

Shakespeare's play Hamlet is full of action. Ghosts, murders, love scenes, plots, accidental killings, betrayals, recriminations and more plots. The play highlights the indecision of the hero when faced with huge problems, and this results in pauses here and there. There is one moment in particular when the action comes to a shuddering halt.

Hamlet is looking for an opportunity to take revenge on his stepfather, Claudius, for murdering his father and usurping the throne of Denmark. He finds an ideal opportunity when Claudius is in his chamber, kneeling quietly. But Hamlet stops and thinks. Claudius is praying! If he takes revenge now, Claudius may perhaps have repented and will be saved. Hamlet therefore decides to wait for a better moment.

Hamlet couldn't tell what Claudius was praying, but knew he should pause and wait. And, with a totally different king, equally caught up in mystery, intrigue and plots but innocent of everything, we come in this chapter to a place where we, too, should pause and wait, and listen in.

This section begins the longest recorded prayer of Jesus so it is important that we read it and understand it. In the week that Billy Graham died it is perhaps appropriate that we reach a section in John's gospel that speaks about eternal life. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, paid tribute this week: *“When it comes to a living and lasting influence upon the worldwide church, he can have few equals: for he introduced person after person to Jesus Christ. There are countless numbers who began their journey of faith because of Dr Graham. He was one who met presidents and preachers, monarchs and musicians, the poor and the rich, the young and the old, face-to-face. Yet now he is face-to-face with Jesus Christ, his saviour and ours. It is the meeting he has been looking forward to for the whole of his life.”*

Billy Graham preached of the love of God for us sinners, and of Jesus' power to change lives and lead us out of darkness into his marvellous light. For many people all over the world, it was hearing the gospel preached by Billy Graham that caused them to turn to God in faith, and perhaps some here this morning share that experience.

This section of John's gospel is about relationship with God. I think that there are lots of people in Scotland today who have a Christian belief system but aren't necessarily in a close personal relationship with Jesus. The problem with that is that we don't experience eternal life as we should. We are not living in the fullness of God.

Let me explain the difference. A belief system means there are certain things I believe to be true. I believe God exists, I believe God sent his Son, Jesus, who died and took my sins to the cross so I can be forgiven and live forever in heaven, that I have been “saved” by God's grace. Perhaps we could recite the Apostles Creed by heart, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord...”. We call this orthodoxy, having the right beliefs. But the thing is that having the right beliefs or belief system alone, doesn't change a person's life and cause them to live differently. Even practicing certain disciplines like prayer and reading the bible, or attending church services doesn't bring any change if we do them mechanically, in other words if we are just going through the motions because our Christian belief system tells us we should. What changes us is our personal relationship with God, and experiencing him living through us in a real and personal way.

The core of your belief system might be summarized, like mine, in John 3:16, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*” Out of love God sent his Son to save us from what? Our sins, hell. Right, we know that. What did God save us for? According to this passage God saved us for eternal life. But let’s return to our reading to remind us what eternal life is. In Jesus’ prayer for his disciples in John 17:3 he says, “*Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*” Eternal life is **knowing** God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son, it is being in relationship with God now and forever. This is not **knowing about** God but knowing him in a personal way. Eternal life is something we are meant to participate in now and forever, the only thing which changes is our address (from earth to heaven when we die). Dwight L Moody the great 19th century evangelist wrote in his autobiography: *Some day you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody, of East Northfield, is dead. Don’t you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I shall have gone up higher, that is all; out of this old clay tenement into a house that is immortal—a body that death cannot touch; that sin cannot taint; a body fashioned like unto His glorious body.*

The first and primary characteristic of a relationship with God is love. There is a reason Jesus said the greatest commandment is to “*love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” (Mark 12:30)”

If we miss the fact that God saved us **for** a love relationship we miss the entire point. Rev Henry Blackaby writes of a conversation he had with one of the members of his church who was always having difficulty in his personal life, his family, at work, and in the church:

“One day I went to him and asked, “Can you describe your relationship with God by sincerely saying, ‘I love You with all my heart?’” The strangest look came over his face. He said, “Nobody has ever asked me that. No, I could not describe my relationship with God that way. I could say I obey Him, I serve Him, I worship Him, and I fear Him. But I cannot say that I love Him.”

