

Session 12 Pathways to the Knowledge of God

INTRODUCTION

Proverbs 2 is on page 23, the last page of this session. I want to tell a little testimony based on chapter 2. I just want to give a little of my particular journey. I've touched some of it already.

THE FLOWERING OF THE JESUS MOVEMENT AND A MASSIVE YOUTH REVIVAL

In the summer of 1974 I was part of a discipleship group. I was eighteen years old—eighteen, nineteen, something like that. This was in the context of a Presbyterian church. I mentioned last night that we had the beginnings of a youth revival. Of course, in the early seventies the Jesus movement was sweeping across North America, and there were all kinds of discipleship houses where ten men would live in a house and ten girls would live in another house. In the early days ten men and ten girls lived in the same house, but that got sorted out after a couple of years all across the nation. It started out that way. I remember that. You could go anywhere from the east coast to the west coast, from Canada down south to the tip of Texas, and find these discipleship houses with vans and guitars. It was really quite a time. How many of you in this room knew the Lord in that time and were a part of that move of the Lord? It was a very romantic time in one way.

The main-selling books in the bookstore were Hal Lindsey's books. He was the ultimate voice to this move of God that led probably several million young people to the Lord—not only young people, but certainly many of them were. Then you had the charismatic movement breaking forth in the Catholic church, and all this was really beginning to pick up momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Those two streams, the youth movement and the Catholic charismatic movement, overlapped. There was just so much romance in the land. Everyone thought Jesus was coming any day. I remember those days so clearly. The best-selling books were all about how Jesus would come at any moment. Hal Lindsey's books sold millions. I didn't know anyone who didn't have one, who didn't read it. Those books aren't so popular now, but they were really something then. The idea of going to college, of planning for the future, seemed carnal. I remember I was one of those who really wanted to go to college, and a lot of friends were asking, "Why are you compromising? Why are you doing that?" Of course now, twenty and twenty-five years later, a lot of them wish they had gone to college.

FORMATIVE BOOKS IN ACQUIRING THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

Anyway, that's another story, but there were a lot of discipleship houses in that day. I lived in one, and the leaders of the discipleship house were teaching us. The books they gave me, I still recommend even twenty-three years later; they're still favorites of mine. One was A.W. Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy*, which is a little, skinny book. It's quoting from Proverbs 9:10, which says, in essence, "The main thing is to get the knowledge of the holy, the knowledge of God, who is the Holy One" (Prov. 9:10, paraphrased). I highly recommend that book. It was written in the early 1960s, and it's powerful.

I was eighteen years old. My leaders were about thirty. A couple of them said, "This book will change your life." Of course, when you're eighteen and your thirty-year-old leader says, "This book will change your life," you take it as gospel and you do it. I look back now, and that was really a divine strategy in my own life. It set me on a course that, even twenty-three years later, I see as the course on which the Lord had set me. I think it's the course for all of God's people in one way. It may not be everyone's main focus of ministry, but everyone, I believe, is better off if they get on that course to some degree.

The second book they gave me was J.I. Packer's book *Knowing God*, which I still recommend highly. So I recommend A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, and J.I. Packer's book, *Knowing God*. The third book would have been A.W. Pink's *Gleanings from the Godhead*. He was a man who, I think, died in the 1950s. It's a brilliant book. There are maybe four or five or six chapters on different aspects of God's nature and attributes.

I don't use the words "the nature of God" or "the attributes of God." I use the words "the personality of God," although it means the nature and attributes.

People tend to tune out when you say, "The attributes of God." They say, "Oh, that's theological," which it is. The word *theology* only means, "The study of God." Everything is theological.

Sometimes I hear people say, "Well, I don't want to get into theology."

I say, "Oh, absolutely you do. You want to get into the study of God. That's what the whole Word of God is about, in essence, the study of the person of God."

Those three books were the beginning point for me. They were a bit complicated, to be honest. Before I tell you of my journey with those books and how I began to go forward with this, I mentioned last night that one of my favorite books of the last five years is a book called *The Pleasures of God*, an absolutely delightful book by John Piper. He's a Baptist pastor in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a man who really has a view into the deeper things in the Word of God. His writings are superb. John Piper. I think he's about fifty years old; he's a brilliant man of God with a strong devotional touch in his life.

The Pleasures of God. I would recommend that one first, and then A.W. Tozer's book second, J.I. Packer's third, and *Gleanings of the Godhead* fourth. Read them all. You have time, unless you die tomorrow.

Someone might say, "That will take a long time."

I say, "That's what we've got. That's right, it will take a bit of time, but so what?"

"LIKE A FIREBRAND PLUCKED OUT OF THE BURNING"

I remember I got these books. I was eighteen years old. I had no religious background at all. My father was a professional boxer. Actually, he was amateur world champion. He was a lightweight class. He traveled the world boxing, and all the world champion heavyweights were good friends with him.

