

## Knowing God

by Rev. Robert Griffith

The seventeenth chapter of John's gospel contains one of the most beautiful prayers in the Bible and it is prayed by Jesus Himself, just before He is arrested and executed by the very people He came to save. For three long years, day and night, Jesus did exactly what He saw the Father doing, He spoke the words the Father gave Him to speak, and then, as His earthly mission was about to come to a bloody, brutal and incomprehensible end, He poured out His heart to His Father and spoke these amazing, insightful, powerful words. Let's read them all:

*"... Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.*

*I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours.*

*All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.*

*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

*Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them." ( John 17 )*

I have read this prayer hundreds of times and preached from it on many occasions. However, when I looked at this amazing passage again last week, verse 3 just stopped me in my tracks: ***"This is eternal life: that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."***

This is the only place I know of where Jesus lays down a straightforward definition of eternal life. He gets asked about it a lot; He references it many times, but here Jesus gives us a crystal clear definition of eternal life and it's as simple as it is confronting. It's confronting because it's radically different to what most Christians in the modern world think of when we hear the term 'eternal life.'

For many of us, 'eternal life' is wrongly understood as everlasting life. That's because whenever 'eternity' is mentioned, we immediately think of life beyond the grave. Eternity is where we will be after we die. So eternal life has been turned into a phrase that simply means going to a good place when you die (if you have been good) or going to a bad place when you die (if you have been bad). For some reason we have made it part of a punishment/reward system or a market exchange and so we want to know exactly how much this 'eternal life' will cost.

It's as though John 17:3 has been ripped out of our Bibles all together! But here it is – and there can be no clearer language than this one sentence – no clearer definition: *"This is eternal life: that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."*

Eternal life is a relationship. Eternal life is not something that can be purchased with the currency of our behaviour or our confession, repentance, obedience or piety. Eternal life is not the transactional outcome of praying 'the sinner's prayer,' or reciting a catechism. Nor will you be rewarded with eternal life by adopting a set of behavioural practices that retroactively prove you 'got saved' some time in the past. Eternal life cannot be bought, sold, traded or exchanged for anything because it is not a market-based product.

**Eternal life is not a reward for knowing God, eternal life is knowing God.** When we know God, our life is eternal and we truly live and encounter the world around us as the masterpiece of a Creator who loves us - instead of a randomly thrown together system that nobody watches or cares about. Knowing God, changes everything!

Arthur Stace is one of the more remarkable men in the rich tapestry that makes up the story of the city of Sydney. Born in 1885, Arthur was a down and out drunk – a methylated spirits drinker who was destitute, roaming the streets of Sydney in the 1920's with no fixed place of abode. His eventual recovery and coming to faith in Christ, makes for a fascinating story.

Arthur Stace had the odds well and truly stacked against him from the beginning being born into an alcoholic family, and as a boy forced to steal and eat food scraps from garbage bins to survive. He became a ward of the state, an alcoholic and was then sent to jail at 15 years of age.

In 1916 he enlisted as a soldier in the First World War, but following his discharge in 1919 returned to his alcoholic ways around the streets of Sydney. He became totally destitute, a hopeless drunk who would attend the occasional church service, mostly to get the free meal put on by the church afterwards.

But a major change occurred one evening in 1932 when he heard a sermon by the evangelist John Ridley who spoke about eternity to his congregation. Ridley challenged them with the words, *"Eternity, eternity, I wish that I could shout that word to everyone on the streets of Sydney. I long for each of you to embrace eternity!"*

At that very moment Arthur Stace received what he described as a “powerful calling from the Lord,” to take the message of eternity out onto the streets of Sydney - not by shouting it, as that preacher had asked – but by writing it. And from that point on he put the bottle down and became sober.

For the next 35 years Arthur Stace would arise early and visit various locations around the city, writing in chalk the word “Eternity” in an immaculate copperplate style. He wrote on footpaths, seats, billboards and doorways – in fact any flat, smooth surface that would take chalk – he would write the word Eternity.

