

# Knowing God: *How Can I Know God?*

1 John 1:1-10

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on September 8, 2013

## Introduction

- ❖ Most people you come in contact with today have an underlying confidence problem. I'm not talking about low self-esteem or a poor self-image. **I'm talking about a diminishing degree of confidence in what they believe, particularly when it comes to religion.** When it comes to claims of knowing God and knowing what he expects of us. This confidence problem is a conviction problem. The religious convictions of most people today are fairly weak.
  - Now the reason is not a mystery. It's obvious that we operate in a cultural environment that readily challenges and criticizes any presumption of having solid confidence in any truth claim, much less religious ones. This is a relativistic age. You have your truth; I have my truth; and neither of us can be certain we have *the* truth. We live in an age of uncertainty. I'm sure you can think of friends or co-workers or classmates who fit the bill, who don't really know what they believe about God, who are fairly agnostic.
  
- ❖ *But what about us Christians?* We go to church. We worship Jesus. We read our Bibles. We don't have a confidence problem, do we? It's true that many of us are pretty confident in what we believe. Especially those of us who grew up in Christian homes and churches. We've grown up in an environment surrounded by Christians. It was a bubble, and living within it, we rarely doubted.
  - But once we're forced to leave that bubble – like when you go off to college or move to a new city (as some of you recently experienced) – you're likely to enter an environment that is religiously diverse. Especially in an urban context like Houston, which was recently noted as the most ethnically diverse city in America due to the huge influx of immigration.
  
- ❖ So if you work in downtown or the medical center, if you're on the campus of UH or Rice, you're most likely rubbing shoulders with a Buddhist in the workplace or a Muslim in the dorm, or an atheist in a study group. Your kid plays with a Hindu friend who lives down the street. You know the family. You've had them over dinner. They're good people.
  - **Now once you get to know these individuals on a personal level, that's when the confidence problem becomes real for even devout Christians.** Once you step out of that bubble and make an effort to know someone of another faith well enough, you'll hit a point where you start to feel this uneasy tension between the genuineness of their friendship and the falseness of their belief system.
  
- ❖ These people are real nice. We share a lot of values and common interests. And yet they're view of God and Jesus stands in direct contrast to my own. **Am I prepared to say, "Yes this person is real friendly, but his beliefs about God are not real?"**
  - Do you have the confidence to say that this co-worker's rival belief system (which she holds as firmly as you hold yours) is ultimately leading her down a path of destruction? Are you confident that there is only one true God who has been made known through a man named Jesus, and are you confident that you know him?

- ❖ Because, in a sense, you're saying that you are more in tune with the truth than the billions of right-minded, thinking people on this planet who believe differently about Jesus. Are you sure about that? Friends, if we're honest, there are times when you and I have quietly (and uneasily) wondered to ourselves: *Do I really have it right? Do I really know God?*
  - So whether you're an agnostic, who would readily admit you're not confident in Christian truth claims about God, or you're a Christian who has these lingering doubts – you'll have to deal with this question: ***How can I know God and can I know him for sure? Can I know him with certainty?*** That's our question today.

### The Cultural Backdrop of 1 John

- ❖ As we begin a new series through the letter of 1 John, I want you to know that there is nothing new under the sun. If you think we have it hard today living in an age of uncertainty with so much skepticism towards Christian truth claims, you'll be surprised to learn that the Apostle John wrote into a culture much like our own.
  - **The cultural backdrop of this letter is filled with uncertainty, with competing claims and rival viewpoints about God and Jesus.** I point this out because it's comforting to know that this kind of confidence problem is addressed in Scripture.
- ❖ One of the more pernicious worldviews that took root in John's day (and grew to become a serious challenge to Christianity) was **Gnosticism**. The Gnostics had a dualistic view of reality where the physical world was considered evil while the spiritual realm was good.
  - You're body is seen as a prison for the soul. And salvation for a Gnostic is about escaping physicality and all its limitations and operating solely on a spiritual plane. *Now how does that happen?* Through knowledge – secret, esoteric knowledge. That's where Gnosticism gets its name. *Gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge.
    - Again there's a downplaying of the physical and an emphasis on redeeming the mind. Free the mind with this secret knowledge and you free the soul.
- ❖ **Now when Gnostic thought began to infiltrate the early church, there arose people in the church who began to challenge core doctrines like the Incarnation.** That's understandable if you believe the body is bad. If the goal is to escape our flesh, then why would God do the reverse and willingly take on flesh?
  - So false teachers were claiming that Jesus was never a real human. He just appeared that way. It was all smoke and mirrors. Sleight of hand. He didn't have a real body.
- ❖ It sounds silly but that's what Gnostics believed. That's what they were actually teaching. Later in **chapter 4:2**, John has to warn of those out there denying that Jesus came in the flesh. He says the same thing in **2 John 7**, "*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.*"
  - John wasn't crying wolf. There were plenty who believed this stuff to the point that it split the church. Listen to what he writes in **chapter 2:19**, "*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.*"

