

What Does It Take?

To Come to Know God

What does it take for you to come to know God – the God who created everything there is and who knows you personally?

There's more to this question than we may at first think. Are there things and circumstances that can prevent or dissuade us from finding God?

Let me explain: the western world has enjoyed some 50 or so years of relative peace with unprecedented prosperity. Never before have so many people been so well off. Yes, I know property prices today are inflated, but it seems that we have more of everything available to us now than ever before.

The “resources boom” where I live in Western Australia has made the past decade one of the most prosperous ever. Gold, copper, iron, nickel, gas and oil are in abundant supply. Unemployment is virtually non-existent. An increasing turnover in our annual Christmas shopping sprees reflects this ever growing wealth. Our social security services have afforded the poorest among us a reasonable, if not enviable, standard of living.

And, in case you haven't noticed, our country's outlook has shifted. No longer do our school assemblies feature the Lord's Prayer; in contrast, our high schools now no longer teach the “theory of evolution” – it is taught as fact. In this equation, there is no room for God.

A few years ago, when discussing the high school course outlines for one of my daughters at an orientation meeting, I explained to the interviewing teacher that because we're followers of Jesus, [ie. Christians,] the underlying premises for her biology classes, being evolution, would not apply – and politely asked how we might best negotiate around it. The teacher responded rather abruptly, and made

what I felt a somewhat scornful remark to one of her peers – all within earshot.

I had expected an empathetic hearing, thinking that our national multiculturalism and expanding tolerance for ethnic and multi-faiths would have been incorporated into the state education system. Instead, I learned quite differently – and that the decades of change on so many fronts bring with it results we don't always anticipate.

No one can deny that our society is changing. Have you noticed, for example, that the rated content on our televisions has, over time, changed? Nudity, explicit crime scenes and other “simulated” scenes feature daily as the centrepiece of our prime time lounge room viewing. It seems that our accepted levels of tolerance have, over time, imperceptibly changed. Even more surreptitious, however, has been the influence media has had on us. Our references to wisdom no longer emanate from Christian terms of reference [as they used to]; have you noticed how many popular movies nowadays feature wise Buddhist sayings?

Then there's the issue of infanticide. The altar of abortion as acceptable to our society today would horrify our forefathers. A few generations ago, families placing greater value on human life would have stilled any notion that abortion may even be touted as acceptable in some circumstances. But, every year, for whatever reason, we sacrifice 42 million humans worldwide.

The moral compass that used to guide our lawmakers, politicians and religious leaders, such as “You shall not kill,” isn't so relevant nowadays. Even Christian theologians tout that the Ten Commandments were “nailed to the cross” – that is, their relevance only applying to an ancient people and not to us.

So, the issue we're really getting at, is God, or a faith in God, really all that relevant to us any more? Do we need God in today's society? Or, have we slowly weaned ourselves "off that crutch"; are we sufficiently enlightened for the better?

When I say "God", I'm referring to the God in the Bible, revealed through the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

Because, far from being dead, religion and superstition is well and truly alive. In the past few years you may have noticed new shops offering products never seen before in Australia. We're not talking about new and amazing technological innovations. Rather, I'm referring to the gods and deities that originate from neighbouring Asian countries. Last month I came across two new shops in prime suburban locations offering hundreds of Buddhas, Hindu gods and other eastern statues of varying sizes and shapes. I remarked to my friends that it's a wonder those businesses are able to make a living selling those things, and they responded saying, "You'd be surprised at how many people buy them!"

So who in Australia buys Buddha statues? Are they mere decorations, items of exquisite artwork, or do they convey some of the intrigue, power and mystery they possess in Asian homelands?

I think our problem with the God of the Bible is that He tells us things we don't want to hear. He tells us how to live; and warns us of the consequences if we don't listen to Him. God asks us for all our attention. He tells us that He made us, and that we're prosperous because He has blessed us.

The gods we have substituted, however, whether a statue of Buddha or the sports car we shine every weekend, remain pleasingly silent on those issues.

God also frequently warns us about the danger of riches. Jesus said that it was impossible for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Wealth it seems obscures our understanding of how needful we really are; it gives us a false sense of security.

A wise man once prayed, "Don't let me be so poor that I would steal for food, or let me become so rich that I would forget you." (Proverb 30:8-9)

There's something in that prayer that we have neglected. In becoming affluent, we have forgotten the very core values that set us on this journey.

