

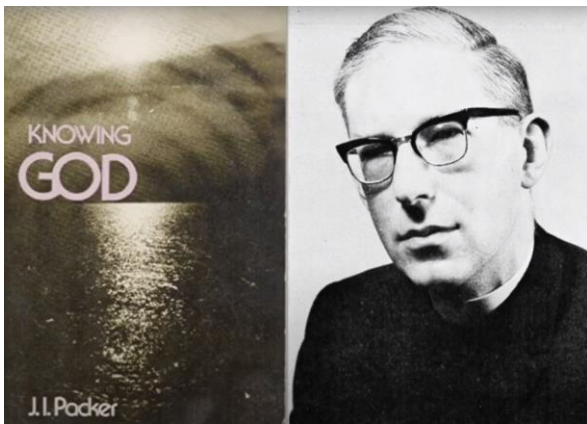
**“Knowing God by J.I. Packer**  
**Session 1: Chapters 1-3 (June 13, 2022)**  
**Father Jonathan Bailes**



**Lesson Summary:**

*Originally published in 1973, Knowing God has been hailed as one of the greatest Christian classics of modern times and, by 1992, had sold more than 100 million copies. That is rather strange considering the fact that it was written by a (then) relatively unknown British academic and is a rather demanding read. Nevertheless, since its release and ever since, generations of Christians have read and reread and been changed by this book. Our first session will focus on the first three chapters of Knowing God and the accompanying video will highlight a couple key themes in those chapters.*

In 1973, InterVarsity Press published a book that the editors thought would one day be regarded as a classic.



That book was *Knowing God*, and the editors were right. By the early 1990s, the book had sold more than 1 million copies in America and had earned numerous accolades from some of America's most important Christian leaders. People like Billy Graham, Elisabeth Elliott, Joni Eareckson Tada, Chuck Colson - all of whom testified that this book was one of the most important and impactful they'd ever read.

Looking back on all of this now, nearly 50 years later, it's quite remarkable that this book had the impact that it did. After all, the author of the book was not a prominent American church leader or celebrity, but a relatively unknown British academic. He was an Anglican priest by the name of J.I. Packer, who was at the time serving in a small theological college in Bristol, England.

What's also surprising is that despite the confidence of the book's original editors that it would be a success, it's not an easy read. In fact, it's quite dense. As Packer's biographer would later say, it's a book that makes “considerable demands” of its readers.

So why and how did this demanding book by a British academic become such a bestseller among American Christians? Perhaps one of the reasons is that this book is not just a dry, abstract, academic discussion that aims to give us right opinions about God. No, as you'll discover when you read it, it's a very lively, passionate, joyful exploration that aims at nothing less than bringing its readers into a personal and face to face encounter with the living God.

As the great evangelical preacher John Stott put it when he described his own reading of this book:

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*The truth [Packer] handles fires the heart. At least, it fired mine, and compelled me to turn aside to worship and to pray.*



JOHN STOTT

Or as another well-known preacher, the late Billy Graham, said:

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*This book will help every reader grasp in a fuller way one of the Bible's greatest truths: that we can know God personally, because God wants us to know him.*



BILLY GRAHAM

That's the goal of this book.

Knowing God isn't just meant to teach us truths about God. It's meant to fire our hearts, to lead us to worship, and to show us how we can know God personally as He desires to be known.

As Packer says right in the very first chapter, this goal - knowing God - is something that every person should care deeply about. Not because it's something we owe to God. This isn't some kind of religious duty. Like I said, it's not because it's important to have right opinions about God. No, it is something we should care about because it is crucial to our ability to live well and to live successfully in this world.



*We are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it ... Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 19)

That's why, as he says elsewhere, "knowing God" is the most practical project anyone can engage in. Because if we don't know God, we will never be able to navigate our lives successfully.

But the purpose of studying God isn't just to help us live well. If that were the case, if we only tried to know about God so that we could make wise decisions, then we would end up treating God as nothing more than a means to an end.

### **A Means to an End?**

Sadly, we often have a tendency to do just that. I don't know if you've ever noticed this, but if you talk to people about the purpose of religion or the purpose of Christianity, you'll often hear something about its practical benefits. Religion is important, we're told, because it helps people to be more kind and conscientious in their dealings with others, or because it makes their marriages stronger and more dependable. Because it tends to reduce depression and anxiety. Scientific studies have linked church attendance and religious involvement to better physical and mental health, stronger families, better performance at school, and higher levels of happiness and satisfaction.