If we love God and walk in close relationship with him, we will desire to spend time with him. If we love God and walk in close relationship with him, we will desire to worship him and be with his family (brothers and sisters in Christ). If we love God and walk in close relationship with him we will try to discern what he wants us to do and how we should live our lives. If we love God, we will obey him when he reveals his plan, his commands, or what he wants us to do. That’s why Jesus said, “*Whoever has my commands and obeys them is the one who loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I too will love him and show myself to him.*” (John 14:21)

If we don’t love God and have a close relationship with him the opposite is true. We won’t desire to spend time with him, we won’t desire to worship him, we won’t care about his family, we won’t listen to him or discern his plan for us. Therefore, we won’t obey because we either don’t understand his plan or perhaps we won’t choose to follow it. By not following God we don’t experience him working in our life. We’ll continue to struggle with anger, we won’t be able to get along with others including family members, perhaps even our spouse, we don’t desire to serve God, we can’t seem to beat addictions, we don’t have more love, joy, and peace, we don’t experience any miracles because we never step out in faith doing what only God can do through us. In other words, our life looks just like everyone else’s...well except we have different beliefs. But that’s not what Jesus came to earth for, it’s not what he

saved us for. He saved us for a personal, life transforming relationship with God. It all comes back to the quality of our personal love relationship with God.

The Apostle Paul one of the greatest missionary figures in the Bible, understood this when we wrote in Philippians 3 (NLT):

Phil. 3: 8 Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the priceless gain of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I may have Christ 9 and become one with him. I no longer count on my own goodness or my ability to obey God's law, but I trust Christ to save me. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. 10 As a result, I can really know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I can learn what it means to suffer with him, sharing in his death, 11 so that, somehow, I can experience the resurrection from the dead! 12 I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection! But I keep working toward that day when I will finally be all that Christ Jesus saved me for and wants me to be.

Paul understood that nothing is as important as knowing Christ, not his job, his heritage, his religious convictions, his good works for God, nothing. As a result of knowing Christ, we can experience the same power that raised him from the dead at work in our life.

I realize some men tune out or get a little nervous when I talk about a “love relationship with God,” because we get the image of some sort of heart fluttering, emotion driven, touchy feely, kumbaya, let's hug each other kind of relationship with God. There's not one example of that kind of love relationship between God and his people in the Bible. Love is a choice, it is an unselfish, caring for the other person. Love means caring about their welfare, caring about what they think.

The key element in a relationship with God is that it was real. In the Bible God made himself known in real and personal way. In the Bible, people always knew they had been with God, from the beginning when he walked with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, to walking as Jesus with his disciples. Even after Jesus went back to heaven, his followers still knew his very real presence, they knew when God had spoken to them. Through God's Spirit he is still just as real to us today as he was walking with his disciples as Jesus 2000 years ago.

God's personal relationship was practical. He took care of their needs, he guided, instructed, he comforted, he healed.

The Bible presents several images of what it means to know God and have a personal relationship with him. The first image is of the servant to the King. Obviously this is not a chummy, buddy-buddy kind of a relationship, but it is a relationship nonetheless. Think of Joseph or Daniel in the OT being second in command to the king. They were able to have access to the king and enter the king's throne room, to have his ear, yet as second in command they had the authority of the king, therefore having access to everything under the king's control. God is our King and we are his servants. We have access to God whenever we desire, we can enter his throne room, he gives us access to everything under his control. Our loving King promises to care and provide for us, his subjects, and we promise to serve the King and do what he asks of us.

A second image is the sheep to their shepherd. We are the sheep and Jesus is the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd goes out in front of the sheep, the sheep follow him because they hear and know his voice (John 10:3-4). We might not think of sheep and a shepherd as much of a relationship, but the point here is that the sheep know the shepherd and recognize his voice. Those who have a relationship with Christ will hear and recognize his voice. They will know the still small voice of God, see him at work around us, and follow him.

Jesus gave us a new image of our relationship to God, that of a child to a parent. John 1:12 *Yet to all who received him [Jesus], to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.* We aren't just servants to the King, through believing in Jesus, we are children of our heavenly Father. We are adopted into God's family.

NIV Romans 8:15 *So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father."*

Abba is a personal name for father, like daddy. We can relate to God as we would to a father or mother. In a loving nurturing way.

The last and most intimate image is of the bride to her husband. The OT book of Hosea is the story of a prophet of God who was told to marry a prostitute and love her, even though she kept running away from the love relationship and returning to her old lifestyle. God uses this illustration to demonstrate his love relationship to his people Israel who kept wandering away prostituting themselves to their old sinful lifestyle. In the NT this image is further fleshed out by Paul who says we are the bride of Christ. A very intimate kind of relationship.

The Bible uses these images to help us understand that we are meant to be more than just casual acquaintances of God, and that through Jesus we can have a close relationship with God, that is real, personal, and practical. Whether it is like a sheep to a shepherd, servant to a king, a child to a parent, or a bride to her husband. Sometimes it will be one of them at a time and sometimes it will be all of them at once.

This week a quote has been attributed to Billy Graham, and you might recognise it: *Someday you will read or hear that Billy Graham is dead. Don't you believe a word of it. I shall be more alive than I am now. I will just have changed my address. I will have gone into the presence of God.*

Is that your hope and expectation?