Think about it. We have failed to be thankful for all that we have, and what I mean by this is that we have neglected to "join the dots" between our prosperity and our successes to the providence of God. (Instead, we boast that it's technological innovation that has made us better off).

A few years ago, the Australian Government endorsed and promoted National Thanksgiving Day, with the motto on their website reflecting the words: Say thanks to God and say thanks to each other.

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I was particularly touched by the frankness of including God in our national Thanksgiving statement. Because Australians don't necessarily see themselves as a Christian-based society any longer, a direct attribution to "God" seemed almost "out of touch" with mainstream thinking.

When the Government recently awarded pensioners a once-off large sum payment, the first response we heard from the media, pensioners and others was to criticise it. Some complained it was a waste of taxpayer funds. Others felt it would hurt the economy. Still others said it wasn't enough to really help.

Are we becoming more ungrateful the richer we become?

Now, if you were privy to what God's thoughts might be on our emerging national ethos, how would you respond? I mean, what are God's thoughts and intentions to a people like us?

Thankfully, history speaks for itself of a people not so dissimilar to ourselves. Throughout the experience of the prophets of old, as recorded in the Bible, was the warning that if people moved away from the one and only God to "worship things made with hands" the consequences would be dire.

From prosperity to poverty, freedom to captivity, health to diseases, was the warning the prophets echoed again and again. And, in due course, those people of old learned some painful lessons over and over; no wonder so many of the prophets were killed or imprisoned.

Despite our failings, however, there is a silver lining running concurrent to the trends of emerging affluence.

No matter how decadent a society becomes, it seems that historically, there has always been a God-loving and faithful remnant; a percentage of people who have not traded their faith for, for example, the lie of evolution or superstition in other eastern gods. People who genuinely seek God, and live changed lives; in Jesus' words, who are "in the world but not of the world" – people who "keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus".

Their lives of faith are all the more accentuated in an "educated" society that at best says, "We evolved. There is no God."

So if faith is preserved and nurtured in the righteous in the midst of a wicked and perverse generation, and that God is the centre of their life compass, what are the odds of anyone finding this God?

It's a good question. The good news message proclaiming the heritage and promises of God have been there for us in a book called the Bible, and it is to those who "hear" it that it applies.

"He that has an ear, let him hear," said Jesus on numerous occasions.

Jesus also explained the miracle of someone coming to genuine faith; it is something that can't be achieved by reasoning or intellect alone.

Jesus explained it this way, *"No one can come to Me unless the Father who has sent Me draw him, and I will raise him up at the last day."* (John 6:44)

It comes down to calling, a specific calling by God, coupled then with the willingness to listen. The good message has always been proclaimed and taught; today the Bible holds the position as the world's most printed and published book! No other text compares.

Yet, despite its Divine authorship, riches and wealth make it so much harder to hear and understand the message. We become distracted and comfortable, and simply fail to perceive just how needy we are.

To a people of old, God said, *"Because you say, I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing, and do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked..."* (Revelation 3:17)

Has anything changed today? Affluence takes its toll, unfortunately, in ways that are more harmful than beneficial. The signature of human nature is exactly the same as it has been from old; greed and ingratitude.

That is, however, as history confirms, until calamity strikes. Some insurance policies include the somewhat ironic "act of God" clause, referring to

events beyond human control, such as hurricanes, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions.

It is often in times of calamity, or war, or profound suffering that people in desperation "turn to God". It's happened in the past, and if history is any precedence, it will happen again.

When stripped of those material things that give us a false sense of security and power, we only somehow then perceive our own inadequacies.

Jesus Christ gave John a vision of the future, where he saw "an innumerable multitude" from every nation and language, singing songs to God. In learning their identity, the angel told John, *"These are the ones who came out of the great tribulation..."* (Revelation 17:14)

The Great Tribulation is a term that encapsulates a time yet future, just prior to Jesus' return, when the world is at war. Suffering is so vast and incomprehensible, and global warming so intense, that it seems many [more than what is humanly possible to enumerate] will finally "turn to God".

And as tragic as is the reality that only through suffering will human hearts turn to God, the silver lining is that they do turn!

You see, God doesn't force His will and way on us. He simply asks us to choose, and in doing so, we also choose the consequences.

To an ancient people, not unlike ourselves [in the western world], God spoke:

"I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life, so that both you and your children may live, so that you may love Jehovah your God..." (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

The choice is ours. Will we hear, today? Can we recognise that the abundance we have isn't ours because we're smarter; but because God is, that He loves us and has blessed us – not because we deserve it, but because He is faithful? □



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