Arthur believed that he was doing the work of the Lord, he dressed only in his best outfits for these expeditions – usually a threadbare suit, battered felt hat, collar and tie – a diminutive shadowy figure moving around in the early morning light of Sydney. The regular appearance of this graffiti all around town aroused immense curiosity amongst Sydneysiders. Who was writing this and what did it mean? Then one day the mystery was solved. Stace was seen by the Reverend Lisle Thomson writing the word on a footpath and notified a newspaper reporter.

His story eventually appeared in the Sydney Sunday Telegraph in June 1956 – much to the delight of the Sydney public. Stace, then dubbed ‘*Mr Eternity*’ eventually died in 1967 at the age of 82. It’s estimated that he wrote ‘Eternity’ more than 500,000 times throughout his unique ministry, and his incredible work was celebrated early on New Year’s Day in 2000 when the word ‘Eternity’ appeared in a fireworks display on the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Arthur Stace was not waiting for eternity. He was embracing eternity - every day for those 35 years.

If John 17:3 is the definition of eternal life, then it must shape how we think and talk about what salvation is and how to receive it. We need to ask God here and now to remove from our minds, once and for all, any concept of eternity being a future destination.

Eternity is another word for the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven and it’s not in the future or the past or the present. The Kingdom of Heaven has no beginning, end or middle. The Kingdom of heaven is the spiritual realm in which God exists. The Kingdom of heaven is that reality in which the King, Jesus Christ, rules and reigns and manifests His presence, His power and His mission.

So ‘eternal life’ is not the life after this life. Eternal life is the life you experience, enjoy, celebrate and embrace right now when you know God, through Jesus Christ. You cannot *know God* in the earthly, finite kingdom of this world. You can only know God in God’s world, the Spiritual Kingdom of God into which we are born again - the Kingdom of heaven. That is where you know God, experience God, grow close to God and are empowered by God to impact this earthly kingdom *for* God.

All of this happens in Christ, through Christ and for Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus makes it possible for us to approach God in His kingdom without guilt, without shame. Jesus removed the need for us to wear masks and lie to ourselves or pretend to be holy and righteous when we are actually wretched and lost. *This* is the gospel – *this* is the good news! How do we respond? We simply, but sincerely say, “*Thank You Jesus. I accept Your spotless life as my own, I accept Your sacrificial death as my own, I embrace Your victory and resurrection as my own and I now embrace eternal life, with You in me and I in You.*”

Now that is not some magical ‘sinners prayer’ which triggers a vending machine in heaven to spit out an ‘eternal life’ token. That is a simple prayer of thanks which acknowledges that knowing God in all His fullness as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is the only thing that matters to you and the whole reason you were created.

If we are pursuing something else as our god, whether it's our career, our personal comfort, an addiction, or even a really good cause, then we're not going to get very far in knowing God. But let me sharpen the sword of God's Word here and go one step further.

I believe the enemy of God has brought a veil of deception down across God's people for centuries now and that veil is religion. What is religion? Religion is what Jesus came to dismantle, disown and destroy. Religion is what has blinded millions of sincere believers and billions of unbelievers to the powerful truth of John 17:3. Religion is what has caused successive generations of people to believe the lie which suggests that carrying out the work of God is proof that we actually know God.

There are millions of people doing an amazing job across this nation right now supporting the weak, healing the sick, comforting the lonely, feeding the hungry, fighting for the powerless ... all wonderful stuff which actually flows from the heart of their creator God ... but I guarantee that most of those people have not met God personally. They do not *know* God. They have not encountered eternity. They have not embraced eternal life.

Eternal life is a relationship and you get to see eternity now, when you know God personally and intimately. Just look at the language Jesus uses in this prayer. It is so intimate that it almost sounds offensive to suggest that we could be and should be this close to God and know Him this intimately.

