

IRWYN L. INCE JR.

FOREWORD BY TIMOTHY KELLER

THE BEAUTIFUL COMMUNITY



UNITY, DIVERSITY,
AND THE CHURCH
AT ITS BEST



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Beautiful Community* by Irwyn L. Ince Jr.
Copyright © 2020 by Irwyn L. Ince Jr.
Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com.



THE HOLY AND BEAUTIFUL HABITATION

Our Relational God

*Look down from heaven and see,
from your holy and beautiful habitation.*

ISAIAH 63:15

Shortly after joining All Saints Church, Joyce was asked to serve on a Mercy and Justice ministry board for the city. At first glance, it sounded like a good development. She was a new member, there was a ministry need at the church, and the leadership asked her to serve in a leadership position right away. But what began with positive intentions quickly became offensive to Joyce.

She explained that being Black and growing up in a predominately white neighborhood enabled her to understand the dynamics of being a minority in a majority setting. Even still she initially felt unable to connect deeply with the non-Black members of All Saints Church. When she was asked to serve on the board, she said it made her feel the way she felt as a child—something she had never been able to articulate. She described this experience as making her feel as somewhat of a token.

“I was immediately asked to be on the board. And some people might be like, ‘Oh, that’s really great.’ But they didn’t know me. They didn’t know my character. They don’t know who I am. They just know that I’m Black and I’m a female.” Joyce explained that the church’s leadership viewed her as a good fit to serve on the board because of her master’s level education. “I felt like I was chosen to participate in something that is really important for reasons that do not show you who I am as a person.”

In other words, she felt as though she was valued more for the role she could play than for who she was as a human being. Joyce wanted to be known, not commodified. This is a shared human desire, wanting to be known. As Charles Taylor writes, “The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame.” We know that we appear before others and, therefore, we have an innate desire to be known by those before whom we appear in a way that communicates respect. And we need that respect to be on our terms, not solely on terms imposed upon us by others.

This is the case with human relationships, but, amazingly, the God of all creation wants to be known as well. Consider our sinfulness, our imperfections, and the ways we hide those shortcomings from others. It ought to boggle our minds that the perfect and holy God who sees everything wants to be known by us. Not in a creaturely way, as though he would lack something if he remained unknown. Rather, he wants us to know him for our delight. Joyce realized that the leadership at All Saints required more than information about her—she’s Black, she’s a woman, she’s married, she has a master’s degree—to truly know her. So it is with God. To know God is not simply to possess facts about him. We know God as those who stand before him, as we submit to him. We are in fellowship with the living God as he teaches us about both himself

and ourselves. Esther Lightcap Meek notes well that “it is not the knower who is in the driver’s seat, but rather the yet-to-be-discovered reality.” God is in the driver’s seat when it comes to making himself known to us.

What made Joyce feel like a token was the lack of relationship.

It wasn’t a fact or information problem; it was an in-

timacy problem. In other words, knowing is

covenantal. Knowing God as those who

stand before him, who submit to him,

and who are in fellowship with him is to

say that we know him as our covenant

Lord. For God to be in the driver’s seat

means that he sets the conditions and

standards of our relationship with him. Be-

cause he is in control, we don’t get to to-

kenize him. “Rather than taking him for

granted, as we do with impersonal things and

forces, we must always take his concerns into account, responding

to him in repentance, love, thanksgiving, worship.” Of course, the

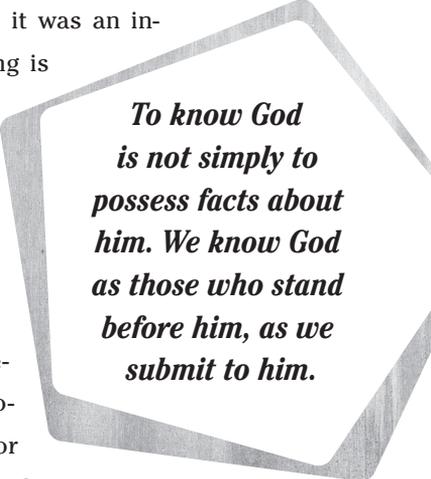
problem is that we do not always take God’s concerns into account.

We do not always respond to him in repentance, love, thanksgiving,

and worship. We regularly take God for granted through unbelief and

willful ignoring of his concerns.

