

## COMING HOME, PART 5: KNOWING GOD

John 14:20-26 (NASB)

David Bruce Linn, Pastor-Teacher

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The 1993 film, *Sommersby*, tells the story of Jack Sommersby, a Southern plantation owner who has gone off to fight in the War of Northern Aggression, also called the Civil War. Like hundreds of thousands of soldiers, he is captured and shipped off to a military prison in Elmira, New York. There Sommersby grows sick and thin, and spends his time dreaming about coming home.

Six years later he is released, as the story goes, and he makes his way back to his home in the South. As he walks into town he encounters one person after the next and greets them by name. Each one peers at him without recognizing him at first, then they look like they've seen a ghost, and finally they embrace him as their long lost Jack Sommersby. His plantation had been one of the linchpins of the local economy. In his absence it had fallen into disrepair and the town had lost hope.

As he walks the dusty road toward his plantation house a crowd of well-wishers gathers around him. He sees it from afar, the paint is peeling, weeds have grown up around it, and pickets have fallen off of his white fence. Yet there is still something gracious about the place. The crowd stops at the gate, and as Sommersby advances, his wife Laurel opens the door and steps out on the porch with their young son who was conceived just as his father was leaving for war.

His son, of course, does not know him. His dog does not know him either. He approaches his wife as she stands, looking tentative, in her best velvet dress. She gazes without expression at his face. He looks at her with love in his eyes and says: "I had forgotten how beautiful you are." Laurel Sommersby is stiff as he embraces her, but then softens. She says nothing, but we see a flash of relief and joy in her eyes. The crowd goes wild with cheering. It is the complete scene of hopeful homecoming which so many people desired after the Civil War and so few enjoyed. [Please be advised that the film is rated PG-13 and may not be suitable for everyone.]

Can you imagine the intensity of yearning felt by those millions of Civil War soldiers who just wished they could have gone home? The yearning of those left behind for their loved ones to return in one piece and restore their fractured families, homes, villages, and towns? We all know the yearning for home. In this study series in John 14 we have learned that God is himself the home for which we yearn. In verses 20-26 we will see that home is the place where our desire to know others and be deeply known is fulfilled. The final fulfillment of that desire will be in heaven, as the apostle Paul wrote: **"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known"** (1 Corinthians 13:12). In the mean time we are given a foretaste of this wonderful reality.

## KNOWING GOD BY DWELLING TOGETHER

There are four different aspects of knowing God which are revealed here. The first is the commonplace that you really get to know someone when you live with them. Very little can be concealed in the day-to-day reality of dwelling together at home. The apostle John tells us the

stupendous truth that by trusting Christ for salvation we begin the process of growing to know God himself in this way: **"In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you....Judas (not Iscariot) said to Him, 'Lord, what then has happened that You are going to disclose Yourself to us and not to the world?' Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him'"** (John 14:20, 22-23).

We immediately see that the experience of coming home to God is not automatically given to everyone. It is reserved for those who love God and keep his word. Why does Christ need to say this so clearly? Because there have always been those who associate themselves with the people of God, and even speak in favor of it, but who have never embraced love for God and obedience to his word. This has happened in every era of redemptive history. Make sure that you have moved past mere agreement with Christian thought or ethics. No one goes home to God without the faith which is animated by love and obedience.

After clearing that requirement away we can see the unthinkable promise being made to the believer. Christ speaks of what British author Charles Williams called coinherence, namely: Christ in the Father, we in Christ, and he in us. This is an example of the fathomless reality of our unity with God when we believe in him. We enter a mode of life where we are together implicitly, interpenetrating one another. This is hard to process, since we are finite and God is infinite, yet the clear meaning of the words remains. At the end of verse 23 it sounds more sensible where the Father and the Son promise to every believer: **"We will come to him and make Our abode with him."** Just as we grow to know people deeply with whom we dwell, we learn of God deeply as he comes to indwell us.

## GOD'S SELF-DISCLOSURE

The second aspect of the promise of knowing God in this passage is that God chooses to disclose himself to all who love and obey him: **"He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him"** (John 14:21). Self-disclosure, which means telling people who we really are, is normally a choice made by our most beloved people, typically those in our own home and few others. Most people are afraid to do it because the exposure makes us vulnerable to others if they are not well-intentioned. It is also a choice we are given about how we relate to others.

When we come home to God we discover that this human desire to be known at the deepest level and to know others the same way is satisfied by the God who delights to reveal himself. When the high priest demanded to know from Jesus what he had been teaching, he replied: **"I have spoken openly to the world; I always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together; and I spoke nothing in secret. Why do you question Me? Question those who have heard what I spoke to them; they know what I said"** (John 18:20-21). We also read about Christ: **"And He is the radiance of His [God's] glory and the exact representation of His nature..."** (Hebrews 1:3). God is not hiding from us--except to keep his holiness from slaying us!

I have followed the policy of self-disclosure in ministry. It makes me vulnerable to people who are looking for an opportunity to attack. But it is the model of Christ and the only way to enjoy the fellowship that God has planned for Christ's brothers and sisters! If we hide, we lose. There was no

hiding from one another in the Garden of Eden until the fall of man. I urge you to choose, as a regenerate person who has been freed from the fall, to know and be known. In God's house he leads the way by choosing the path of self-disclosure.

