

Notes for Lesson 10 - "Seeing God as He Really Is"

I'd like to start out this morning by asking you all for a show of hands if you agree with any of the following five statements:

1. We were created by God; in His image and for His glory.
2. As Christians, we strive to become more like Jesus, conformed to Him, over the course of our lives.
3. We try to build our lives around God's truth, looking to Him for guidance in how to live every day as well as how to face the various challenges we encounter throughout our lives.
4. Our sins are forgiven by God; because of his mercy and grace.
5. Our hope is to spend eternity in His presence.

We've all just agreed about some very significant, even essential core ideas about ourselves and our lives:

These statements reference ideas about:

Why we're here,
How we're meant to live, and
Where we hope to end up.

Given that we've all just agreed on these facts about God and our relationship with Him, one would think that knowing God, understanding Him and as this week's lesson is titled, "*Seeing God as He Really Is*" would be something that is central to our lives, something we would think about a lot.

It should be the thing we are most interested in.

We should be more curious about our creator and what He wants of us than anything else. If we want to be like Jesus, which was one of the statements we just agreed upon, we first need to have a very good understanding of who He is and what he says is important in terms of how to live our lives.

Unfortunately, learning more about God quite often takes a back seat to the concerns of our daily lives: our jobs, our spouses, our children.

Even things like our hobbies and our TV viewing schedule can get in the way of making time to learn about God.

I know in my house we made sure to record the latest season of "The Amazing Race" and a few other TV shows we really like. I might not make the time every day to be in God's word, but I found the time to record those shows.

What does that say about my priorities?

If we want to learn about God, one way is through His creation, as Christina talked about in her teaching on God's word near the start of our study of the Book of Psalms.

In addition to His creation, God has revealed Himself to us in two ways: through His word, and through Jesus, who was God's word incarnate and who was also a perfect representation of God.

Reading the Bible, His word, and learning about Jesus are obviously the BEST ways we can learn about God.

To learn more about God's attributes, to really try to know Him, we need to spend time in His word and thinking about

1. what God is telling us about Himself
2. what Jesus teaches about who God is
3. what God wants from us.

For those of you who are married, just think for a minute about how much time you put into "getting to know" your spouse when you were dating and at some point became interested in him.

I'll bet you thought about him a lot, and were really interested in learning more about HIS qualities and how your relationship with him was growing over time.

There might have been a time when you would describe yourself as not being able to get this person out of your mind, you thought about him all the time.

I know I thought about my husband, Rick, a lot when we were seriously dating. I remember when thoughts of him were pretty much always there if I wasn't actively involved in doing something else at work or at home.
I'm sure that many of you experienced that same thing.

For those of us with kids, I'm sure we spent a lot of time thinking about our children as their personalities developed. That's what all the young moms in our study are doing right now, literally getting to know their child as a person as they grow from an infant, to a toddler, and then to a child with a distinct personality
Then, when our children reach that adolescent stage, some of us probably found ourselves wondering just who this alien, moody and oppositional creature was who had somehow taken over the body of the sweet child we thought we knew...

For those of us who work now, or have in the past, how about your boss? I'm sure we've all spent time trying to figure out what kind of person our supervisor is, how to please them and what they want from us.

The point I'm trying to make is that people who are important to us, either personally or professionally, probably occupy a lot of our thinking.

Let's reflect for a minute on those statements we agreed on a few minutes ago. Given how important these facts about God and our relationship with Him are, ultimately much more important than our relationships with our spouses, our children, our bosses and certainly than the concerns of everyday life, we should spend more of our time thinking

about God, who He is, our relationship with Him, and what He wants from us than we spend thinking about any other person or relationship or thing.

God has made it really easy for us to learn about Him and the relationship He wants to have with us. We don't have to go very far or do anything really complicated. All we really need to do is make the time to turn the pages of our Bibles to learn more about God. He tells us about Himself pretty clearly there and He also tells us what He wants from us, his people.

This fall we've been learning more about God, studying many of His attributes. What I'd like to do today is to briefly review each of the divine attributes that we've looked at in the course of our study of the Book of Psalms so far this year.

In addition, there should be copies of Psalm 145 on each of the tables. I'm not going to go through this psalm verse by verse but I did put in bold all the attributes of God and characteristics of His Kingdom that this one Psalm mentions.

Let's think about what we've learned in the last nine weeks about various attributes of God and what this knowledge means for us. As Anne asked in the very first week's teaching: Why does God want us to know about each of these attributes?

How should we be affected by our knowledge of these attributes?
Most importantly, how should we respond (to our knowledge)?

