

## STUDY 1

# Knowing the Heart of God

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The phrase ‘Shepherds after God’s own heart’ derives first from the words of Jeremiah 3:15. But they are evoked also by the whole thrust of the scriptures which show the strong tenderness of God. God’s *strong* tenderness is seen in his fierce action against all that would oppose his purposes of love. There is his action against the enemies which set themselves against not only God himself but which do so by threatening his humanity and then, in particular, his elect and redeemed people. Also there is his action against his own people as they reject the covenant and exchange their glory for something that does not profit (Jer. 2:11). God’s strong *tenderness* is shown in his gentle caring for the whole creation, so that not even a sparrow falls to the ground without our heavenly Father knowing it (Matt. 10:29) and then especially his care for the sheep of his pasture (Ps. 100:3). Bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks need not fear for their eternal safety. Even the discipline we may receive is the expression of the Father’s love (Heb. 12:5–10).

What must be plain from the outset, though, is that God does not deal with us as ‘silly’ sheep. That is why Forsyth put it:

And as a race we are not even stray sheep, or wandering prodigals merely; we are rebels taken with weapons in our hands.<sup>1</sup>

The implication is that the sheep of his pasture have been created to be—and so must be—morally serious about all things:

... God’s holy law is His own holy nature, the principle of His own holy heart, the life action and norm of His moral personality, with no source or authority outside Himself, and no claim He could even wish to ignore or evade. To tamper with it would have been to deny His own soul. He loves it as He must love Himself, or His other self, His very Son, His Holy One, dearer to Him than all men and all prodigals. A wound to that holy law of His Being is a stab to His own heart at least as keen and urgent as any love or pity He might feel to men.<sup>2</sup>

No matter at what point we may enter the discussion of God’s being and action towards us and towards his whole creation, we are immediately confronted by his great moral presence, his holiness. Unless we understand this and submit to it, all our questions and supposed answers will remain expressions of hostility. This is because God takes his own being seriously, and his being is expressed by his Law.

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<sup>1</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1993, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p. 109.

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### **SHEPHERDS AFTER GOD'S OWN HEART**

Jeremiah's statement in 3:15 should not be taken lightly. These shepherds will be part of an amazing transformation:

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.<sup>16</sup> And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall no longer say, 'The ark of the covenant of the LORD.' It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made.<sup>17</sup> At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will.<sup>18</sup> In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your ancestors for a heritage (Jer. 3:15–18).<sup>3</sup>

While the promise is vivid, the context clarifies it. Jeremiah begins by recalling the call and commission which he received (ch. 1), then proceeds to a delineation of the state of the people to whom he is to go. When Israel was brought out of Egypt there was an excitement such as only a newly married bride could know (Jer. 2:2). While Israel's behavior in those early days was by no means always commendable, we should at least see the great joy which was to be inherent in their life as the covenant community:

But if, when the LORD your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the LORD your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you,<sup>25</sup> then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the LORD your God will choose;<sup>26</sup> spend the money for whatever you wish—oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your household rejoicing together (Deut. 14:24–26).

The name YHWH ('the LORD') was the covenant name of God and his covenant people were to sell their goods that would otherwise be used in sacrifice and they were to spend the money on enjoying the great generosity of God. This was expressive of the devotion of their youth and their love as a bride. 'Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of his harvest' (Jer. 2:3). The language is not merely picturesque; it is drawing on the heritage of Israel as described in Exodus 19:5–6. 'Holy to the Lord' was to be inscribed on the turban of the high priest in Israel (Exod. 28:36) and Israel itself carried the same covenant function among the peoples: they were 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation'.

It hardly needs a reminder that Israel's calling was always with the nations in view (see Gen. 12:1–3). Through Israel's creational covenant blessing was to be restored to the scattered nations (the whole spiritual blessing to both Jews and Gentiles, Eph. 1:3). It was the simple and sad fact that Israel refused that calling (see the thrust of the book of Jonah). The prophets of the exile, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were aware of this situation. For instance, Ezekiel 36:16–32 declares that Israel had profaned the holiness of God's holy name (YHWH, 'the LORD') and in doing so made their own identity as the covenant people a matter of contempt. Any redemptive work was always with a view to their restoration to their true role and so to their glory. The glory had departed from Israel (Ezek. 10:18–19; 11:22–25).

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version or are my own translation or paraphrases.

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It was not through a fault in YHWH but because of a deep evil in Israel that Israel was to suffer judgement (Isa. 65:1–7). Of particular fault among the people were the priests and the rulers (Jer. 2:8). The priests were the guardians of the Law in Israel:

Then they said, ‘Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us bring charges against him, and let us not heed any of his words’ (Jer. 18:18).

