



Knowing God

by J.I. Packer

IVP, 1993 (first published 1973), 286 pp, ISBN 083081650X

J. I. Packer's *Knowing God* has become a classic of the Christian faith. Why? While it gives us information about God with clarity and grace, it does much more---it aids us in actually knowing him, in building our relationship with him, and helps draw us closer to him in love and worship.

Ignorance of God and his ways, as well as a lack of communion with him lies at the root of much of the church's weakness. This arises from two trends: being conformed to the modern spirit which spawns great thoughts of man and small thoughts of God, and confusion arising from the skepticism of the modern naturalistic worldview. (12)

Study of God

"Nothing will so enlarge the intellect, nothing so magnify the whole soul of man, as a devout, earnest, continued investigation of the great subject of the Deity." (quoting Charles Spurgeon) (18)

"The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know God." (And who therefore must "stumble and blunder through life blindfolded") (19)

Five foundational principles:

1. God has spoken to man through the Bible, his word to make us wise unto salvation.
2. God is Lord and King over his world.
3. God is Saviour, active in sovereign love to rescue believers from both the guilt and the power of sin.
4. God is triune.
5. Godliness means responding to God's revelation in trust and obedience, faith and worship, prayer and praise, submission and service. (20)

“Our aim in studying the Godhead must be to know God himself better ... We turn each truth that we learn about God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God. Meditation is the activity of calling to mind, and thinking over, and dwelling on, and applying to oneself, the various things that one knows about the works and ways and purposes and promises of God ... Its purpose is to clear one’s mental and spiritual vision of God, and to let his truth make its full and proper impact on one’s mind and heart.” (23)

The People Who Know God

“Little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about him” (26)

Evidence of Knowing God (27 ff.)

- One has great energy for God
- One has great thoughts of God (Daniel’s prayers are the best evidence of a man’s view of God. (30)
- One shows great boldness for God
- One has great contentment in God.

“We must learn to measure ourselves, not by our knowledge about God, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts.” (32)

Knowing and Being Known

“What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the ‘eternal life’ that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God.”
What makes life worthwhile is having a big enough objective. What higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?” (33-34)

“As you listen to what God is saying, you find yourself brought very low; for God talks to you about your sin, and guilt, and weakness, and blindness, and folly, and compels you to judge yourself hopeless and helpless, and to cry out for forgiveness... You come to realize as you listen that God is actually opening his heart to you, making friends with you....” (36)

“... knowing God involves, first, listening to God’s Word and receiving it as the Holy Spirit interprets it, in application to oneself; second, noting God’s nature and character, as his Word and works reveal it; third, accepting his invitations and doing what he commands; fourth, recognizing and rejoicing in the love that he has shown in thus approaching you and drawing you into this divine fellowship.” (37)

“Knowing God is a matter of personal involvement—mind, will and feeling. It would not, indeed, be a fully personal relationship otherwise. To get to know another person, you have to commit yourself to his company and interest, and be ready to identify yourself with his concerns ...

Knowing God is an emotional relationship, as well as an intellectual and volitional one, and could not indeed be a deep relation between persons were it not so. The believer is, and must be, emotionally involved in the victories and vicissitudes of God's cause in the world...." (39-40)

God Incarnate

The incarnation is the real stumbling block in Christianity. It is not strange that he, the Author of life, should rise from the dead. If he was truly God the Son, it is much more startling that he should die than that he should rise again." (54)

He Shall Testify

"It is not for us to imagine that we can prove the truth of Christianity by our own arguments; nobody can prove the truth of Christianity except the Holy Spirit, by his own almighty work of renewing the blinded heart ... Do we honour the Holy Spirit by recognizing and relying on his work? The inevitable consequence of unregeneracy is unbelief." (71)

"Living becomes an awesome business when you realize that you spend every moment of your life in the sight and company of an omniscient, omnipresent Creator." (86)

God Only Wise

"For us to be truly wise, in the Bible sense, our intelligence and cleverness must be harnessed to a right end. Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attain it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness." (90)

"What is his goal? What does he aim at? When he made us, his purpose was that we should love and honour him, praising him for the wonderfully ordered complexity and variety of his world, using it according to his will, and so enjoying both it and him. And though we have fallen, God has not abandoned his first purpose. Still he plans that a great host of humankind should come to love and honour him." (92)