Joyce’s dilemma is actually an apt description of the human problem concerning God. The heart of humanity’s problem is the one described in Genesis 3—a loss of intimate relationship with God and one another. In the Garden of Eden, nothing hindered our vertical or horizontal relationships. Indeed, the last verse of Genesis 2 is a portrait of intimacy: “And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (2:25). Everything was exposed to everyone. Every aspect of the relationship between God and humanity shone in the light. And it was beautiful. Try to grasp the magnitude of the moment



***To know God
is not simply to
possess facts about
him. We know God
as those who stand
before him, as we
submit to him.***

when sin entered the picture. Humanity's first impulse was to hide from the presence of the Lord God (Genesis 3:8). Biblical scholars have rightly pointed out that the death sin brought into the world was threefold. It was physical; we became subject to decay. It was judicial; we lost our innocence and became guilty before God. And it was spiritual; we lost intimacy and fellowship with God. We have been trying to hide ever since. But God was not and is not content to let us continue deceiving ourselves into thinking that our efforts at camouflage actually work. A central facet of the Bible is God's desire and commitment for us to know him as Lord.

A FELLOWSHIP OF KNOWING

In Isaiah 63:15 the prophet requests that the Lord look down from his holy and beautiful habitation and see his people's condition. He confesses, "You are our Father," while lamenting, "Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us" (v. 16). The people have strayed far from the faith of their fathers, so much so that their fathers would neither recognize nor acknowledge them. Yet Isaiah's plea relies not on being acknowledged by their fathers, but on the fact that he knows God as Father. You see, God has disclosed himself and this is a gift. It has always been a gift and as fallen creatures, our knowing God is a gift of his grace.

God's dwelling, heaven, is envisioned as a holy and beautiful habitation. The imagery of a beautiful or glorious habitation indicates knowing God as Lord requires a covenant relationship with him. Who are those who know that God's dwelling place is a holy and beautiful house? Those whom God has graciously brought out of darkness and into his marvelous light that they might see his beauty. Alec Motyer describes this verse as being addressed to the Lord in the fulness of his divine nature: "The prayer is addressed to the Lord in the fulness of the divine nature, his transcendence (*heaven*), dignity ('house'), 'holiness' and beautiful or winsome glory."

God's divine nature connects intimately to real life. What is your vision of God? Do you envision radiance, glory, and beauty? God brings us into relationship with him so that we will know him as our glorious Lord who dwells in beauty. We do not have time for a thorough biblical exploration of that wonderful truth in this work, but we will take a brief look at a few key texts to help us see it, beginning with God's famous address to the people of Israel.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered. "And God spoke all these words, saying, 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me'" (Exodus 20:1-3).

These words form the preamble to the constitution of the newly formed nation of Israel and the first of the Ten Commandments. It is basically saying to them "Signed, sealed, delivered, you're mine." This is so that their life in response to God will be "Signed, sealed, delivered, we're yours."

In the preamble God identifies himself by name: Yahweh, the Lord. He had previously identified himself by name to Moses back in Exodus 3:14 at the burning bush. Now he directly reveals himself by name in the hearing of the people. However, what we ought to find striking about this self-identification is how personal it is. He does not simply say, "I am the Lord God." He declares, "I am the Lord, *your* God." The assembly of people gathered at Mount Sinai have something the other nations do not have. God identifies himself with his people. If any of us is able to say to God, "Signed, sealed, delivered, I'm yours," it is only because God has said it of us first. Professor and theologian John Frame remarks, "This expression in effect makes Israel part of God's own name. Yahweh is 'Yahweh thy God,' Yahweh the God of Israel. How remarkable it is that the Lord of glory so profoundly identifies himself with his sinful people!"

Who has earned the right for God to speak to them with such a term of relational intimacy? The answer is no one. What is more, no one is

able to claim this relational intimacy *with* God apart *from* God declaring it. In other words, there's a difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing God. Knowing God always includes

loving fellowship initiated by him toward us. It is sheer grace. There is a day coming when the whole

earth will be full of this kind of knowledge of the Lord (Isaiah 11:9; Habakkuk 2:14).

In other words, there's a difference between knowing that there is a God and knowing God. Knowing God always includes loving fellowship initiated by him toward us. It is sheer grace.

Knowing the Lord. Our second passage picks up the promise of loving, intimate fellowship with God and moves it further along.

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of

Israel and the house of Judah, not

like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)

In Joshua 24 we find Joshua leading the people of Israel in a covenant renewal ceremony. The Lord had fulfilled his promise to deliver them from slavery in Egypt and bring them into a land flowing with

milk and honey. Of all the good things that the Lord promised, not one of them had failed (Joshua 23:14). As we saw in the preamble to the Ten Commandments, the Lord's usual pattern is to demonstrate his love for us through his saving power then call his people to obedience. Now that the people have arrived in the Promised Land, their covenant relationship is renewed. After laying out all that the Lord had done for them, Joshua clearly states the issue: "Choose this day whom you will serve. If it is the gods who your fathers served at the edge of the river, or if it is the gods of the Amorites whose land you are dwelling in. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15, my translation). The people respond emphatically. "Far be it from us that we should abandon the Lord to serve other gods . . . We also, we will serve the Lord, for he is our God" (24:16, 18b, my translation). Joshua then tells them about the problem with their affirmation. "You will not be able to serve the Lord because he is a holy God. He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your transgressions and your sins. For you will forsake the Lord and you will serve gods of foreigners. And he will turn, and he will treat you badly, and he will consume you. After that he will do good to you" (24:19-20, author's translation).