In Jesus' name, listen to what God is saying to us and the Church today. Jesus pleads with His Father, *"... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me."*

Now can you even imagine the kind of relationship Jesus had with His heavenly Father? We don't have the capacity to understand how close, how intimate, how supernatural and empowering that relationship was when Jesus walked this earth as a human. But in our wildest imagination we would assume it was pretty amazing. Well Jesus prayed that you and I and every last man, woman and child on this planet would experience that same relationship.

He prayed that we would be brought into the Trinity; brought into the intimacy between the Father, Son and Spirit; brought into the Throne Room – the Holy of Holies; brought into the very heart of God. Is that even possible? Could we ever truly know God like Jesus knew His Father? Can that be our experience this side of the grave, when we are bound by our finite minds and earthly bodies? Of course it's possible! A bearded, sandaled carpenter from Nazareth proved it was possible a very long time ago – and why would Jesus pray for something which God did not desire or was not able to give or had not already given to mankind, in Jesus.

We must remember that Jesus prayed this prayer *as a man* – as a human being who had just proven over His whole life on earth that knowing God as a human is not only possible, it is how we were all meant to live from the beginning – in a close, intimate relationship with God.

Now stay with me here friends - because you are about to hear the most important words ever spoken to the people of God – to the disciples of Christ and to the Church which bears His name. If you want to know why I am standing here; why I do what I do; why I accepted Christ's call to join Him in His mission on earth; if you want to know why God still allows you to walk this earth and hasn't taken you home and wound up this wayward planet, then listen, as Jesus tells us why we are *all* here. In verse 21 of John 17 Jesus prays:

*" ... just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us **so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**"*

Then, just in case His Father didn't hear the first time (or, more likely because we didn't get it now), Jesus says it again in the next two verses:

*"I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. **Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.**"*

Do we want the world to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God? Do we want His Kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven? Do we really want Jesus to build His Church here in this very place – a Church so strong that it storms the gates of the hell so many people are living in right now and sets all the captives free? Do we want to embrace eternity now and embrace and experience now the eternal life Jesus died to give us? Do we want our loved ones and friends and neighbours and work colleagues and community leaders to believe that God is real and Jesus is alive and this world doesn't have to spin out of control like it is?

Is that what we really want? None of us deserve to be part of Christ's church if we don't answer yes! Well this is eternal life: that we may know the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent. When you and I decide that knowing God, in Christ, is the most important thing in our life – God will do all the rest. He is just waiting to discern the same spirit in us as He saw in the Apostle Paul when he said:

*"... I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ ..."* (Philippians 3:8-10)

It was that same passion in Paul which drove him to write to the Ephesian congregations:

*"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better."* (Ephesians 1:17)

That is why the most common mission statement of Churches across the world is still: *"To know Christ and to make Him known."* Brothers and sisters, the promise of John 17 is that if we truly know Christ – He will make Himself known – in us and through us. Evangelism is the natural outflow of a healthy Church and a healthy Church is nothing other than a gathering of people who truly know the One in whose name they gather.

Then we will Acts 4:13 where Peter and John were arrested and dragged before the most powerful religious and political council in the land – the Sanhedrin. These were the very people who had just executed Jesus and yet look what happened:

*"When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realised that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus."*

Then they just let them go!

When you have been with Jesus, when you truly know our God, in Christ, the world will notice; the authorities will notice; your unbelieving family members and friends will notice; because *this* is eternal life: that we may know the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent - and eternal life is what everyone on this planet is programmed by God to seek, to long for and be drawn to.

It is not too simplistic to say that knowing God is our only true purpose here and the only reason we gather like this or do all the wonderful things we do. Knowing God and leading others into a relationship with God should be our single highest priority. Everything else - all our ministries, programs and activities must flow from and find their meaning in that one priority.

*That* is the mission of Christ and that mission has a Church and *that* is the Church which Jesus is building. Everything else comes second in the eternal kingdom where Christ is King and Lord.

That's why Jesus said: *"This is eternal life: that they may know You the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."*