Disaster comes upon disaster,  
rumor follows rumor;  
they shall keep seeking a vision from the prophet;  
instruction shall perish from the priest,  
and counsel from the elders (Ezek. 7:26).

For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts (Mal. 2:7).

They were the ones who ‘handle the law’ (Jer. 2:8) but they did not know the LORD. As a result, the ‘rulers’ (NIV ‘leaders’, AV ‘pastors’<sup>4</sup> or shepherds) transgressed against the LORD.

The end result was thoroughly repellent and totally incomprehensible:

Therefore once more I accuse you,  
  says the LORD,  
and I accuse your children’s children.  
<sup>10</sup> Cross to the coasts of Cyprus and look,  
send to Kedar and examine with care;  
see if there has ever been such a thing.  
<sup>11</sup> Has a nation changed its gods,  
even though they are no gods?  
But my people have changed their glory  
for something that does not profit.  
<sup>12</sup> Be appalled, O heavens, at this,  
be shocked, be utterly desolate,  
  says the LORD,  
<sup>13</sup> for my people have committed two evils:  
they have forsaken me,  
the fountain of living water,  
and dug out cisterns for themselves,  
cracked cisterns  
that can hold no water (Jer. 2:9–13).

Israel has exchanged its glory for something totally worthless (cf. Hosea 4:7, 17–18). And their sin is appalling. The whole redeemed covenant people ‘say to a tree, “You are my father,” and to a stone, “You gave me birth”’ (Jer. 2:27).

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<sup>4</sup> It seems that those who translated Jeremiah for the Authorised Version of 1611 preferred ‘pastor’ to ‘shepherd’ for the Heb. *r’h*, and the result today is sadly humorous: ‘For the pastors are become brutish [NRSV ‘stupid’, NIV ‘senseless’] and have not sought the LORD: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered’ (Jer. 10:21); ‘Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard, they have trodden my portion under foot, they have made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness’ (Jer. 12:10). Any humor, of course, is an anachronism, since the reference is to kings and rulers.

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Israel ought to have had knowledge of the LORD their shepherd (Ps. 23:1); instead:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel;  
for the LORD has an indictment against  
the inhabitants of the land.  
There is no faithfulness or loyalty,  
and no knowledge of God in the land . . .  
My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge;  
because you have rejected knowledge,  
I reject you from being a priest to me.  
And since you have forgotten the law of your God,  
I also will forget your children (Hosea 4:1, 6).

The knowledge of God is personal, not meaning individualistic but meaning that the LORD is to be known in his own revealed being (contrast Deut. 29:29) by those who have received the Law which is the expression of his being. To receive the Law is to keep that Law, which contains within it not only commandments and ordinances but all the remedies for their breaches as well.

The heart of God is known as in this moral context he calls his adulterous bride back to himself.<sup>5</sup> His call to return was the expression of his mercy and his faithfulness to his purpose. Israel knew that purpose but had chosen to play the role of unfaithful wife. They had ‘forgotten the LORD their God’ (Jer. 3:19–21), and the indication is that their forgetfulness was deliberate. They had chosen not ‘to have God in [their] knowledge’ (Rom. 1:28) and had said ‘No God’ (Ps. 14:1; 53:1).

Behind all this is the fact that Israel had known God, had heard his voice and seen his presence and his actions (Deut. 4:33–34; Rom. 1:21). Their ignorance was completely culpable. Furthermore they had received the Law, the revelation of the moral glory of God. When Moses asked to see the glory of God, he was given to see the covenant name:

The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,  
‘The LORD, the LORD,  
a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger,  
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,  
<sup>7</sup> keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,  
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,  
yet by no means clearing the guilty,  
but visiting the iniquity of the parents  
upon the children  
and the children’s children,  
to the third and the fourth generation’ (Exod. 34:6–7).

The covenant God, who redeemed Israel from Egypt, who established them as a nation under his tutelage, and whose Law identified and directed them as his covenant freedmen, now stood as their judge. They had chosen to have shepherds like the nations round about them and to repeat the sin of Adam, although they been set apart

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann (*A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, p. 47) says that this is ‘in violation of the torah prohibition of Deut. 24:1–4’, but that passage refers to a man who has sent his wife away ‘because he finds something objectionable about her’. Furthermore, Jesus said that this was a concession made to the hard-hearted but was not the way things were to be ‘from the beginning’ (Matt. 19:1–9).

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to be the means of restoration of all that was lost in Adam and of the worship which should fill the whole earth.