## KNOWING GOD BY LEARNING THE WORD OF GOD

We can learn a great deal about God from observing all the things which he has made, but such knowledge is deficient. It is vague and cannot save anyone. The third path to the knowledge of God in our text is by the words he has chosen to speak to mankind, as revealed in verses 24-26: "**He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine, but the Father's who sent Me. These things I have spoken to you while abiding with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you**" (John 14:24-26). Christ came to give us the truth--more than that, to be the Truth for us. He lived it, but he also gave a torrent of inspired words which accurately express what God want us to know about himself.

The word of God is the common possession of those who dwell in the house of God. It is the sole standard by which we know who God is and what he requires of us. Know this about yourself: if you think you love God but you willfully refuse to submit to the teaching of his word, you do not love God. You can use the same test to evaluate where others are in their faith. For example, Christ teaches us: "**A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another**" (John 13:34-35). Even the loosest Bible paraphrase gets this right! So when you and I lack concern for other believers or find ourselves tearing down other Christians, we need to remember that we are proving that we do not love God, at least not at that moment, neither do we fear him.

The exciting thing about learning God's word is that it opens to us theology proper, the queen of the sciences. We have the privilege of intellectually grasping the nature and attributes of God from the Bible, discussing them with others, working to understand better, and then seeking to live the truths we are discovering. I do not believe that meeting God face to face in heaven will end this process. He is infinite and we are finite, so we will always be able to grow in the wonderful knowledge of God through his word.

The Holy Spirit himself guides us into the truth, illuminates it, and reminds us of everything Christ said. It is a very common experience for me to sit down with my Bible and coffee in the morning to read God's word, and discover that my little plan to read a portion of Scripture has turned into a massive revelation of God. I find myself taking notes as fast as I can, and often these times become not only sermons or lessons, but entire series such as this one on the subject of Coming Home. My testimony is that if you will present God with a rested mind and a willingness to hear from him, you will be presented in return with more shining truth from God's word than your mind can hold. It is a great privilege and freedom to be able to be a self-feeder. We are not like caged animals who can only get the truth from the hand of a zoo keeper. We can roam the jungle and eat whatever and whenever we want. This is a great blessing of life in God's house.

## THE DIRECT TEACHING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

But the fourth privilege of the knowledge of God for the members of God's house is the promise that the Holy Spirit not only teaches and illuminates the word of God for us, he does more: "**But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things...**" (John 14:26). The words "all things" do not mean, for example, that the Holy Spirit will teach us brain surgery or how to speak Farsi. They mean that class is never out in the house of God. Every experience we have, every thought we think, will be used by the Spirit of God to help us know him better.

Often that knowledge impacts us directly. Some time ago, apart from any specific Bible passage, I had the insight that my personal goals are not worth a hill of beans in God's kingdom. In fact, they are intrinsically corrupted by sin. C. S. Lewis wrote his beloved wife, Joy, that although he wanted to love her with a perfect love, he could not. One of his poems begins: "All this is flashy rhetoric about loving you. /I never had a selfless thought since I was born." It hurts to think this way, but it is very freeing. Suddenly you and I, as believers in the God who is perfect, do not have to try to be perfect. Suddenly you and I do not have to have commendable and noble plans for achievement in life which others will applaud. This is a revelation of self and God which could only have been given by the Holy Spirit who teaches us all things.

We may also learn things we need to know in specific circumstances though a word of wisdom or knowledge, a prophecy, or just help getting something done which are not sure how to do. How many times have you breathed out the prayer: Lord, how am I ever going to do this? Since life is lived in the forward direction only, we need this every day. I urge you to embrace the idea that you do not have to be adequate for every challenge, because God is, and he will teach you by his Holy Spirit at the very moment you need him.

Every person who looked in Jack Sommersby's eyes as he greeted them after six long years of absence asked the same question, though no one said it out loud: *Do I know this man?* Even his wife! Why was it so important? That village was Sommersby's home. He was known there. He was an intrinsic part of the community, and his absence was keenly felt. For Jack, the plantation held his wife, son, dog, livelihood, servants, and history. They all desperately wanted to see Jack again, and he wanted to be home.

In the same way, your heavenly Father wants to be reunited with every one of his lost children. In your own heart he has placed a yearning for home as well. The home for which you yearn, to which every earthly home is merely a pointer, is God himself. The door to that home is the knowledge of God. The key that opens that door is faith evidenced by love for him and obedience to his word. He made you to want to know him and be known by him.

God has a word to the person who confesses his or her sins to him and receives the atonement for them which Jesus Christ achieved by his death on the cross: Welcome home! This is a home like no other you have ever known, and the personal knowledge of God is its preeminent characteristic. I urge you to dive into this knowledge! Drench yourself with the word of God by reading the Bible, open yourself to the teaching of the Holy Spirit, and then walk in his presence everywhere you go. This home travels with you!

[clip from *Sommersby* DVD, 0:07:30 to 0:11:00, *Sommersby\_comes\_home.avi*, 3:30 min.]