I grew up in the boxing world, in a bar, surrounded by the Mafia, honestly, and had zero introduction to spiritual things—zero. Me and my dad were really good buddies. There were seven kids in our family in nine years, so we just had stair steps. I was at the top. I had one older sister, but we were just one year apart. There were seven of us, and all of them are in the church that I pastor in Kansas City. All seven of us are. They've been there for ten to fifteen years. The last one came in about eight or ten years ago, and the other ones were there from the beginning. I have five sisters and a brother, and they've all been there for a long time. It really puts a damper on me telling the stories of my childhood, because they're all sitting on the front row checking out everything. I have a high accountability factor. Occasionally after a meeting they'll say, "We don't remember it that way..."

Then another one says, "But I do!"

I start family feuds all the time by my sermons. Both of my parents were totally, completely non-Christian. I mean, they were heathens plus one. My brothers and sisters are seriously devout; I mean, they're praying, fasting, and taking the kingdom by force. My five sisters are like Wes Campbell's four sons. I describe them as, "Devil, come out, or I'm coming in after you!" That's their approach to ministry. They're very aggressive in the Lord. I've said that for years, and they don't seem to be offended by that. They smile, so I guess it's OK to say that.

This is just a bunny trail, but how do two totally heathen parents, with zero initiation to Jesus, raise seven children who are devout and radical Christians? It messes up every equation in the book. When parents tell me, "I didn't really raise my children right, and I'm in the Lord"—I think we should certainly try to do that; I'm not minimizing that, but I say, "You know, the story isn't over yet, believe me."

Both of my parents are dead now. My dad died when I was eighteen years old; he had a heart attack. My mother died maybe five years ago. She met the Lord right on her deathbed, but we would go visit her and her second husband—I guess you could call him my stepfather; I never thought of him that way, because I had already moved away from the home and didn't know him that well. We would go visit them at the bars and the taverns and they would have their friends. All of us would go at one time and they would ask my mom, "How did you raise kids like this?"

She would say, "I'm really mystified by how all my kids turned out religious." She said, "I have no idea how they all turned out religious."

Anyway, I don't know why I'm going on that bunny trail. Maybe some of you need to be encouraged that the Lord's heart for His people is actually bigger than parents doing everything right. Maybe some of you need to know that. It's really true. My point in telling you a little about my background is that I had zero understanding of God—zero. I didn't have a clue about anything. I didn't know what the Christmas story was, really. I knew there was a baby and we got presents. That was the extent of the Christmas story in our house. That was all I cared about. Easter was Easter eggs, and Jesus rose from the dead. I didn't really connect the two together. It didn't really matter; the eggs were great. They were chocolate. It was good enough for me.

ENCOUNTERING THE BIBLE AND GOD FOR THE VERY FIRST TIME

I met the Lord when I was fifteen, and I didn't have a clue about anything. I mean, zero. I didn't know the difference between an apostle, a disciple, an epistle, and a gospel. They all sounded the same to me. I remember the summer after I got saved, and I was trying to find a job. I thought, "How do you do this thing?" I looked up the book of Job. It looked like *job* to me. I looked in the table of contents and I saw *Job*. I thought, "Oh, this will be great."

I opened it up and said, "What?" It had nothing to do with getting a job. I read a couple of chapters and I gave up on it. I thumbed through some of the other parts of it. I thought, "I'll go back to the want ads!"

Then I went to Psalms. I remember I was at a Bible study and I was studying one of the psalms and I said, "Man, I've got this really good verse from the book of Palms."

They said, "Where's Palms?"

I said, “Right after the ‘Job’ book, you know, the book about jobs.”

People would laugh and I thought, “I don’t get it. Why is that funny? It’s the book right after the one about getting jobs!” These men gave me a couple of books on theology; prior to that, I had no comprehension of anything, and they didn’t sit down and go through it with me page by page. I saw terms I had never heard of before, like *sanctification*. I said, “What’s that?” I had a dictionary. I had to try to figure out all this stuff. It was less than satisfying on the front end, is what I’m trying to say. I understood *justification* by that point, but any word that wasn’t a word we used on the street that showed up in the Bible was a confusing word to me.

AGES FOURTEEN AND FIFTEEN: FROM THE MAFIA TO THE MASS

I’ll bunny trail on this, just because I want to. When I was fourteen I went to my father. Again, he was a total heathen. He was a very tough man, a boxer. He worked with the Mafia in Kansas City and he beat people up. That wasn’t his main job; that’s the job that I only found out he did years later when my mother told me. I knew that a number of our family friends got shot in their cars. It never dawned on me that that was totally weird. When I was eight, nine, ten, or twelve, I would hear someone say, “Billy was killed.”

“Where?”

“In his car!”

“Man, just like the other guy! What a bummer.” We would go to his funeral.

