, and Holier than us. As the Heavens are higher than that Earth, so are his ways higher than our ways, as he tells Isaiah, and even that comparison does not really do the difference justice. His very being transcends everything that we are. So how can we know him?

We can read the bible, God's word. And we can hear from people who claim to know him. And that helps a bit, but it falls a long way short of really knowing Him.

I am particularly conscious of the difficulty of getting to know people through my acting on selection committees at my work place. The task is to choose the best applicant for a job and the available resources are a pile of written application, and a few half-hour interviews. The written applications provide at best a very poor perspective on who the applicants really are. Even the interview — which is a long way better than an application — still leaves me feeling a lot of uncertainty as to what each person is really like.

Yet in contrast to that difficulty in getting to know someone, and particularly in getting to know God, we see two ladies in these two readings who seem to have a real insight into the nature of God. It is not a complete insight, a complete understanding. But as far as it goes, it does seem genuine. They are bubbling over in their excitement for their God. "My heart rejoices" and "My soul glorifies" are the words they use. This is not an understanding that they got from reading God's resume. There is something more here.

3 Review of Hannah and Mary

What both these ladies share, and what is clearly the source of this overflow of joy, is a recent experience of God. Not just a powerful sermon that they have heard. Not just a particularly challenging or encouraging passage in the bible, though those certainly have value in themselves. But a genuine, personal experience of God. That is, I think, what it takes to really start to know God. This should not be surprising as it is exactly the same with people — it isn't until I actually start working with someone that I find out all the things that the interview process missed.

Hannah, in our first reading, has recently had a long hoped for child, a baby boy. As I discussed last time I had the opportunity to preach up here, Hannah felt a deep need for a child, but she couldn't have one. She brought her need before God while worshipping at the temple one year and God told her, through the priest Eli, that she would have her request. The next year she did not go up to the temple, for she had a young baby to care for — her prayer had indeed been answered. When the boy was weaned, she presented him at the temple and gave him into service there. She was clearly very aware of God's having worked in her life very directly and very recently, and out of the understanding that this touch gave her, she sings his praises in this little Psalm.

Mary is in a similar, though not identical, position. While she does not yet have a baby to hold, and though she had not been, as far as we can tell, hoping for one — she was not even married — yet she had been promised a child by God, and it was a child that she knew full well was to be a great blessing. A blessing not only to her but to the whole world and the whole of creation.

Mary undoubtedly knew that God has promised to send a saviour, and probably was aware that it was about time for that saviour to come. With that knowledge, she had been visited by an angel who told her that she had been chosen to bear that saviour, she had been encouraged by her cousin Elizabeth who was also blessed with a child from God, and she was soon to have the most special child there ever was. Much like Hannah, Mary had had a direct, personal experience of God, and out of that experience came her worship, her adoration, and her praise of the mighty God.

But what is there in these two passages for us? Both Mary and Hannah has received a special knowledge of God by having their lives touched by Him. But we do not, by reading these passages, get the same touch and the same knowledge. We could examine the songs to find what God is like in the eyes of these young ladies, and by doing so we might have a somewhat better understanding of God. But that would be missing the point. The point is, as I see it, that we too need to experience God if we are to know him more deeply. We mustn't settle for knowing God just through Hannah's eyes and through Mary's eyes, or even through the eyes of Peter, Paul, David, Elijah, Job, Esther, Ruth and many others we read about in the bible. We need to know him for ourselves.

What we can get from these passages, is a sense of what an experience of God might be like, so that we can seek and can recognise such experiences. For both ladies tell us something about how God works in the world and how he works with people. If we are active in seeking God as Hannah was, and able to recognise and accept God's working when it happens in our lives a Mary was, we will be more ready to benefit from the working of God in our lives.

So from these two songs, I want to draw out two ideas about how God works, and to encourage us all to be on the lookout for, and to be actively seeking, God's working in us. These two ideas are that God is powerful, and that God loves to change our circumstances.

4 God is Powerful

To say that God is Powerful seems almost trite. Everyone knows that God is, or is meant to be, powerful. For many, his power is his defining attribute. That is what makes him God. If he wasn't powerful, he wouldn't be God.

But it is still worth focussing on his power. Possibly all the more because it is such an obvious characteristic, maybe we don't reflect on it as much as we should.

Hannah describes God's power like this:

“The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.
The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.
He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

“For the foundations of the earth are the LORD's;
upon them he has set the world.

and Mary simply says:

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

God acts in the lives of people in ways that are far beyond us. Though there are those in the world who are in a position to bring death or life, to send poverty or wealth, it is but a shadow of the subtlety, and the control, and the purpose which God can put into those acts.

One of my favourite lines from the Lord Of The Rings takes place in a conversation between Gandalf, the wise old wizard, and Frodo, the young Hobbit. Gandalf says:

Many that live deserve death, and some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgement.

This is wise advice for Frodo or for any mortal who cannot give life. But it is not relevant advice for God, for he **can** give life to the dead. This, I think, helps draw the contrast between our power, which is deeply limited, and Gods, which is limitless.

But how can a belief in, and knowledge of, His power help us to experience him more? It can help by preparing us to expect and accept His acts of Power when they happen.

Last Sunday we as a church, and many other churches, prayed for rain. That afternoon the rain started and continued for 3 days. For me, that was quite exciting, and my son commented on it at least once too - “It's raining Dad”. “Yes” I said. “We prayed for rain and it's raining” he continued. It is exciting to be involved in God's work.