This provides the basis for the promises of Jeremiah chapter 3. Knowledge and understanding will once more be given. The people will multiply and increase in the land, fulfilling both the command to Adam (Gen. 1:28) and the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (e.g. Gen. 26:3f.<sup>6</sup>). The old structures of worship will be gone: ‘. . . they shall no longer say, “The ark of the covenant of the LORD.” It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made.’ The purpose of God for creation will have been achieved and all the nations gathered before the LORD in Jerusalem. Furthermore, Israel of old will have the former divisions totally healed and be restored to their inheritance (cf. Ezek. 37:15–28; also Acts 1:8; 8:4–25).

Shepherds after God’s own heart will be those who are morally serious about the things of God and who are themselves aligned with his great redemptive purposes for the world. There will be no place for career shepherds but only for those called to and gifted by God for their noble task. George Herbert (1593–1633) put it thus:

A pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God. This definition is evident, and contains the direct steps of pastoral duty and authority. For, first, man fell from God by disobedience. Secondly, Christ is the glorious instrument of God for the revoking of man. Thirdly, Christ, being not to continue on earth, but, after he had fulfilled the work of reconciliation, to be received up into heaven, he constituted deputies in his place; and these are priests. And therefore St. Paul, in the beginning of his Epistles, professeth this; and in the [letter] to the Colossians [1:24] plainly avoucheth, that he *fills up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in his flesh, for his body’s sake, which is the church*. Wherein is contained the complete definition of a Minister.

Out of this charter of the priesthood may be plainly gathered both the dignity thereof and the duty. The dignity, in that a Priest *may do* that which Christ did, and by his authority, and as his vice-regent. The duty, in that a Priest *is to do* that which Christ did, and after his manner, both for doctrine and life.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Mystery of God**

Jeremiah also prophesied that there would be a new covenant:

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. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> 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 (Jer. 31:31–34).

Hebrews chapters 8–9 insist that Christ is the mediator of that new covenant which has indeed now been established. Men and women now do know God (or, rather, are known by him; Gal. 4:9). They have been re-established in that moral seriousness of which we spoke earlier. They have been delivered from ‘the present evil age’ (Gal.

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<sup>6</sup> See the discussion in N. T. Wright, ‘Adam, Israel and the Messiah’ in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1992), pp. 18–40, esp. 21–23.

<sup>7</sup> *The Priest to the Temple* (1632), H. Washbourne, London, 1842, pp. 1f. (available at <http://cqod.com/r/rs322>).

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1:4), sin no longer has dominion over them (Rom. 6:11, 14) and the power of Satan and his minions brought to nothing (Heb. 2:14; Col. 2:15).

In their place has come the open statement of the truth (2 Cor. 4:2), which is Christ himself, the man Jesus (Eph. 4:21). Liberation from the evil powers comes as men and women know the truth (John 8:32). All is now open and plain. Freedom from guilt results in restored intimacy between men and women and their God (Isa. 59:1–2).

All that fallen man suppressed (see Rom. 1:18ff.) is now freely his in Christ. He now stands in grace (Rom. 5:2). The fullness of God, found and seen clearly in Christ (Col. 2:9; John 1:14), is now completely his (John 1:16; Col. 2:10). Within this context Paul wrote that his deep concern was that his readers should have a deepening awareness of the mystery of God, that is, Christ himself (Col. 2:2). But first they should know that the mystery of God is not hidden from them:

Jesus said to him, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.’<sup>7</sup> If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.’<sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, ‘Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.’<sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”?’ (John 14:6–9).

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.<sup>13</sup> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.<sup>14</sup> He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.<sup>15</sup> All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12–15).

But, as it is written,

‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the human heart conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him’—

<sup>10</sup> these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God (1 Cor. 2:9–10).

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God . . .<sup>16</sup> But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:12, 16).

For it is the God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness,’ who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in knowledge of him<sup>8</sup> . . . (Eph. 1:17).

Now this I affirm and insist on in the Lord: you must no longer live as the Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds.<sup>18</sup> They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.<sup>19</sup> They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.<sup>20</sup> That is not the way you learned Christ!<sup>21</sup> For surely you have heard about him and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus.<sup>22</sup> You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts,<sup>23</sup> and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds,<sup>24</sup> and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:17–24).

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<sup>8</sup> Some translations have ‘as you come to know him’ (NRSV, meaning ‘more fully?’), hence, ‘so that you may know him better’ (NIV). The phrase lacks a verb, reading only ‘in [a] knowledge of him’. I would contend that it is at least *possible* that ‘the knowledge of him’ (RSV etc.) could be understood as already existing (so NIV).

