

Can You Meet God Outside the Bible?

Written by Bill Perkins

My introduction to Christianity began with my entry into the world. My parents placed their warm hands on my soft head and prayed God's blessing over me. From that moment forward, faith saturated my life. Every Sunday morning, I woke to the smell of brewing coffee and my dad's booming voice practicing his sermon; then after eating breakfast, my family piled into our navy Oldsmobile and headed to church.

Faith comforted me as a child, and I carried it deep in my soul.

Believing Because it Makes Sense

As I grew older, I got involved at church, running slides during worship and inviting friends to youth group. Some of those friends began peppering me with questions about God. To answer their questions, I opened the Bible on my own for the first time. With the harder questions I went to my dad. While he always gave good answers, he did something even better—he pointed me to a stack of apologetics books.

I quickly got my mind around enough information to know my faith wasn't make-believe but based in history. I wasn't satisfied with simple answers, though. I wanted to know more. So I continued studying.

By the time I turned sixteen, I had accumulated tons of data. I knew the New Testament well and could hold my own debating just about any topic a high schooler might raise—whether the historicity of Jesus' resurrection, the inerrancy of the Bible, the scientific support for intelligent design, the differences between Christianity and other religions, or the archeological evidence of biblical events.

Despite all my learning, though, something didn't feel right. That is, I didn't *feel* much of anything. Although I didn't know it at the time, my faith was all brain and no heart. Like learning algebraic formulas, I treated God as just an intellectual belief.

That's not to say my faith wasn't real. In light of my life experiences up to that point, it made sense emotions weren't a part of my faith. But that also meant I had a lopsided faith. God created us as emotional beings, and our relationship with him shouldn't be based on sheer intellectual assent. A vibrant faith requires intellect *and* emotion.

Perhaps more profoundly, my faith as a teenager was wrapped up in my need for stability—my desire to affirm the truth of my childhood and the core of my identity. Adolescence is hard enough, and I certainly wasn't an exception. Like most people, I suffered traumas that left me wounded and scarred. I'm not sure if, in the midst of that turbulent season, I could have also handled a crisis of faith.

So I believed in God because it made sense to believe in God, and because deep down, I needed to continue believing.

Closing the Bible and Stepping Outside

It wasn't until years later that my faith began the long, slow descent from my head to my heart. In a sense, I had to journey through the process of decoupling my faith from my personal history. I had to stop seeing Christ through the eyes of a child, a sort of divine Santa Claus, and meet him as an adult. A real man who wanted a real relationship with me.

Over time, I began seeing Christianity differently; less a list of rigid theological doctrines and systematic proofs, and more a dramatic and mysterious love story, a creative explosion inviting everyone to salvation, an overwhelming invitation into the kingdom of heaven—not at some future point in a far-off destination, but right here and right now.

I came to realize that while I had dedicated years to learning about God, I had never really met him. I had studied God's Word, but I hadn't experienced him. I understood God's nature, but I didn't know him.

As I began drawing near to God, feeling his presence and sensing his Spirit, I noticed it wasn't a result of reading more or memorizing more or studying more. I drew near to God by closing the pages of my Bible and stepping outside, living life in all its glorious messiness.

That's not to minimize the importance of Scripture. It absolutely has its place in the Christian life. God's words are "sweeter than honey" (Psalm 19:10). But Scripture isn't everything. In fact, there are countless ways to experience God outside the Bible.

In Psalm 19, for instance, the author writes:

The heavens declare the glory of God; The skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; Night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; No sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, Their words to the ends of the world.

An Expanded, Lighter Faith

While I still identified with the faith of my childhood, in many ways my faith was different. Bigger and more expansive. Deeper and wider. Softer and more flexible. Less defined and more unknown. Spirit-filled and creative. Challenging yet infinitely lighter.

If you think about it, this is a natural progression. Faith is an intrinsically personal experience, and the Christian faith in particular is based on a relationship with the divine. And just like you can't fall in love with a person simply by reading her journal or studying his movements, you can't learn your way into loving God.

You must live with God to love God.