It was only years later when I was watching a movie and I said, “Wait a second...” I went to my mom and said, “Was Dad in the Mafia?”

She said, “Well, yeah, but I don’t know what he did. I know he beat people up.”

I said, “Oh my goodness.” I didn’t know that at the time, but those are the kinds of men I was hanging around with because he took me with him everywhere. When I was eight and ten and twelve I was hanging around these men who were forty and fifty who all were Italians, and they all said funny things and did funny things, but I loved it at the time. Personally, at the time, I loved it.

I was fourteen years old and I went to my dad and said, “I want to be religious.” I looked up at the sky and said, “Something is going on up there. What’s the deal?”

He said, “Well, there’s a God.”

I said, “How do you do it?”

He said, “Well, I don’t really know much about it. If I was you, I would either become Jewish or Catholic.”

I said, “OK.” I said, “Why?”

He said, “Well, the Jewish people have more money, but the Catholics, they’ve got a lot more power. There are billions of them everywhere.”

I said, “OK.” I thought about it and decided to become Jewish. I was fourteen. He said, “That’s what I would do if I was you,” so he told me to get out the encyclopedia and look up *Judaism*. I gave him a little report; then he told me to go down to the synagogue. I went down to the synagogue. I was fourteen and I walked in and everyone had these little hats on, all these little caps. I walked up to the man who looked like one of the main guys. He was telling everyone what to do.

I said, “My name is Mike Bickle. I’m fourteen years old and I want to be Jewish.” I don’t remember what he said but I remember he wasn’t friendly. I said, “Ah, forget it. I’ll be Catholic.”

The next week I went to the Catholic church and did the same thing. I read a little on Catholicism and then the man up front disappeared—you know, the man with the robes on. I had never been in a Catholic church before. I walked up afterwards, past all those railings, and walked back there. I said, “Sir, I need to talk to you.” I only realized later that those were sacred boundary lines that common men don’t cross. I chased him back there and I said, “How do you join this church?”

He looked at me and smiled. I said, “I want to be a Catholic. How do you do this?” He met with me every Saturday afternoon for about a year, minus a few of them. He taught me Catholicism. It was wonderful.

I still went to the bars with my dad after I got baptized and confirmed. I was fourteen or fifteen now. I wasn’t converted; I wasn’t born again yet. It was just before that. He would say, “Hey, tell them! Hey, Jimmy Orville, listen! My son is Catholic!”

Of course, they were all Italians. They were all kind of Catholics, you know. They said, “There’s nothing wrong with that.” They always said that to me: “Well, there’s nothing wrong with that.”

I thought, “Is there something wrong with being Catholic?”

Of course they were all Catholics, and they thought it was really cute that I was meeting with a priest. They said, “Maybe he’ll be a priest some day. We could use a priest on our team, you know”—that kind of thing. Well, that’s enough of that story.

There couldn’t have been a person more totally uninitiated in the things of God. I lived in a low income neighborhood. Lots of people were on welfare, and there were lots of funny things happening. Some of these men had millions of dollars in suitcases, but they didn’t show it in their houses and their cars. That’s another thing that was kind of interesting. I remember once a bunch of people drove by our house with a machine gun, shot the whole front of our house, and blew out all the windows. We were all in the house and we all got up. My dad did something to someone that someone didn’t like. To this day I don’t know what happened, but the windows were all shot out.

I remember a few times in the car when he yelled, “Get down, quick, quick!”

We all got down, and we said, “Why do we have to get down?”

He said, “Don’t ask questions!” so we got back up. I thought that was weird. To this day I don’t know what all that was about. It probably had something to do with something.

THE BEST PATH TO A DEEP LIFE IN GOD

I met the Lord and I was born again when I was almost sixteen. Now it was two years later, and I was given these books. My point is, I didn’t have a clue what any of them meant. These leads of mine told me, “If you want to be really mature and hardcore in the Lord, you have to know God.”

That sounded logical to me. I started reading these books; they were so hard. I didn’t understand anything, but I was really connected to these books because my leaders convinced me that this was the best path to a deep life in God.

Now it’s twenty-three years later, and I still maintain that what they told me was the truth. This is the best path to a deep life in God. It absolutely is. There’s no question in my mind about this.

I was at the University of Missouri, and I was involved in a campus ministry. I was teaching a Bible study and playing on the university football team. I decided to play football instead of boxing. My dad really pushed me into athletics, and I was leading a Bible study in my apartment.

In this youth group they always told us, “Whatever college you go to, start a ministry or join one.” So I decided to start one. What I taught on was these books. Can you imagine teaching on the knowledge of God, God’s majestic transcendence? I never even knew what *transcendence* meant. In essence I was memorizing the books; I wasn’t really memorizing, but studying them intensely so that I could mimic what I read. It wasn’t like a perfect rendition, but I did the best I could to memorize it line by line. I would take down about ten pages of notes, and then I would say my notes a thousand times to get ready for my Tuesday night Bible study. Then I would give it, and all the college students would look at me and say, “Huh?”