Joshua's prediction came to pass. The people turned out to be covenant breakers instead of covenant keepers. By the time we reach Jeremiah's day, the consequences of the peoples' rejection of their Lord had begun coming to fruition. This rips at Jeremiah's heart, bringing him to tears (Jeremiah 9:1-3). He is the prophet appointed by the Lord to usher the nation of Judah into exile. The Lord sent him to root up, tear down, destroy, and devastate. Then, to build and plant (1:10).

Jeremiah 31:31-40 is at the heart of the Lord's plan to build and to plant. It is the promise of a new covenant, a better one (Hebrews 8:6). Of course, the problem with the old covenant lay not with the Lord, but with the people (Hebrews 8:8-12). Their leaders did not know the Lord (Jeremiah 2:8). Since loving fellowship with God, or lack thereof, has

ethical implications for how we live, Jeremiah characterizes the nation's lack of knowing God by their greed for unjust gain (6:13). There is an intimate connection between their behavior and their knowledge of God, specifically as it relates to their violating the Ten Commandments. Jeremiah stands at the entrance to the temple and asks, "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations?" (Jeremiah 7:9-10). The list of accusations directly names the first, second, sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth commandments. Note that violating the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before me," happened when they chased after other gods they *have not known*. They rejected the God that they knew by seeking to know other gods in the same way.

Therefore, it's no surprise when we discover the crux of the new covenant is, "They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 31:34). From the least of them to the greatest has a dual emphasis. It promises a fellowship of knowing with the living God from the youngest child to the oldest adult and it envisions people from both ends of the social structure loving and serving the Lord from their hearts. We may even say that this is a vision of the eternal life that Jesus gives. "And this is eternal life, that they know you [Father], the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). To know the Lord is life and glory.

United to Christ. "For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:5-6).

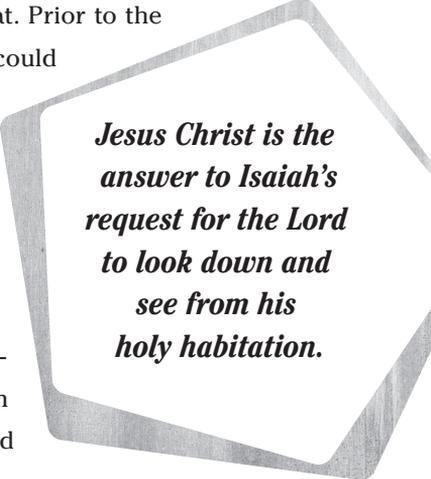
The culmination of our fellowship of knowing with the living God is found in our being united by faith to Jesus Christ. The same voice that

said, “Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3) radiates the beauty of his holy habitation into the center of our being so that the intimacy with God that we so desperately need becomes ours through Jesus Christ. From the beginning, God has specialized in bringing light into darkness. The darkness of our sinful condition is overcome by the effulgent glory of God in Jesus Christ. His is the face, as Esther Lightcap Meek says, that will not go away.

PERSONAL, COLLECTIVE, COMMUNAL KNOWING

Jesus Christ is the answer to Isaiah’s request for the Lord to look down and see from his holy habitation. Divine beauty has broken in on us through him. We are enabled to pursue the fellowship of knowing with our neighbors by the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the beautiful countenance that will never turn away from us. The fellowship of knowing God is personal, collective, and communal.

This is how it was for Joyce. She struggled with feeling like a token at All Saints, commodified because she fit a desired profile for their ministry board. They did not know much about her, which caused her to recognize that there was not a lot of authenticity happening at her church—a perception that began to change for Joyce three years into her membership at a women’s retreat. Prior to the retreat she did not feel as though she could connect with the women in the room. She attended the retreat feeling depressed and disappointed about personal issues that she described as having nothing to do with the people in the room. Some non-Black women who she felt were particularly opened up to her and their vulnerability caused the guards and barriers in her heart to come down. She experienced



Jesus Christ is the answer to Isaiah’s request for the Lord to look down and see from his holy habitation.

these women as sisters in Christ and began to feel a real sense of connection. Following the retreat, she began to believe that people in the church who invited her family over for dinner were not just doing so out of a sense of Christian duty. They were being authentic. She said, “It became more real.” In other words, what developed for her was a personal and communal fellowship of knowing. Her relationships at All Saints church began to reflect the relationship we have with God as we are brought into communion with him.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/the-beautiful-community