In Lesson 1, we learned that God is omniscient, having infinite knowledge and understanding of everything, including each of us and that He is omnipresent, being everywhere simultaneously. From this we know that God is a faithful, abiding presence for his people. He is always with us.

Anne talked about the fact that God knows us intimately, He designed each one of us and He comprehends the depths of our souls. He knows all the thoughts and desires of our hearts and minds, good and bad. There is no where, including death, that we can go to hide from Him.

As Dave summed it up in a recent sermon on this topic, God is both infinite and intimate – He is everywhere and knows everything about us.

How should we be affected by this knowledge that God is always with us? How should we respond?

Really believing that God is always there means we should respond by depending on God, because we know that no matter what we are going through: health issues, financial crises, or issues with people in our family, God is there. He is right beside us, waiting for us to turn to Him.

But just like someone can be nearby, right outside our front door, we have to invite them inside if we want to share what's on our minds and in our hearts and ask for their help. Even though He's God, we have to invite Him in if we want to lean on Him.

In week 2 we learned that God's word is truth, and that it's rock solid and enduring. And because it is timeless, God's word is just as relevant for us today in the 21st century as it was to the 1st century Christians.

God reveals Himself to us in His word and He reveals his plan of redemption for us.

Jesus is God's word incarnate, literally brought to life for us. During his life, Jesus showed us how God wants us to live.

How should we be affected knowing that God's word is enduring truth? How should we respond?

Our response should be fairly obvious – we need to know God's word so that we can stand on its firm foundation as we face the challenges of life.

As the study guide put it God's word gives us “clear answers to life's hardest questions” but we need to be reading our Bibles in order to benefit from the truth they contain.

When we know God's word, the salvation story contained in it can give us joy and help us experience fulfillment, despite our circumstances, whether they are good or bad. This is very different than experiencing happiness, which is usually based directly on our circumstances and is fleeting.

It's possible to be facing very difficult issues yet still feel God's love and experience true joy knowing we have been forgiven and saved. We can experience this joy even though we are facing very unhappy circumstances.

As David wrote in Psalm 23:

“Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for you are with me”.

And he ends this Psalm by claiming God's promise of salvation, writing:

“I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever”.

In addition to helping us face really hard situations, God's word also gives us guidelines for every day living. The Bible is His guidebook for keeping us on the right path.

God's living truth and our hope are contained in this one book.

But like most books, the knowledge contained in the Bible is only useful, when we read it and try to apply it to our lives.

In Lesson 3 we learned that God loves us unconditionally. He created us in His own image and gave us domain over the entire earth.

He knows exactly who we are, in all of our weakness, and He loved us while we were still sinners.

God doesn't look at us the way the world does, He loves us despite all our imperfections.

How should we be affected by the knowledge that God loves us unconditionally? How should we respond?

Knowing that God loves us unconditionally and that we were designed to be in relationship with Him, we should respond by looking to God to fill the yearning in our heart for purpose and completion.

We should live our lives based on the knowledge that nothing else can fulfill us in the here and now like our relationship with the God who loves us.

There is no level of human achievement, no amount of power, money or possessions that can ultimately fulfill our longing for purpose.

The second way we should be affected by the knowledge that, despite our sin, our creator loves us, is that God's love for us should give us a foundation for loving ourselves.

In Week 4 we learned that forgiveness stems from God's mercy and that by forgiving our sins, our relationship with Him is restored.

That, in fact, the goal of all forgiveness is to restore our relationship with God that was ruptured by our sin.

God wants to be in relationship with us; that's why, He forgives our sin and wants to change our hearts.

How should we be affected knowing that God's forgiveness is designed to restore our relationship with Him? How should we respond?

To receive God's forgiveness, we need to be honest with ourselves and with God, acknowledge our sin, and come before Him with a truly contrite heart, asking for his forgiveness and mercy and not the judgement we deserve.

It's important to remember that the two elements of a contrite heart are: being truly sorry for what we've done and truly intending not to repeat the sin again.

Ultimately, we should respond not just by asking for forgiveness over and over but also by pursuing a deeper relationship with God and being open to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts so he can begin to change us and thus change our future actions.

We should respond by wanting to be changed people and not just forgiven people.

In Lesson 5 we looked at Psalm 23 in which David wrote so eloquently about God's grace that he rested in and God's care that he trusted in.

I think it's important to remember what Christina pointed out that, just like us, David didn't always feel the sense of grace and hope we read about in Psalm 23. In fact, in the preceding psalm – 22 which was written during a different time in his life, David was literally asking God why He had forsaken him.

That week we learned that, like a good shepherd would, Jesus laid down his life for his flock, for us, so we KNOW God is our ultimate protector and our provider.