None of it made sense, and I would say, “You know.”

And they would say, “Uh-uh.” They would ask me questions, and if they would ask me a question that wasn’t on my notes, of course, I didn’t know the answer because I was just memorizing notes from a book about the knowledge of God.

It was an ugly beginning, for sure. Now that I look back, the Lord was smiling the whole time, saying, “This is really cute; I really like this.” I know that He liked that.

THE SUMMER OF 1972: BILLY GRAHAM, CAMPUS CRUSADE, AND EXPLO’ 72

I don’t know why I’m in this tired, loose mood, but I’ll tell you another story that has nothing to do with anything, and you’ll get a kick out of it. We’re on page 23 anyway; we’re at the end of the notes and we have at least one more session tomorrow morning.

It was the summer after I got saved. I got saved during the summer when I was fifteen. Now I was sixteen. This is another bunny trail story, by the way. Maybe it was prophetic humor; I don’t know. I never thought about that until just now.

I was living in this discipleship house for three months in the summer with this Presbyterian youth group that had the spirit of revival on it. There were about 1,200 in the youth group, and people were getting saved like crazy. That happened for about a year or two. All across the nation that was happening, and then it kind of lifted. One or two hundred people from our youth group would go from Kansas City to Dallas, which is about a ten-hour drive. They had this thing called “Explo’ 72.” Does anyone remember Explo’ 72? It was the biggest thing that happened. One hundred and twenty thousand believers met in the Cotton Bowl stadium in Texas. Billy Graham was the main speaker, and Campus Crusade with Bill Bright hosted it. They had probably a hundred speakers. They had seminars in all the churches across Dallas. We took the four spiritual laws and knocked on a million doors. One hundred thousand people all did ten doors each to evangelize the city. Billy Graham didn’t preach on evangelism, but on discipleship, every single night. We took about 200. It was an absolutely incredible event. I had only been in the Lord for about a year.

“THE TEN COMMANDMENTS” AND THE BOOK OF EXODUS

This was in June 1972. Right before I went to that, the movie *The Ten Commandments* with Charlton Heston came out. It was incredible. I had never heard of Moses. Maybe I did and didn’t know it, but the name *Moses* was a new name to me. This guy, Moses, was the main guy in *The Ten Commandments*. I said, “I don’t really know the Bible; it would be good for me to see a movie about it; it’ll help me understand some of the stories,” so I went to see it.

I was blown away. They had frogs and blood, and I said, “This really happened in the Bible?” The sea divided. It was a fascinating movie to me. I went and read the book of Exodus over and over and over. I loved it. I probably saw *The Ten Commandments* ten times in about fifteen days. I went every night to the drive-in, even though we had school the next day. I was blown away by this idea that God did this with a man.

When I read the book of Exodus, the verse that hit me is that “No man can see God and live.” No man can see God and live” (Ex. 33:20, paraphrased).

I loved that verse. It seemed awesome to me that God was so powerful that if you looked at Him you just incinerated. You were blown away. That was a pretty cool idea to me. I would share that in the youth groups: “Anyone who would see God would die!”

That was kind of my main verse. I thought that was so awesome. I remember the youth group leader saying, “Hey Bickle, get off that verse. Get on to something else.”

I thought, “That’s incredible. You look at Him and you just die. That’s incredible. Then if you die, you go to heaven and you get to see Him again, but you live.” That was an interesting concept. I would tell everyone that verse in the *Ten Commandments*.

That was in March and April. So now it was June and we went to Explo’ 72. Billy Graham taught a four-night series on discipleship. It was incredible. He called the youth to missions every night. Every night I answered the altar call. “I will leave my high school. I’m going to the mission field at the end of the summer.” I was convinced that I was supposed to go to the mission field at the end of the summer. Me and my best buddy went every night and committed ourselves. We were dead serious. We were going to the mission field and we were going to tell our football coach and tell our parents and break up with our girlfriends. We were going to the mission field. No one would stop us. Billy Graham had us as high as a kite.

We drove back the ten hours from Dallas to Kansas City and re-committed ourselves to this. We got back to the discipleship house where nine men lived. They were all twenty-five to thirty years old, whereas my friend and I were seventeen and sixteen. We were the two men who had to mow the lawn and do the dishes and run all the errands.

Anyway, we got back early. We were down in the basement of this discipleship house where six men lived. There were three bunk beds. In the week that we went to Dallas one of the men became a youth pastor in Nebraska, and he moved all of his clothes out of the closet. We had this giant closet, from here to the wall, about a forty-foot closet for six men. When he moved all his clothes, behind his clothes, about five feet deep into the closet, was a water heater. When it would heat the water you couldn't see it because clothes were in front of it. This basement was so pitch-black that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. Sometimes the men would play tricks on each other, because you couldn't see if a man was one inch from you. You could feel it, but you couldn't see. That's how dark it was.