- ❖ Now all of this was shaking the confidence of believers. “*What if the Gnostics are right? What if their view of Jesus is correct, and they have some sort of secret knowledge from him? I don’t want to miss out.*”
  - So John is writing to Christians living in uncertain times like ours. And he’s saying to them (and to us), “*I know your confidence in the truth has been shaken. I know your rubbing shoulders with people who hold to competing truth claims about God, Jesus, and salvation. I know many of them are nice people. You used to be in the same church with some of them. But they’ve departed from the faith and that’s shaken your confidence. I know all this, and that’s why I’m writing to you.*”
- ❖ What I love about John, in his Gospel and letters, is that he’s very direct with his intentions for writing. He states it in a number of places (1:4; 2:1, 21, 26). So in **chapter 5:13** we read, “*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*”
  - So he’s writing to Christians – those who believe in the Son of God so we already have the gift of eternal life (Jn 3:16) – but he writes so that we may *know* we have it. He wants to give assurance. **He wants us to know that not only is God knowable but that we do know him because we know his Son Jesus Christ.**
    - In our passage, John mentions three solid planks upon which we can build up our confidence in the claims of Christianity: 1) The fact of the Incarnation, 2) The testimony of the eyewitnesses, and 3) The message of the Son.

### The Fact of the Incarnation

- ❖ So let’s ask again our big question: ***How can I know God and can I know him with certainty?*** Considering the way John describes God in our passage, I can see why you may doubt it’s possible. Look at **v5**. There John says the message he heard and that he proclaims is this: *God is light.*
  - Now when you hear that maybe you picture God with a radiant glow around him or you think of a sunrise beaming through the clouds. God is light. How nice.
- ❖ But the biblical imagery is far different! When biblical characters meet God, they’re confronted with a terrifying, paralyzing, blinding light. They either fall on their face as if dead, or they’re left blind and groping around (cf. Acts 9:3-9).
  - **1 Timothy 6:16** says God is he “*who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.*” John says the same in this letter in **chapter 4:12**. He says “*No one has ever seen God*” – this God who is light. Just as you can’t look at the sun, you can’t look at God in his radiant, white-hot holiness. You’d go blind.
- ❖ That’s a problem. ***If this God dwells in unapproachable light, if no one has ever seen him or can see him, then how in the world can we ever know him?*** John answers by pointing to the fact of the Incarnation. Listen to what he says in chapter 1 of his Gospel, “*No one has ever seen God.*” Okay he’s made that abundantly clear, but listen to what he says next, “*the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.*” (Jn 1:18)

- So yes, God is light – blinding light. No one has ever seen him (he’s invisible), yet the one who is at God the Father’s side has made him known (made him visible). *What are we talking about?* We’re talking about the Incarnation of God the Son.
  
- ❖ John says more or less the same at the start of his letter. Look at vv1-2, “<sup>1</sup>*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—<sup>2</sup>the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us.*”
  - As he introduces the subject of his letter, John says it's about, “*that which was from the beginning.*” He starts off vague and just says in v2 he’s talking about “*the life*” or “*the eternal life*”, but it quickly becomes apparent that John is talking about a person.
    - He says this “*life*” was “*with the Father (like at his side) and was made manifest to us*”. So John's not here to proclaim some impersonal quality of life. **He’s here to proclaim the Life Incarnate.** He’s here to talk about Jesus.
  
- ❖ When I see those words, “*from the beginning*”, I’m reminded of how John introduces Jesus in his Gospel. “<sup>1</sup>*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . <sup>14</sup>And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*” (Jn 1:1, 14)
  - In other words, you can't see the unmediated glory of the Triune God, but if God the Son (God the Word/Life) becomes flesh, then you can see his glory. **None of us can know God unless he wills to make himself known, and that's what happened in the Incarnation.** That which is eternal and preexists creation made himself temporal and entered creation. That which is invisible (and dwells in unapproachable light) made himself visible. That which is spiritual became physical. God became man.
  