How should we be affected by knowing that God is our ultimate protector and provider?
How should we respond?

We should respond by Trusting that God will meet our needs.

As David wrote in Psalm 23

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”.

If there is something we don't have that we want, we should focus on the truth that God knows what's best for each of us and He has decided in His wisdom to provide exactly what he has. As Dave said on a recent Sunday, we have everything we need to fulfill God's plans for our lives.

We may not have everything we want to fulfill our plans for ourselves. But we need to respond by choosing to be content with what we have; the exact opposite of what our culture teaches us – that we must always strive for more material things and that is where our happiness lies.

As Christina noted, if we truly believe that God loves us and provides everything we need,

(note I did not say everything we want; just like we tell our kids, there's a difference between really needing something and just wanting it)

the discontent in our lives should die out and we should experience only gratitude for everything God has provided for us.

This idea was reinforced for me recently in an on-line daily devotional I got from the Home Word ministry. It had a quote on gratitude: “A grateful heart is not acquired in a moment but is rather the fruit of a thousand choices”. That quote is from a woman paralyzed at age of 17 who was expressing her gratitude for everything God has given her.

If there is some aspect of your life that you wish was different, I would encourage you to keep coming back to Psalm 23. Keep coming back to the fact that God is your good shepherd, He knows what's best for you and He has given you everything you need to fulfill His plans for your life.

In Week 6 Anne posed the question: How do we know God's will for our lives?

At first glance, that question can seem huge, complicated and very difficult to figure out. But, the answer actually turns out to be quite simple - if we made every decision in our lives, large or small, based first on seeking His kingdom, we can be sure that we are following God's will.

So, if we have questions such as:

How should I deal with my kids?

How should I react to my husband?

How should I treat my neighbors, my siblings or my parents?

If we seek to advance God's kingdom when answering each of these questions, we will be following God's will for our lives.

If our mindset is that – life is about God, not us and that what God wants is the filter through which we consider any question we have about what we should do in a particular situation, we can be assured of being in His will.

To the related question of : Why God doesn't always give us quick answers when we look to Him for direction regarding His will, Anne noted that our relationship with God often grows the most during times when we are seeking his will, trusting Him and waiting on Him to guide us.

How should we be affected by this question of discerning God's will? How should we respond?

Discerning God's will is made easier when we know God's word because this is where He tells us how He wants us to live. The bible gives us clear instruction in how to approach each of the scenarios I mentioned earlier.

So, for example, if I have a question about dealing with my kids, and I know God's word, I know that Ephesians 6:4 tells us to *bring your children up in the training and admonition of the Lord*.

Knowing this, I can ask myself what do I need to do in this particular situation so that I am teaching my kids to respect God's commands?

If I am not sure how I should respond to my husband in a particular scenario; I can ask myself : What does loving him, as I am called to do in Titus 2:4, look like in this situation? What would submitting to his spiritual leadership look like as I am instructed to do in Ephesians 5:22?

The next time my irritating neighbor shows up I can ask myself: What does it look like to love my neighbor as myself as Paul instructs us in Romans 13:9-10?

At holidays like Thanksgiving which we just celebrated and Christmas which is around the corner, when I'm spending a lot more time than usual with my mom and dad I can ask myself What can I do today in order to honor my parents, which Ephesians 6:2 tells me to do.

These are just a few examples of how we can go to God's word for guidance in most situations we find ourselves facing in daily life.

Anne pointed out that we can choose to follow God's will numerous times every day in what we might typically call the "unimportant" decisions we all make.

If we establish that habit on a daily basis with these smaller decisions that can prepare us over time, to follow God's will for larger and more important decisions that typically happen much less frequently in our lives – questions such as what job to take or who to marry.

If we respond to any question, large or small, by simply following the teaching in God's word, we can be sure we're in God's will.

In Lesson 7 Terri Gundlach talked about how trust is the best antidote to fear and she pointed out how great it would be if our response to those things we fear, was to run to God and trust in His protection and his plans for us, instead of worrying so much about our fears.

God is our fortress and he is strong enough to protect us from anything.

And Terri pointed out, that not only does God shield us from many things, but He has also provided us with his word which we can also use to protect ourselves.

Remember those wonderful verses in Ephesians 6? They call on believers to *gird ourselves with truth and take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God.*

Knowing God's word, like these verses in Ephesians, gives us powerful tools to face our fears.

Going back to the analogy of the good shepherd taking care of his flock, Terri noted that neither sheep nor people can get to the mountain top without going through the valleys. For sheep, she pointed out that it's actually in the valleys that the best food is found for their nourishment.