This man moved his clothes, and there was a water heater deep in the closet, but I didn't know about that water heater. I had forgotten that the man moved his clothes. My friend and I drove back from Dallas. We got back a couple of hours before everyone else. It was in the evening and we were dead tired. We got back and lay on our bunk beds. I was on the bottom bunk and my friend was on the top. Our heads were like this and our feet went that way. Our heads were towards the wall where the closet was. The closet was going that way. Deep into the closet was the water heater. We couldn't see the water heater even if the lights were on. It was deep in the closet. We were lying this way.

Now the clothes had been moved that week. So we were lying on our bed, exhausted. It was pitch-black.

I told the Lord, "Lord, we're going to the mission field in September. It's June. We're not going back for our senior year of high school. Forget it. We're with You."

We asked the Lord to confirm it. What happened next is divine humor.

Instantly when I said this, the light of the water heater went on back in the closet. I didn't know there was a water heater back there. All I saw was the very light that Moses saw appearing in this dark room. I looked at that light and said, "Oh my God."

The man said, "Oh my God."

What did I tell him? "Don't look or you'll die!" I had seen that movie ten times just about two months ago. "If there's one thing I know, it's don't look or you'll die!"

The man said, "Yeah, I know! You've been saying that for months!"

I said, "Man, I'm glad I got that one down!"

We got down. We were in our underwear. We crawled across the room on our knees staring into the light, which was a water heater, but we don't know. Our eyes were closed, our hands were over our eyes, because we didn't want to be killed before we made it to the mission field.

The very passage we used is Isaiah 6, the one I used the other day where the Lord appeared and the glory of God filled the temple. Isaiah said, "I'm a man of unclean lips! Here am I, Lord, send me" (Isa. 6:5, 8, paraphrased)! We had just listened to a tape two or three times on the way back from Dallas by a man named Stephen Olford on Isaiah 6, so we had the language down.

The man said, "What do we do?"

I said, "Here am I, Lord, send me!"

A few minutes went by and I could see the light through my fingers. I felt so anointed. I believe in psychosomatic feelings of anointing. I'm sure it wasn't the true anointing, but it felt like it. I could hear the music of the *Ten Commandments*—boom, boom, boom. To this day, I could swear I heard that sound. I probably really didn't.

The man said, "What do we do?"

I'm the one who read Exodus. I was the pro at seeing God in fire. I said, "Well, why don't you say it? Say it louder."

He said, "Here am I, Lord! Send me!" Nothing happened.

I said, "Don't look!"

He said, "I'm not!"

I said, "You'll get killed if you look!"

He said, "I won't look." We were whispering. We didn't want God to hear that part, you know.

He said, "What do we do? Let me try one more time. 'Here am I, Lord! Send me!'" Nothing happened.

I said, "I don't know."

Finally, he looked. He couldn't handle it. He peeked; he opened his fingers. He saw the water heater. He was in anguish; he was a really aggressive, gregarious man. He said, "Oh no, oh no!" and he hit me.

But in the one to three seconds when he was screaming, I thought he was getting anointed. I thought, "I'm next! It's coming! Oh, my God."

I didn't know he was screaming, "Oh, no!" in anguish at seeing the water heater. I thought God's hand was on him. I knew I was next, any second. I was all tense.

Then he hit me. At first I thought it was God touching me. It was a big, brutish *whooom*. He got a scholarship to college in football; he was a great athlete, very strong. He just plowed into me, knocked me over, and I saw the water heater.

We went ahead and did our senior year in high school. We stayed home. Anyway, I told you it had nothing to do with anything; I just thought I would tell you that story. Maybe it was prophetic humor. Maybe the Lord was saying, “I really want you to study Me and I’ll give you just a little jump start. I’ll get you started with some humor here.”

I don’t know what it was. When I see the Lord on the last day, I’ll ask Him, “Why did You let that happen?”

My guess is, He’ll laugh and say, “Wasn’t that great?” I just know He’s going to say something like that. I think it’s great now. At the time I didn’t; I was totally depressed. “Lord, that kind of wounded me!”

“No, you did great! That story cheered you your whole life.” The Lord will probably say something like that. I can’t wait to hear what He says. The whole setup was perfect. Moses, Billy Graham. It was a total ambush of humor on my young life. OK, off of that story. I don’t know why I told you that story.

THE EARLY CONFUSION AND ANGUISH OF SEEKING AFTER GOD

Now I’m back at the college, at the university teaching *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer, week by week in my college Bible study, which is boring everyone. It’s very un-anointed; it’s very clumsy, I don’t really even understand the concepts I’m teaching. I don’t even know what some of the big words mean. I looked them up in the dictionary, but they were still confusing to me. I was faking, trying to present the image that I knew what I was doing. It didn’t work very well. I’m in anguish at this time. I’m doing this hour-a-night prayer thing I was telling you about.