- ❖ This is what sets Christianity apart. **In some religions, God is viewed as utterly other. He's totally transcendent.** So they say the only way you can know him is to rely on their prophets who have these ecstatic visions of being transposed to spiritual realms to receive heavenly visions. So God is knowable but only through mystical, esoteric knowledge and experience.
  - **Or you have pantheistic religions on the other end of the spectrum that view God as just like us. He's totally immanent.** In fact, he's in you. He's in everything. So to know God you just have to know yourself.
    - **Or you have those who reject theism altogether and embrace scientism.** They say there likely isn't a God, but even if there is we can't truly know him because you can't empirically study God. You can't perceive him or experience him with any of the five senses.
  
- ❖ But here you have Christianity saying, yes, God is transcendent. He is otherworldly. He's not like us. Yet through the Incarnation he became like us. He entered our world. So yes he's also immanent. And you want empirical proof of God? John says, “Guess what? I’ve heard him. I’ve seen him with my eyes. I’ve looked upon his face. I’ve touched him with my hands.”

- God's real. God's knowable. And for a short time, he was very much perceivable by our senses. He took on flesh, entered human history, and dwelt among us.

### The Testimony of the Eyewitnesses

- ❖ But I know what you're thinking. You might grant me the fact of the Incarnation, but what does it matter to you today? If it did happen, it happened 2000 years ago. Jesus is not dwelling among us today. *So how can I know God? I don't have the privilege, like John or the other apostles, of actually seeing, hearing, or touching God Incarnate.*
  - Well neither did those to whom John was writing. By the time John wrote 1 John, there were very few surviving witnesses of Jesus in the church. So John doesn't expect his readers to have experienced Jesus like he has. And yet he fully expects, through his letter, to help them know that they know God and have his eternal life.
- ❖ Imagine someone told you they were recently jogging in Memorial Park when the strangest thing happened. Suddenly the clouds parted and a UFO appeared in the sky. It landed right on the trail and little green alien stepped out of the ship, introduced themselves, shook your friends hand, and then took off back into outer space.
  - Now I'd be highly skeptical. **But if I wanted to verify such a fanciful claim, what would I do? I'd look for eyewitnesses.** I'd ask if there was anyone else jogging with this friend, anyone else on the trail that morning who saw the same thing.
    - Taken at face value, I'm not inclined to believe such things. But if twelve eyewitnesses came forth and testified to the same thing, that would get me thinking. And if 500 credible eyewitnesses said they also saw, heard, and touched little green aliens, I'd have to rethink my belief system on aliens.
- ❖ Now I realize that to many people the Christian claims of the Incarnation or the Resurrection sound as fanciful as a UFO landing in Memorial Park. God becoming man? A man rising from the dead? Seriously, you want me to believe that?
  - But what if I told you there were eyewitnesses? Twelve in fact. Actually more than 500 (cf. 1 Cor 15:6). They saw, heard, and touched Jesus before and after his death and resurrection.
- ❖ **And what if I told you one of Jesus' closest companions wrote a book about his eyewitness experience?** This man reclined next to Jesus at his Last Supper and heard Jesus predict his impending death (Jn 13:23). This man stood at the foot of the cross as Jesus hung there, as Jesus entrusted his mother into this man's care (Jn 19:26-27). And along with the Apostle Peter, this man witnessed the empty tomb that first Easter morning (Jn 2:2-10), and he saw, spoke to, and ate breakfast with the Risen Lord on the shore of Galilee (Jn 21:7, 20).
  - And what if I told you this same man wrote a letter pleading with his readers to believe his message, to trust its veracity, because he speaks out of firsthand, eyewitness experience?

- ❖ **But the skeptic in us cries out, “What if this man was lying?”** What if all the eyewitnesses were lying? How can we know they didn’t conspire together to concoct this fanciful story?
  - Let’s just say, if the apostles were trying to concoct a story about Jesus to seduce gullible readers, they did a horrible job. If you’re trying to win over Greeks, you don’t start your story with an Incarnation. The concept makes no sense to them. In fact, it’s offensive to Gnostic or Platonic thought. If you were concocting a story, you probably *would* teach that Jesus didn’t come in the flesh, that he only appeared human.
    - And if you’re trying to win over Jews, you’ve also got the wrong strategy because Jews are strict monotheists. To call a fellow man “God in the flesh” would be blasphemous. They’ll stone you for that. In fact they did.
  
- ❖ **Why would John, himself being a devout Jew, insist on proclaiming the fact of the Incarnation when it’s such a stumbling block to believe?** It makes no sense unless, of course, he’s simply testifying to that which he heard with his ears, saw with his eyes, and touched with his hands.
  - Friends, when a man claims to be one with God (Jn 10:30), to be able to set you free from sin (Jn 8:36), to be the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6), and this man accepts worship from countless people who fall at his feet, then he needs to be investigated. So where do you turn? To the eyewitnesses.
  