### **Seeking to be Led to God**

And of course, that's not surprising. Those who know God should experience healthier and more satisfying lives. But that is not the primary reason why we should seek to study or know God. It isn't just because of its practical benefit to us. No, as Packer says at the end of his first chapter:



*Our aim in studying the Godhead must be to know God himself better ... As he is the subject of our study, and our helper in it, so he must himself be the end of it. We must seek, in studying God, to be led to God. It was for this purpose that revelation was given, and it is to this use that we must put it.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 23)

### **What Does it Mean to "Know God"?**

As you begin to read the book, you may start to wonder what exactly does Packer mean by this phrase "knowing God" - he certainly uses it often enough. It's the title of the book, and it's a phrase that he repeats again and again in the first chapters. But what does that actually mean? (To know God) What does that involve? How is a person supposed to go about it?

Thankfully, Packer himself anticipates these questions.



*What are we talking about when we use the phrase 'knowing God'? A special sort of emotion? Shivers down the back? A dreamy, off-the-ground, floating feeling? Or is knowing God a special sort of intellectual experience? Does one hear a voice? see a vision? find trains of thoughts coming to one's mind? or what?*

KNOWING GOD (P. 34)

As you can tell from the many examples he gives, this is a question that has been answered in a wide variety of ways. Some people think of a relationship with God as a very direct and emotional experience. Some people talk about encountering God through the majesty of nature or through unexpected and surprising moments when things just seem to come together. Some people talk about hearing from God directly in moments of prayer or meditation.

But that's not exactly what Packer means when he talks about knowing God. Don't get me wrong, he certainly doesn't dispute the reality of experiencing God's glory in creation or experiencing God personally through

prayer. Indeed, he puts great emphasis on how personal a thing it is to know God and as he puts it, to "be known" by God. He also says that knowing God does involve our emotions.



*The believer is, and must be, emotionally involved in the victories and vicissitudes of God's cause in the world ... Believers rejoice when their God is honored and vindicated and feel the acutest distress when they see God flouted.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 40)

There is no such thing then as unemotional or unfeeling knowledge of God. Yet when it comes to "how" a person can know God, Packer insists that we don't begin with our emotions or our spiritual experiences.

We don't come to know God by taking long hikes in the woods or by sitting quietly and meditation and listening for a voice within. No, the way that we come to know God, he says, is by paying close attention to God's own revelation of himself. Knowing God, he says, is a matter of:



*... listening to God's Word and receiving it as the Holy Spirit interprets it ... noting God's nature and character, as his Word and work reveal it ... accepting his invitations and doing what he commands ... [and] recognizing and rejoicing in the love that he has shown in thus approaching you and drawing you into this divine fellowship.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 37)

In other words, if you want to know the living God, then you need to pay attention to where that God has revealed himself in the Bible. That's a very important principle, and it's one that Packer himself sticks to all throughout this book. He wants us to know God.

In order to do that, he draws our attention over and over again to the **words of Scripture**, almost as if he were a tour guide, walking us around the pages of the Bible, constantly calling for our attention. Look over here. Did you notice what it says there? But Packer's goal as a tour guide is not just to acquaint us with a city we've never been to. His goal is to acquaint us with nothing less than the living God.

## Group Discussion Questions

1. What is one thing from this week's assigned chapters that stood out to you?
2. In chapter 1, Packer says that "a study of the nature and character of God" is "the most practical project anyone can engage in." What do you make of his claim? Why (or why not) is the study of God practically relevant to our lives?
3. Packer makes a big distinction between knowing about God and knowing God. Knowing God, he says, isn't just a matter of having right opinions or knowing facts. It includes knowledge of the nature and character of God, but it also involves a personal relationship with God, being friends with God. How would you describe what it means to know God?
4. Can you name some examples of people (either in the Bible or that you've known personally) whom you would say have "known God"? What can you learn from their example?
5. What do you think is the greatest challenge that the assigned chapters of this week pose to you? What is one practical step that you can take this week to apply and act on the lesson from this week?