I hated praying. I hated it. I would always go into my room at 9:01pm and think, “Oh, this is horrible.” I was in a time of real anguish in my life because prayer was so boring. That’s the same year when I witnessed to the man. I witnessed to someone every day. I told you the story. Everything was hard. The Bible was confusing and boring; I had this idea that I had to know God, but He felt so distant and the concepts were so confusing and the puzzle didn’t work together at all. The pieces didn’t fit at all. I couldn’t figure out Romans and Galatians and Matthew. The Bible was entirely confusing to me. I had a big ball of frustration. I really had anguish about this. “The Bible is boring, God is boring, studying about God is difficult. Witnessing isn’t fun anymore, fasting is horrible, and I have to do this my whole life. This is really going to be bad.”

I said somewhere, “Something has to change or I’m going to die.” I was constantly in anguish about the subject of the knowledge of God because I was teaching on it regularly. I was telling people, “If we don’t know God, we’re never going to make it.” I would try to give people these books.

“IF YOU RECEIVE MY WORDS, AND TREASURE MY COMMANDS WITHIN YOU. . .”

That was in the summer and fall of 1974. Now it was January 2, 1975. We were taking our college group to a ski trip in Estes Park, Colorado. We had maybe a hundred kids on a ski trip and we were at the lodge. It was the morning of January 2, during Christmas break.

A man came up to me. I was there early one morning reading my Bible a little. He came up to me. He was a brand-new believer. He said, “Will you show me what you do when you read the Bible in the morning?”

I thought, “Sure, I’m the leader of the Bible study. Why not? I’ll disciple him.” I was two years or three years old in the Lord. He was two months old, so I was way ahead of him. I said, “Here’s how you do it.” This was what the men at the discipleship house told me to do. I said, “What’s today?”

He said, “January 2.”

I said, “Good. On the second, you go to Proverbs 2. There are thirty-one proverbs, thirty-one days a month. Whatever date it is, that’s the proverb you read.” That’s what they told us to do.

I was being set up for a major life encounter with God in the Word of God on that day and I didn’t know it. I said, “Proverbs 2 because it’s January 2. Here’s what you do. It says, ‘My son.’”

Just go ahead and turn to Prov. 2. “‘If you receive my words.’ See the word *if* there?” I was such a scholar at this time in my life. “If you have an *if*, sooner or later you’re going to have a *then*.”

The man said, “Man, you really know the Bible.”

I said, “Well, I’ve been around for a while.”

I said, “Circle that *if*. A *then* is going to come sooner or later.” He thought that was profound. “‘If you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you’” (Prov. 2:1). I said, “Well, that’s the second condition. That’s two conditions right now. We’re going to get a promise in a minute.”

“‘So that you incline your heart to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding’” (Prov. 2:2). I said, “That’s another condition.”

“‘Yes, if you cry out for discernment. . .’” (Prov. 2:3). “There’s another *if*. There are a bunch of conditions here. Boy, this is going to be a good one. ‘If you lift your voice for understanding’” (v. 3b, paraphrased). I didn’t understand what any of this stuff meant. But there was the *if* again in verse 4. Boy, this was going to be a knockout! We were about to come across a major *then*. When all these *ifs* line up one after another, you know you have a big promise coming.

“‘If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures, then. . .’” (Prov. 2:4-5). I stopped. Filled with pride, I said, “I told you the *then* was coming!”

The man was awed at my scholarship. He really was. He was blown away. “How did you know?”

“Well, if you’ve read the Bible as long as I have, that stuff just becomes clear.” Three years now, and I didn’t like the Bible so I tried to read it as little as possible.

“Then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God” (Prov. 2:5). That phrase, “You will find the knowledge of God,” hit me like an arrow, piercing my heart. This is what I was in anguish about. I kept asking everyone, “How do you find the knowledge of God?”

I said, “Oh my God. Oh, God...”

The man said, “What?”

It was unbelievable. I had read Proverbs 2, but it had never hit me before.

The man said, “What?”

I said, “I have to be alone right now.”

I had had so much anger and frustration over this issue. It was like the arrow went straight in. There were five conditions in a row, and a promise that God would back up with His word, by the Word of God: “You’ll discover the knowledge of God if you’ll do this.”

I was so blown away. Go on to verse 10. I read it in the New American Standard. It says, “Wisdom will enter your heart” (Prov. 2:10, NASB). I was thinking of divine wisdom of God, because I was always studying the subject of wisdom as related to the spirit of wisdom, because it was in those books. “Wisdom will enter into your heart, and knowledge of God will be very pleasant to you” (paraphrased). “You’ll enjoy it. It will satisfy. It will enthrall your heart.”