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These references could be supplemented by others, but they are sufficient to demonstrate that the scriptures recognise that a deep transforming work has been done. Ephesians 4:17–24 is especially instructive. In the face of unbelieving Gentile lifestyles, the believers are to recognise what has happened to them and live accordingly. They learned Christ (v. 20). Verse 21 reads, ‘surely you have heard him [see AV<sup>9</sup>], and were taught in him, as truth is in Jesus’. The only way the Ephesians could have heard Jesus would have been by the risen Jesus, specifically Jesus the man, having spoken to each hearer through the apostolic proclamation (thus 2 Cor. 4:6).

Given all this, the readers of these statements could be left in no doubt that they have had a personal and intimate encounter with God in Christ: they now have come to know him as he knows them, albeit with the limitations imposed on them prior to the final climactic revelation at Christ’s return (1 Cor. 13:12; Col. 3:1–4; 1 John 3:2). The God whose being cannot be penetrated or discerned by human wisdom is now ‘unhidden’ by his own personal self-revelation.

### **Knowing the Mystery of God**

The knowledge of ‘the mystery of God’<sup>10</sup> comes to each through the proclamation of the cross of Christ, communicated in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:1–5). Although the mystery remains veiled and foolish to the perishing (1 Cor. 1:18–23; 2 Cor. 4:3), the word of the cross is not at all foolish since it is the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18; Rom. 1:16). So, though not apparently humanly wise, the mystery of God is wise beyond our capacity to contain it, far less to conceive it. Yet the apostle still needed to warn the Ephesians not to be foolish but to understand what the will of the Lord is.

Plainly, such understanding is not a matter of the intellect but of the will. So Jesus identified the issue: ‘Anyone who resolves to do the will of God will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own’ (John 7:17). The issue lies in willing to do the will,<sup>11</sup> which has been plainly revealed. To the unbeliever, the will of God is anathema since it confronts the human will which insistently suppresses the truth. However, the issue for the believer is not complex either. While the scriptures may not teach a doctrine of ‘free will’ (so John 8:44, esp. AV), they do make plain the fact of ‘freed will’, meaning that the believer is now free to choose to obey; freedom to disobey simply contradicts the reality of redeemed humanity.

To be ‘in Christ’ means that a believer is ‘in the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:1, 9). In particular, that means the believer is not ‘in the flesh’. Were he or she to live as if they were still in the flesh the contradiction would be profound and the consequences deathly (Rom. 8:1–13). Being led by the Spirit is not an option; neither does the believer have an excuse for sin. Protecting oneself by claiming that there is a valid place for sin is what is meant by living in the flesh. How that is expressed, of course, varies with each

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<sup>9</sup> The expression *αὐτὸν ἠκούσατε* (*auton ēkousate*) according to classical rules should be ‘you heard about him’ but ‘there is some variation in the New Testament’ (Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 325, n. 219). But Eph. 6:19 seems to indicate that the AV of 4:21 should be considered as a valid translation, as Paul asks that a word may be given to him, i.e. that it may be the word of Christ himself which is heard; cf. also Rom. 10:17; 2 Cor. 13:3.

<sup>10</sup> See 1 Cor. 2:1, NRSV.

<sup>11</sup> This is expressed in the Greek, which uses both the verb and the noun for ‘will’: *ἐάν τις θέλη τὸ θέλημα αὐτοῦ ποιῆν*.

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person, but the result is a disruption of the knowledge of the mystery of God. The ‘theology’ may remain, but not the experience of the intimacy.

Knowing the mystery of God is not a goal for which we strive but the reality to be lived in. If we live by the Spirit let us also walk by the Spirit, and if we do that we will not gratify the desires of the flesh,<sup>12</sup> which by their very nature move us away from the desires of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–17). And those desires of the Spirit are what we now want (Gal. 5:17; Rom. 7:15–16)! The command, ‘Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ (Rev. 2–3) is the recognition that as men and women in Christ we have been set to hear and to obey, and so we must.

Herbert’s statement, ‘A pastor is the deputy of Christ for the reducing of man to the obedience of God’, then, does not imply any brow-beating of men and women into cowered submission, but the pastor, the shepherd, will act in and with Christ to keep the sheep in the paths of righteousness. This a noble task, but one for which the shepherd has been prepared and equipped by God and for which the sheep have likewise been born again, for the gift of the Spirit is the people of God newly made to ‘follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances’ (Ezek. 36:27). If they love Christ they will keep his commandments (John 14:15) and they do love him (see 1 Pet. 1:8; cf. 1 Cor. 16:22)! Their moral seriousness is their widest freedom and their deepest joy.

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<sup>12</sup> The NIV, ESV ‘and you will not’ seems to me a more likely translation of the Greek: ἐπιθυμίαν σαρκός οὐ μὴ τελέσητε, where the double negative indicates that the statement is emphatic. The aorist subjunctive with the single negative (so NRSV) would be a command not to begin an action. That technicality aside, the meanings are probably much closer than many recognise.