It turns out that we're not that much different in this respect than sheep. I'm sure many of you have experienced that you often grow the most and feel closest to God during times of hardship, when you are in your own valley.

These difficult times work to nourish our relationship with God.

I know some of the women in this room have walked through valleys I cannot even imagine:

Battles with cancer or other illness, losing a beloved spouse, or even a precious child. Some of you are still in those valleys.

In answer to the really hard question about those times we are in a valley suffering and God doesn't rescue us, Terri made three really good points:

1. Jesus willingly walked through His own valley, of Calvary, for us. He knows what we're going through as we traverse our own valley.
2. If God doesn't rescue us from the valley, we have his promise that He will lead us through it, walking every step with us because as we've learned, He is always with us.
3. What you learn during your time of hardship in a valley, can make you a great comforter later to others facing the same challenge.

How should we be affected by knowing that God is our ultimate protector; how should we respond?

Our response to knowing that God is our protector is quite simple. We need to choose to trust Him and cling to Him whether we're on the mountain top or in a valley.

In week 8, Anne taught us about the source of all hope giving us the biblical definition of hope: a confident expectation and desire for the goodness of God.

As Christians, our hope is in God; it is based on God's goodness and His other attributes, which we've been learning more about this year, and in the promises He has given us in his word.

As the psalmist wrote in Psalm 119:114
"I have put my hope in your word".

How should we be affected by knowing that God is the source of our hope? How should we respond to this knowledge?

Since God is the source of our hope, we should respond by trying to know Him more; because the better we know our God, the more we can draw on the strength of our relationship with Him during hard times in our lives.

Secondly, We should respond by choosing to be hopeful. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can make hope a habit in our lives. Like gratitude, hope is a mindset we can cultivate based on our knowledge of who God is and on our knowledge of His promises to us.

In those times when you feel hopeless. Go back to God's word and the promises he's given us there.

God's eternal hope for believers is found in verses such as Jeremiah 29:11

*"For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you **hope** and a future".*

In lesson 9, With incredible transparency and openness about her own life, Christina taught us about the need to be honest with God in times of suffering.

In our study of the Book of Psalms, we learned that the majority of psalms are lament psalms, in which the psalmists brought their pain and their suffering directly and honestly to God.

Just like these psalmists, we don't always understand God's ways. We know God is good but we often don't understand why things are the way they are. As Christina pointed out, our world is not what God intended it to be, and because it's fallen there is hurt, pain and destruction.

In some of his psalms, David talked honestly to God about the depths of despair which he sometimes felt. But the most important thing we can learn from David is that at the same time he lamented, he maintained an unshakable trust in God's love.

David's trust was not based on God's actions in the crisis or situation in which David found himself, but rather on God's unfailing love which David knew and trusted in. Ultimately David trusted in God's love even though he did not necessarily feel that love in the situations he was in when he wrote some of his psalms.

Christina pointed out, that David's trust in God's love co-existed with the pain he was feeling. His joy and his sorrow existed together.

Because of his trust in God's love, David could lament his present circumstances and still trust God and as a result experience His peace.

So how should we be affected by knowing this truth?

How should we respond to knowing that God wants us to be honest with him when we are suffering and yet still trust Him?

We should respond like David, who one commentary I read described as treating his soul like a pitcher of water, pouring out its contents to God.

In addition to being honest with God, like David, we should respond by still trusting in God's love, while being open with Him about the pain we are feeling.

Our goal should be to lament our present circumstances, in which we may not feel God's presence, while still trusting in God's love for us.

As Christina pointed out, we have wonderful examples to follow, in David and in Jesus. When Jesus cried out to God on the cross, asking why God, his father, had forsaken Him; in that moment of honest lament, the greatest work for all mankind was being accomplished- our salvation.

To summarize what we've learned about God over the last couple of months:
He's always with us

He loves us unconditionally
He forgives our sins
He wants to be in relationship with us
He is our trustworthy protector and provider
He has given us rock solid, enduring truth to guide us
He is the source of our hope

There is literally no one like God and the more we come to know Him the more we should be able to trust in Him. That's why it's so important to deepen our knowledge of God because to really trust someone, even God, you need to know them.

When we put all of the attributes of God that we've studied together; and think about what our response to each of them should be, the recurring themes that keep emerging are:

We need to be in His word, to know God's word;
We should trust in God's love, care and protection,
We should seek to deepen our relationship with Him
We should put our hope in Him
and finally, we should let God into our hearts to heal us, to restore us, to transform us and ultimately to lead us to eternal life - "the way everlasting" that David wrote about at the end of Psalm 139.