Proverbs 2:1-5 and Prov. 2:10 became the tracks I would run on for many years to come. Even to this day, that’s the most important passage of Scripture in my life. I was just a nineteen-year-old college student and the Lord was giving me that first down payment right there, after He tricked me with that experience with Moses, you know. Then He said, “This one is for real. That one was for fun; this is for real.” I don’t know if He really said that.

“WHATSOEVER THINGS WERE GAIN TO ME, I COUNTED THEM AS LOSS”

I want to tell you that there’s a path. There’s a road map where wisdom will enter into your heart, and the knowledge will be so pleasing and so satisfying to your emotions. You’ll have so much pleasure in the experience of this knowledge.

I began to ask the Lord, “What does this mean? What are these five things?”

Twenty-two years later, I’ve worked on these conditions, but they’re very simple. They don’t require unique insight; they’re very, very clear, and very straightforward. They’re not confusing, just costly. Again, it only seems to cost on the front end. Only the new believer or the person who doesn’t experience the Lord thinks of it as costly. The man or woman with experience looks back and says, “I can’t imagine that I gave anything that’s costly. What I gave is nothing compared to what I received.”

Counting the cost is only what new believers do on the front end. Paul said at the end, “I count it rubbish. It means nothing to me that I paid that price. On the front end it was costly. I suffered the loss, but on the back end

I re-interpreted that sacrifice as no sacrifice at all because of the surpassing greatness of the knowledge, because of the excellency of the knowledge” (Phil. 3:8, paraphrased).

I use the word *costly* depending on where you are in your walk with the Lord. It’s costly on the front end, but when God begins to cause your heart to discover the pleasantness of who He is, you don’t think of giving up a little recreation, a little entertainment, a little bit of food here and there, a little bit of your free time, to seek the Lord, as some heavy thing—not when the uncreated God unveils His beauty to your soul, even a little. You start thinking, “I guess it didn’t cost that much when you really, really put it in perspective.”

Let’s look at these five things. I’ll give them to you just for a moment, and then we’re going to take a break. We’ll come back and look at them more in depth, one of them in particular.

“IF YOU RECEIVE MY WORDS, AND TREASURE MY COMMANDS WITHIN YOU”

Number one: “If you receive my words” (Prov. 2:1). I believe that’s the intention to obey, to receive. Don’t resist. You have the intention to say yes. That doesn’t mean you have the maturity that says yes. It doesn’t mean you follow through on everything, but in your heart there’s a yes in your spirit. “Yes, God I really want to obey You. I’m only so far into this. I really want to receive fully. Instead of resisting You I want to receive You.”

That’s number one. Number two: “If you treasure my commandments” (Prov. 2:1b, paraphrased). “Treasure my commandments.” I believe that speaks of meditating on the Scripture. First, there’s the intention to obey. Secondly, we meditate on the Scriptures. We’ll look at that in the next session. Treasure God’s commandments. Don’t just read the Bible and move on; savor the Word of God. Make it your prize possession.

Job 22 has a really precious verse: “Receive, please, instruction from His mouth, and lay up His words in your heart ... Then you will lay up your gold in the dust” (Job 22:22, 24). In other words, you will put it in a secondary place. It doesn’t mean you have to get rid of everything you possess, but put your gold in the dust. “Make it secondary. Don’t let it be so prominent. Make Me your gold; then you will find Me.” That’s what it’s saying here.

In the Old Testament, “the commands of God” is synonymous with the Scriptures: His commands, His precepts, His statutes, His ordinances, His laws. Those phrases are synonymous with the written word of God. We treasure the law of God within our hearts. That’s in Psalms 19 and 119, two psalms that describe the treasuring of God’s law, commands, or precepts. We’ll look at that when we come back.

A TEACHABLE SPIRIT AND AN OPEN HEART

Condition number three: “Incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding” (Prov. 2:2). I believe that means a teachable spirit and an open heart. We approach the Word of God not as a know-it-all. In 1 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says, “The man who thinks he knows everything won’t know anything” (1 Cor. 3:18, paraphrased). Because someone who in their own thinking says, “Lord, I don’t understand anything,” will then receive wisdom. Approach this with a teachable spirit and a child’s heart.

Incline your heart; incline your ear to hear. I think that’s the point. Make yourself teachable. Incline your heart and then apply your heart to really learn these things. Have a teachable heart, hungry to learn. Be a student. Don’t be a master when you approach God. Be a child; don’t be a father. It’s the principle of 1 Corinthians 3:18. “Lord, I don’t really understand this. You’re taking me in a path where I haven’t been before.”

The Lord says, “I like that. Then I’ll show you wisdom if you approach Me in that childlike way.”

