

KNOW GOD

God doesn't want us to retrace our steps. God wants to walk a new path with us, and that path often leads to a way of knowing God that we haven't experienced before.

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Have you ever forgotten how to pray? Maybe "forgotten" isn't quite the right word. Maybe it's best described as still having the desire to relate to God, but all the words and forms and patterns you've used before in prayer somehow feel completely inadequate.

It's a strange and daunting feeling. It's knowing that there has been beauty in the ways you've walked with God before but that you can't keep walking that same way anymore. Something has to change because somehow, you've changed. You can't quite put your finger on it, can't quite name it, but one day you wake up, try to pray, and you just can't.

About ten years ago, I forgot how to pray. Since then I've learned that other people have had similar experiences, usually because of something really traumatic they went through. But my world wasn't crumbling around me. In fact, most things were pretty normal. There wasn't a struggle, a slide, or a crisis. One day I knew how to pray, and the next day I didn't. My world had changed. I had changed.

The Israelite people knew how to worship God. They had pretty clear instructions for what was needed. They had a temple built by a great king where they could focus. They had stories about commandments chiselled into stone that guided them to be in right relationship with God. They were safe and secure in a land they felt had been promised to their ancestors and would be promised to their descendants. One day their world was stable and predictable, and their relationship with God was, too. The next day, everything changed.

They were conquered, and flags of a new empire were raised all over the land. The great temple was torn down. Many of the people, their leaders especially, were uprooted and swept off into exile hundreds of miles from home. The entire structure of

their faith was shaken.

I can imagine that they felt their entire relationship with God had changed overnight. On the long, harsh, depressing road through the wilderness on their way to exile, what do you think was going through their heads?

What questions did they ask into the silence of the night? They were supposed to be a covenant people—a people with a special relationship and responsibility with God. What happened? What had gone wrong? Why had everything felt so adequate one day in Israel and so completely inadequate the next day on the road to Babylon and exile? Why did it feel like they had suddenly forgotten how to pray?

Some days I like to presume that I have figured out how to know God. My temptation is to approach a journey into the unknown wilderness with confidence that I know what things will look like on the other side. Perhaps I do not fear the journey because I do not think I will be changed by it. God has met me in certain ways and in certain spaces before, I reason, so it makes sense that if I just keep to the same schedule and do the same things then I can know God in the same way and be happy, right?

But then the world changes, and I'm left asking into the starless night, "Can I ever know God again?"

We can get paralyzed by the question. It's really scary when the world turns upside down. When something as tried and true as prayer feels like it's been snatched away from us, the last thing we want to do is move forward. More likely, we want to curl up in a ball and eat an entire carton of ice cream.

Several months went by where I could not find my way to prayer. Nothing seemed to work. My attempts felt half-hearted and shallow. No matter how hard I tried or how deeply I wanted it, I just couldn't. When Jesus said to leave it all behind and follow him,

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I didn't think this was what he meant!

Fortunately, I did not enter the wilderness alone. I went wrapped in community. I chose to be vulnerable and shared about my struggle with people in the church who I knew cared enough about me to not give simple, shallow solutions. They walked with me. They asked deep questions and sat in deeper silence.

One day, one of them suggested that I try a spiritual practice called Holding in the Light. I wouldn't need words for this kind of prayer. They told me to picture in my mind who or what I wanted to lift before God, picture myself holding that person or concern in my hands, and then imagine the light of God's love covering all of it like warm sunshine. "Try it, and see what happens," they said.

So I did, and I learned to know God in a whole new way. I could sit holding an image up to God for five, ten, or twenty minutes and feel my own love and light joining God's. When words failed, the Spirit would groan on behalf of the longings in my heart, and I would feel an intimacy with God that transcends language.

When I could set aside my expectations of what should be and step into what was, I could know and be known by God in a way I couldn't have imagined the day before I forgot how to pray. God upheld the promise to be a living God—a God who would be present no matter where my journey took me. This

practice of Holding in the Light asked me to risk something new. It asked me to dare to believe that God could be known in a different way. It asked me to open myself to new understandings and trust that God would meet me in the silence.