"What Abraham needed most of all was to learn the practice of living in God's presence, seeing all life in relation to him, and looking to him, and him alone, as Commander, Defender and Rewarder." (93)

"We should not be too taken aback when unexpected and upsetting and discouraging things happen to us now. What do they mean? Simply that God in his wisdom means to make something of us which we have not attained yet, and he is dealing with us accordingly." (97)

God's Wisdom and Ours

“The moral qualities which belonged to the divine image were lost at the Fall; God’s image in man has been universally defaced, for all of humankind has in one way or another lapsed into ungodliness. But the Bible tells us that now, in fulfillment of his plan of redemption, God is at work in Christian believers to repair his ruined image by communicating these qualities to them afresh. This is what Scripture means when it says that Christians are being renewed in the image of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18) and of God (Colossians 3:10).” According to Scripture there are two prerequisites for wisdom: 1) learning to reverence God, and 2) learning to receive His Word. We do this by “soaking ourselves in the Scripture.” (100-1)

“To live wisely, you have to be clear-sighted and realistic—ruthlessly so—in looking at life as it is ... Most of us live in a dream world, with our heads in the clouds and our feet off the ground; we never see the world, and our lives in it, as they really are. This deep-seated, sin-bred unrealism is one reason why there is so little wisdom among us...” (104)

“Wisdom consists in choosing the best means to the best end. God’s work of giving wisdom is a means to his chosen end of restoring and perfecting the relationship between himself and human beings ... Thus, the effect of his gift of wisdom is to make us more humble, more joyful, more godly, more quick-sighted as to his will, more resolute in the doing of it and less troubled....” (108)

Thy Word is Truth

God’s Word to us includes commands, promise and testimony ... He made us with the intention that he and we might walk together forever in a love relationship ... Therefore, God sends his word to us in the character of both information and invitation.” (110)

“God’s word is his executive instrument in all human affairs... what he says goes ... the claim of the Word of God upon us is absolute: the Word is to be received, trusted and obeyed, because it is the Word of God the King ... Truth in the Bible is a quality of persons primarily, and of propositions only secondarily. It means stability, reliability, firmness, trustworthiness...” (112-3)

“As rational persons, we were made to bear God’s moral image—that is, our souls were made to ‘run’ on the practice of worship, law-keeping, truthfulness, honesty, discipline, self-control, and service to God and our fellows. If we abandon these practices, not only do we incur guilt before God; we also progressively destroy our own souls. Conscience atrophies, the sense of shame dries up, one’s capacity for truthfulness, loyalty and honesty is eaten away, one’s character disintegrates. One is steadily being dehumanized.” (114)

“True Christians are people who acknowledge and live under the word of God.” (116)

The Love of God

“‘God is love’ means that his love finds expression in everything that he says and does.” (122) “God saves, not only for his glory, but also for his gladness.” (125)

The Grace of God

Four critical underlying truths:

1. *The moral ill-desert of man.* In the moral realm people tend to be far too generous toward themselves, “treating small virtues as compensating for great vices ... The thought of themselves as creatures fallen from God’s image, rebels against God’s rule, guilty and unclean in God’s sight, fit only for God’s condemnation, never enters their heads.” (130)
2. *The retributive justice of God.* “The accepted maxim seems to be that as long as evil can be ignored, it should be ... In our pagan way, we take it for granted that God feels as we do.”
3. *The spiritual impotence of man.*
4. *The sovereign freedom of God.* “Modern paganism feels that God is somehow obliged to love and help us....” (131)

“The grace of God is love freely shown toward guilty sinners, contrary to their merit and, indeed, in defiance of their demerit. It is God showing goodness to persons who deserve only severity ... Justification is the truly dramatic transition from the status of a condemned criminal awaiting a terrible sentence to that of an heir awaiting a fabulous inheritance.” (132-3)

God the Judge

There are few things stressed more strongly in the Bible than the reality of God’s work as Judge. In the New Testament, God’s action as Judge is actually intensified. “The entire New Testament is overshadowed by the certainty of a coming day of universal judgment ... The heart of the justice which expresses God’s nature is retribution, the rendering to persons what they have deserved....” (138-142)

The Wrath of God

Wrath is an attribute of God. “To an age which has unashamedly sold itself to the gods of greed, pride, sex and self-will, the church mumbles on about God’s kindness but says virtually nothing about his judgment.” Divine wrath has become taboo in modern society. But “just as God is good to those who trust him, so he is terrible to those who do not.” (148-49)

We are unhappy with the idea of a wrathful God. It seems somehow unworthy of him. But his wrath is never capricious, self-indulgent, irritable or morally ignoble.