Now had I not prayed for rain, would there have been less rain? I don't think so.

But had I not prayed for rain, would I have received the same encouragement? No I would not. And to those who don't know God at all and weren't even aware of anyone praying for rain, the rain is just a pleasant occurrence. We are all experiencing the same rain, the same mighty working of God. But the more we understand his power, are ready to recognise his work, and are actively seeking his help, the more we will experience God in that rain and the more we will come to know Him.

If we don't really believe that God *Can Do*, then we won't be genuine in asking, we won't take risks in expecting, and we might not recognise his works when they come, saying “That was a coincidence” or “It's too good to be true”.

We don't need to expect God to show His power in overt, public miracles: I don't really want to have a baby, at least not in the same way as Hannah or Mary, and I don't particularly need any sea to be parted at the moment. But we should expect God to do things which are impossible for us, but immediately relevant to us — expect him to give us patience when at the end of our tether, expect him to enable us to pay the bill when money is short, expect him to find us a job or help us complete an assignment.

Whenever anything happens in our lives that we might think is impossible, whether it is getting a car-park when in a hurry, or getting sick on the morning of an important meeting, we can decide it is just a co-incidence and continue on our way, or we can realise that God is was work, rejoice that he has touched our lives, and learn about his nature through experiencing what he has done.

5 God Changes People's Circumstances

The second idea that I would like to draw out is that God changes our circumstances.

We know that God is in the business of changing people. His purpose for us is to make us more like him. To change us until we conform to His image. To make us more like Jesus.

And God certainly has many different tools or techniques that he can use to reach in our lives and change us. But it seems that he particularly loves to do it by changing our circumstances.

From Hannah's song we read that:

“The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.
Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry hunger no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.

and from Mary:

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

I am often tempted, when reading passages like that, to imagine that he is punishing the wicked by bringing them down, and rewarding the righteous by exalting them. But while God does those things from time to time, it is not the only situation that he changes people's circumstances. In these passages, there is no suggestion that the warrior, the well fed, or the rulers are wicked, or that the stumblers, the hungry, the humble and the barren are worthy.

I believe God changes peoples situations not so much because of how righteous they are or aren't, but because of how it will further His purpose for them.

Is this belief consistent with scripture?

Certainly some changes wrought by God seem to have a punishment or reward aspect.

King Nebuchadnezzar was sent insane for 7 years because of his pride. Noah and his family were saved from the flood because of his righteousness. And there are plenty of other examples.

But God also brings about change that is not consistent with reward and punishment.

Paul, a righteous man of God, was sent to prison and eventually to Rome to face Caesar . Joseph also was imprisoned and enslaved, though God meant it for good. King Nebuchadnezzar (again) was allowed to conquer Israel and other countries and it wasn't due to his righteousness but rather due to God's purpose. Certainly many prophets had some pretty bad experiences while serving God as He commanded changes in their situation.

So it seems well supported that God does change peoples circumstances, and he does it for his own purposes at least as much as he does it in response to our behaviour.

But does that mean that we should run after any change that seems to be about to happen in our lives? I think certainly not, though we should not run away from them either. We must always measure anything happening in our lives against our understanding of God's will, and should seek through prayer and action to avoid changes that appear to be against his will and to encourage those that seem to follow his will.

But we can not always expect such prayer and actions to work. God may be using the situation to help us experience him better. Indeed God's purpose in allowing unpleasant changes may be precisely for us to go through the experience of wrestling with Him in prayer.

The life of Job is a good example here. All sorts of terrible things happened to him — he lost his children, his possessions, his wealth and even his health. While this change was not directly from God, God certainly allowed it. But Job did not accept the change willingly. He riled against it and sought from God an understanding and a resolution. He ultimately got both I think, but not until God had helped him to grow substantially through experiencing the change, and through wrestling with God over the change.

So if change is happening, we cannot assume that the change is good, but we can assume that if we respond as we believe God would want us to, if we face it not with fear, but with faith in God, with excitement, and with a desire to draw closer to him, then whether to change feels good or bad, we will get a greater experience of God through the situation and will come to know him better.

We can see plenty of examples in the scriptures of people's circumstances being changed and God using this to change them. Maybe one of the most dramatic was Paul who was blinded and made dependant on a hated Christian to restore his site. From then on he lived a different life and he gradually grew into the life God wanted him to have - never reaching, but always pressing on towards the goal.

Peter was taken away from his nets and fishing boats and sent to tell people about his Lord. In this way Jesus made him a fisher of men.

David was first thrust into King Saul's household as a musician, then later thrust out and hunted as an enemy of the state. Through these changes, God helped him grow in knowledge and faith.

We too will often experience God through changed circumstances. How we respond will determine how much better we get to know God through these experiences.

6 Conclusion

The experience of God is an awesome thing. I believe that we all experience God quite often.

Sometimes we try to fight against or avoid the experience if it seems uncomfortable. This leads to feelings of stress, helplessness, discomfort.

Sometimes we take it for granted and think nothing out of the ordinary has happened. These times we don't notice God and gain nothing from the experience.

Sometimes we can realise that God has touched our lives, done the humanly impossible, and maybe changed our circumstances significantly. If we have faith that he is Good, this can lead us to much deeper understanding of him and we can rejoice in our saving Lord.

So I would encourage us all to be always open to what God is doing. To expect him to do great things, and often things that change our situation substantially. To rejoice when those things happen because we can know that it draws us closer to God. And to seek always to see him in all that happens and so to know him more deeply.

Shall we pray....