Jeremiah 31:31 begins with the phrase, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord." The Hebrew people are worn out. They've been through so much, waited for so long, and lost more than they could have imagined. When we're in the middle of the night, the light of day can feel so far away. But there is hope on the horizon! The night won't last. God's promise is to be a living God—a God of possibility and hope and presence and new days. Notice that God doesn't promise that yesterday will come back but promises that tomorrow the people will know God in a way they couldn't have imagined before.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

—Jeremiah 31:31-34

Pay attention! God says, We haven't walked this way before, but I'm so excited to walk it with you! You can almost hear the giddiness in God's voice, like a child waiting for you to unwrap the present they made and wrapped just for you. Here's the new thing we're going to do together: I'm going to put my law in you, write it directly upon your hearts, and we are going to be as one.

The covenant God is making with them in their wilderness places won't be the same as the one God made before. It'll be different than the covenant God made with their ancestors in Egypt and their ancestors who received the law at the mountain. God's vision for the world won't have to be taught any more. It won't have to be constrained by words. It will be known right in the core of each and every person, closer than our breath and more life-giving than the sun upon our face.

The covenant God extends is to the people. God will be known by and in and through a covenant people. This isn't an individualistic thing, but something done in community. We know God best when we share in the rhythms of community. When the world changes, when we forget how to pray, when we find ourselves in the wilderness, it's community that holds us to the light.

When our routine patterns and rhythms and places don't make sense anymore, it's in community that we discern together. In community, we can hear the promise of God: The days are surely coming! In community, we discuss new ways we're coming to know God. In community, we strengthen one another through our sharing.

But it's hard, isn't it? It doesn't feel good when we forget how to pray. It doesn't feel good when the comforts we've known before disappear. It doesn't feel good to wander in the wilderness.

We want to know God in familiar ways. We want to encounter God in the ways that we're used to, the ways that have worked for us before. We want to meet God in the places, sights, sounds, feelings, and descriptions that have made sense to us. We want to go back to those places and those times where God has been met before because we long to hold on to the God who makes us feel secure.

But God doesn't want us to retrace our steps. God wants to walk a new path with us, and that path often leads into the wilderness, into the unfamiliar, and into a way of knowing God that we haven't experienced before.

When Jeremiah calls to the people, he celebrates the gifts of the past. The ways their ancestors had met God at the mountain and in the temple were beautiful and meaningful. They weren't wrong or less significant. But you, God says, you know me in this moment, in this place, in the unfamiliar where I am already at work.

There's a thought that seems so simple that we often forget: to follow God into unfamiliar places, we have to leave much that is familiar behind.

But the good news of the gospel is that the One who makes these promises is faithful. The same Spirit that calls us also accompanies us. Though all else may crumble and change, God is dependable. God will not abandon us. The good news is that God chooses to know and be known by us no matter where we find ourselves.

I eventually found the words to pray again, but I don't pray the same way as I did before. How could I? I can never go back to before, and I'm so grateful for that. Because challenging as it is, I don't want to know God in the confines of yesterday. I want to know God in the light of this moment, and I think that's how God wants to know us, too. God is looking forward.

God is constantly working to bring about restoration, healing, and new possibility in the world. It's a movement of love, emanating from the heartbeat of the universe—a pulse, a dance, a song that literally changes everything. To know God is to be swept up in this movement. To know God is to set aside the songs of fear and division we're so good at singing and take up a new chorus of reconciliation and healing of the spirit. To know God is to join the dance guided not by laws

chiseled in stone but by principles and values that move our feet into new paths. To know God is to let the Divine heart of peace beat within us as our own.

The world changes. We change. The ways we relate to God and God relates to us change. We forget how to pray. We step into the wilderness. But God still meets us, holds us in light, and says, *Let's get to know one another in new ways today.* That is good news, indeed.



'The same Spirit that calls us also accompanies us. Though all else may crumble and change, God is dependable. God will not abandon us. The good news is that God chooses to know and be known by us no matter where we find ourselves.'

To hear more from Dan, listen to his interview on the Project Zion podcast. www.ProjectZionPodcast.org/383-chai-cant

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