- ❖ And the eyewitnesses are saying they have a message – a word of life – which they proclaim, *"so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."* (v3)
  - In other words, if you really want to know God, if you want to share fellowship with the Father and the Son and subsequently share fellowship with the communion of saints, then receive their word – this message of the eyewitnesses.

### **The Message of the Son**

- ❖ Well what's their message? Look at v5 again. John says, *"This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you."* So John’s message is the message he received from Jesus, from God the Son.
  - Now before we read that message, let me ask you, ***“If you could summarize the essence of Jesus’ message, what would it be?”*** I think, in our culture today, if you were to ask the average person on the street, they would say, “Love your neighbor” or perhaps “God is love”. That’s Jesus’ message.
    - But according to John, a man who lived life with Jesus, who sat under his teaching for over three years, the essence of Jesus’ message is, *“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”*
  
- ❖ So how do you know if someone shares fellowship with God? How can you test your own claim to personally know God? Answer: **Measure your life against Jesus’ message.**

- If you're wondering if you can know God with certainty, if you're wondering if you are truly in fellowship with him, then ask yourself, "***Does my life, my walk, my behavior, reflect that God is light?***"
  
- ❖ This is demonstrated negatively in v6, v8 and v10 and positively in v7 and v9. Let's look at v6 first. "*If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.*"
  - So John first deals with those who claim to know God, to have fellowship with him, and yet their lives scream another message. **If you're walking in darkness, John is saying you're a liar to claim fellowship with God.** What fellowship does light have with darkness? (2 Cor 6:14) You can't be in fellowship with light and in fellowship with darkness at the same time.
  
- ❖ ***Do you want to know the best way to know if you're walking in darkness versus in the light?*** Ask yourself: Are there any sins in my life that I'm trying to hide? Is there any sin that I'm unwilling to openly confess?
  - It's usually something I know deep down I shouldn't be doing, which makes it hard tell people, even those closest to me. Now I can try to justify my silence by assuming my friends will be hypercritical if I said something, but really it's not them. It's me. I'm in sin and I'm ashamed of the light. I prefer the darkness.
    - And what's worse than hiding your sin is denying it even exists. Look at v8, "*If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.*" And v10 says something similar, "*If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*"
  
- ❖ So this is the test: When it comes down to it, if I'm trying to hide in darkness, if I go on walking in it – or worse if I were to go so far as to deny my sin, to deny the darkness in me – then not only am I a deceiver, I'm self-deceived. I really don't know God.
  
- ❖ This is the take home lesson: **When someone is dealing with a confidence problem in the truth, when they've got deep doubts and have little assurance, it's wise to ask if we're just dealing with an intellectual problem or is this really a moral problem?**
  - If you're helping a friend work through his/her doubts about whether they know God or if he even exists, it would be wise to probe deeper to see if perhaps at the root you're not dealing with a thinker who's just not convinced but rather a sinner who's afraid of the light and prefers to hide in darkness.
  
- ❖ Or perhaps that's a question you need to ask yourself. **Sometimes we doubt God because it would be easier on our consciences if God didn't exist or if at least he wasn't the God of holy, pure light who can't fellowship with darkness – our darkness in particular.**

- ❖ But here's the good news for doubters and sinners. Look at what v7 says, "*But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*"
  - **Friends, if we come to the light of God, if we walk in it, we can be sure we have fellowship with God and with one another.** Why? Because of the blood of Jesus his Son who cleanses us from all sin.
  
- ❖ In v9 it says, "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*" This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible because it contains this amazing promise from God. If we refuse to hide any longer in darkness and confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us and purify us.
  - He's faithful to this promise. You never ever have to worry about God refusing to forgive the one who confesses his/her sin. That's because he's just in keeping this promise; for he doesn't forgive us by simply sweeping our sins under the rug. God publicly punished our sins on the cross where his Son's blood was shed in our place.
  
- ❖ **So if there is a moral element to your uncertainty of Christian truth claims, then before you go to books or to friends for answers – go to God in confession.** Confess your sins and ask him to search your heart to reveal any darkness you may have deceived yourself into overlooking. He is faithful and just to forgive and to cleanse.
  - Friends, the only way you and I can know God is because he has made himself known, and at great cost to himself he has made fellowship with sinners – which was an impossibility – into a beautiful reality.