“CRY OUT FOR DISCERNMENT, AND LIFT UP YOUR VOICE FOR UNDERSTANDING”

Condition number four: “If you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding” (Prov. 2:3)—understanding of God. I put Ephesians 1:17 there, the prayer we looked at yesterday, that God would “give you the spirit of wisdom and understanding in the knowledge of Jesus” (Eph. 1:17). Lift your voice and cry for it.

Somewhere in one of those books—I don’t remember which one or how I got it—at the same time, someone taught that verse to me. These were my three main verses, the three verses that formed my first five or ten years in the Lord: the father embracing and loving the prodigal (Lk. 15:20); Proverbs 2:1-5, along with verse 10; and Ephesians 1:17. I don’t remember where I got it. Someone gave me Ephesians 1:17 and they said, “This should be the main prayer of your life.” When you’re eighteen or nineteen, you sort of take whatever anyone says automatically if they’re a leader.

I said, “OK, that will be the main prayer of my life then.” Again, that was a divine gift. I can’t imagine too many prayers more important than Ephesians 1:17. I started praying it every day as my first prayer: “Lord, fill me with the spirit of wisdom and revelation of the knowledge of Jesus.”

How was I to know that the Lord would say some years later, “This is what your whole life is about”? “This is what the kingdom of God is all about. This is the track I have you on.” I didn’t even connect Ephesians 1:17 with Proverbs 2 at that time. Someone told me to make it my main verse and I did. It was that simple. It’s amazing the power that a teacher has on the heart of a really young person. I’m glad they told me that instead of something else. Some folks sit in churches and they tell them that the main thing is to use God to get as much money and fame and fortune as you can and all of those young people are after money, fame, and fortune in God. They’re trying to use God to get all of the advantages they can from this natural life. My heart breaks that sixteen-, eighteen-, and twenty-year-old kids are established in that paradigm of the kingdom of God. I look back and say, “God, thank You that I had a group of youth leaders who told me to read *The Knowledge of the Holy*. What if they had taught me on how to get rich quickly by faith? What if they had told me that? I would have done that one.” I thought, “Man, that was really Your kindness that You helped me get established in that way.”

I put Ephesians 1:17. That was a verse that was already important to me, so I link crying out for discernment of God and understanding of God.

“SEEK FOR HER AS SILVER, AND SEARCH FOR HER AS FOR HIDDEN TREASURE”

Proverbs 2:4 is the fifth condition. This is the one I want to spend more time on. It says, “If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures” (Prov. 2:4). Of course, in Colossians 2:2, Jesus is the hidden treasure in God. God, the Holy Spirit, calls Jesus the treasure that’s hidden. We looked at it the other day. It’s hidden. There’s mystery; there’s a certain amount of romance. The very journey itself into hidden things is a part of the thing that enlarges our hearts.

It says, “If you would seek for her as silver and search for her as hidden treasure.” In other words, imagine if someone took an old house that was several thousand square feet, and put a million dollars inside of it, and said, “You can have the million dollars, but you have to tear down every single board. It may be buried under a stone

deep in the foundation. It may be up in the attic behind a board. There's a million-dollar check. It's yours if you want it." You would have to pull the carpet up and tear the wiring out; you could do anything you want. It could take a year or two to do it.

Most people, if they knew for a fact that million dollars was buried somewhere, would take every single board off and undo every stone if they really believed it. The Lord says, "I have hidden treasure. It's hidden, but you can have it. You'll have to tear off every board and turn over every stone if you want it. I won't give this treasure to the casual. I'll give salvation freely, but this treasure I'll give on the basis of hunger—if you want it enough to search for it like treasure that has been hidden"—not just searching a little when you're in a good mood and God is making everything go well in your life. If you would search for it with tenacity and resolution like it's really a treasure and it's hidden and you refuse to be denied, you'll find it in due time.

IF YOU CAN LIVE WITHOUT IT, YOU'LL GO WITHOUT IT

A phrase I like to say is, "If you can live without it"—if you can live without something in God—"you'll go without it."

"If you can't live without it," God says, "I'll give it to you in due time. "Of all the things in God's kingdom," God says, "the things you absolutely cannot live without, the power of which has touched your heart and made you ravenous in your hunger, the one or two things you cannot live without in My kingdom, are the things you will possess."

You determine the things you can't live without. A lot of God's people have determined that the knowledge of God is something they can live without on this side. They want it on the other side, but as long as they have some friends and a little place of ministry in the church and they feel good about life and their bills are paid, they're pretty happy. The Lord says, "If you can live without the knowledge of God, you'll go without it."

God is raising up, I believe, a generation of people by His own zeal who can't live without more of the knowledge of God. The Lord says, "They will have it. If they can't live without it, they'll have it in due time, but it will be costly. They'll have to turn over every stone and pull back every board. They'll have to put their gold in the dust, in the ground, make it secondary, and make Me their treasure, and they'll find Me then in the deep things of God."

That's just a casual look at those five conditions. We'll take a break, come back, and look at them in more detail. Amen.