“It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil ... It is the wrath of the Judge, administering justice ... The essence of God’s action in wrath is to give men what they choose, in all its implications....” (150-53)

Goodness and Severity

Both goodness and severity are attributes of God. We take them not singly but together. God’s severity denotes God’s decisive withdrawal of his goodness from those who have spurned it ... behind every display of divine goodness stands a threat of severity in judgment if that goodness is scorned.” (163-64)

The Jealous God

“God’s jealousy is not a compound of frustration, envy and spite, as human jealousy so often is, but appears instead as a (literally) praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious.” There is a jealousy of positive virtue, such as the zeal of married persons to protect their love relationship or to avenge it when broken. God’s jealousy is of this type, “an aspect of his covenant love for his own people ... Our right response to his jealousy over us is zeal for him. Zeal in religion is a burning desire to please God, to do His will, and to advance His glory in the world in every possible way.” (170-73)

The Heart of the Gospel: (Propitiation)

Man’s root problem before God is his sin, which evokes wrath. God has made his basic provision for the satisfaction of God’s wrath, propitiation, which out of wrath brings peace. (189)

“The peace of God is first and foremost peace with God; it is the state of affairs in which God, instead of being against us, is for us. It is “a new relationship of forgiveness and acceptance ...” (196)

Sons of God

The Old Testament laid the greatest stress on God as holy and separate, on his greatness and purity. New Testament religion can be summed up as “the knowledge of God as one’s holy Father ... The revelation to the believer that God is his Father is in a sense the climax of the Bible.” The highest privilege that the gospel offers is adoption. “God intends the lives of believers to be a reflection and reproduction of Jesus’ own fellowship with himself.” Fatherhood implies authority, affection, fellowship and honour. The entire Christian life has to be understood in terms of sonship. (201-09)

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption. The three aspects of His work are 1) keeping us conscious that we are God’s children by free grace, 2) moving us to look to God as father, showing respectful boldness, and 3) acting up to our position as royal children

by “manifesting the family likeness (conforming to Christ), furthering the family welfare (loving the brethren) and maintaining the family honour (seeking God’s glory).” (220)

“In this world, royal children have to undergo extra training and discipline which other children escape, in order to fit them for their high destiny. It is the same with the children of the King of kings. The clue to understanding all his dealings with them is to remember that throughout their lives he is training them for what awaits them, and chiseling them into the image of Christ ... While justification frees one forever from the need to keep the law, or try to, as the means of earning life, it is equally true that adoption lays on one the abiding obligation to keep the law, as the means of pleasing one’s newfound Father.” (222-3)

“Wisdom in Scripture always means knowledge of the course of action that will please God and secure life...” (232)

Christians seeking guidance often overlook the guidance that is ready at hand. They look for inward prompting apart from the written Word. An inward voice sounds attractive and spiritual but leads to “frantic bewilderment or lunacy.” God guides us fundamentally by “the rational understanding and application of his written Word ... The basic form of divine guidance is the presentation to us of positive ideals as guidelines for all our living ... The Spirit leads within the limits which the Word sets, not beyond them.” (234-37)

Six common pitfalls: unwillingness to think, to think ahead, to take advice, to suspect oneself, to discount personal magnetism, and to wait. “God often keeps us waiting.” And God’s guidance is not proved or disproved by a trouble-free life thereafter. “Trouble should always be treated as a call to consider one’s ways. But trouble is not necessarily a sign of being off track ... Christians have many troubles “nor does God always tell us the why and wherefore of the frustrations and losses which are part and parcel of the guided life ... The right context for discussing guidance is one of confidence in the God who will not let us ruin our souls. Our concern, therefore, should be more for his glory than for our security....” (237-42)

These Inward Trials

“God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on him. Therefore, he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in him ... to ‘wait on the Lord.’ This truth has many applications. One of the most startling is that God actually uses our sins and mistakes to this end. He employs the educative discipline of failures and mistakes very frequently. It is striking to see how much of the Bible deals with godly people making mistakes and God chastening them for it ... God can bring good out of the extremes of our own folly...” (250-51)