

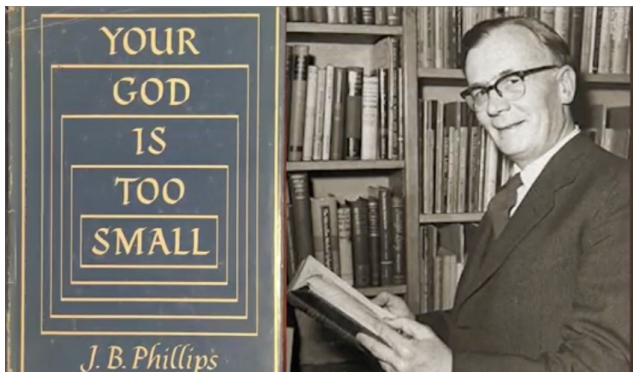
“Knowing God by J.I. Packer
Session 3: Chapters 7-8 (June 27, 2022)
Father Jonathan Bailes



Lesson Summary:

“Your God is too small.” Those words are the title of a small book by the English clergyman, J.B. Phillips, and they are a fitting summary of the themes that occupy chapters seven and eight of Knowing God. Much like his fellow Englishman, Packer believes that we have a severely diminished understanding of God, owing in part to the wide gap between our own experience of God and the experience of biblical saints, who found themselves overwhelmed by the voice of God and thrown to their knees by the faintest glimpse of His glory. And yet, as Packer notes in chapter seven, the God whom we are invited to know is none other than the exact same God who addressed Moses out of a bush and called down fire on a mountaintop in the days of Elijah and spoke words of consolation to a grieving Mary on the day of resurrection. “The God with whom we have to do is,” as he puts it, “the same God with whom we have to do.”

In 1952, the Anglican clergyman J.B. Phillips published a little book that would go on to become a best seller - a book entitled "Your God Is Too Small."



Phillips' argument right from the outset of the book is that many people struggle with faith, in part he says, because their conception of God has never really advanced beyond what they thought of God as a child.

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While their experience of life has grown in a score of directions, and their mental horizons have been expanded to the point of bewilderment by world events and by scientific discoveries, their ideas of God have remained largely static.



J.B. PHILLIPS

Many people have a conception of God that is, in Phillips' words, simply too small. J.I. Packer, interestingly, mentions that little book by Phillips in chapter 8 of "Knowing God." And that's worth noting

because what Packer is trying to do in this chapter (and in the one before it) and what Phillips was trying to do with his little book, have very much in common.

Both of these English clergymen agree that one of the primary obstacles of faith in the modern world, one of the reasons that we modern people have such a hard time relating to the faith that's on display in all those stories in the Bible, is simply that we do not understand God as they did.

Men like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David, Samuel and Elijah. Women like Sarah and Ruth, Hannah and Deborah, Mary, Elizabeth, Mary Magdalene. They encountered and dealt with a God whose grandeur was overwhelming and whose presence made you tremble and thrill all at the same time.

We, by comparison, often imagine God is little more than a distant but comforting presence, or a kind doting grandparent figure; or a stern, disapproving authoritarian. Their God was immense and incomprehensible. Ours is often quite small in comparison.

So what should we do? How can you and I experience the God who made Moses' face to shine and Isaiah's knees quake and Mary's heart feel overwhelmed with joy?

The first thing we can do, as Packer says in chapter 7, is realize that the God with whom we have to deal is the exact same God that all those saints of the Bible dealt with in year's past.



Make the video larger

It is true that in terms of space, time and culture, [those biblical saints] and the historical epoch to which they belonged are a very long way away from us. But the link between them and us is not found at that level. The link is God himself. For the God with whom they have to do is the same with whom we have to do. We could sharpen the point by saying exactly the same God; for God does not change in the least particular.

KNOWING GOD (P. 76)

After that comment, Packer goes on to explain what he means by God being “exactly the same.” He does this with six claims.

- 1) At first, he says, God's life does not change. God has no beginning, and therefore his life, his existence never changes.
- 2) The second, Packer says, God's character does not change. Who he was in his interaction with the patriarchs and the prophets and the people of Israel is exactly the same as who he is today.
- 3) The third, God's truth does not change. He never takes back anything he says. He never leaves his promises unfulfilled. God remains true to his word.
- 4) Fourth, God's ways do not change. God dealt with people in certain ways in the Bible, and that's how He continues to deal with them still.



[God's] aims and principles of action remain consistent; he does not at any time act out of character. Our ways, we know, are pathetically inconstant—but not God's.

KNOWING GOD (P. 79)

- 5) Fifth, God's purposes do not change. He doesn't change His mind. When God intends to do something, he sticks with those intentions. When he makes plans, he carries it out.
- 6) Finally, one sixth and final way in which we see God's consistency is in the consistency of Jesus Christ. God's son does not change. He is, as Hebrews 13:8 says, the same yesterday, today and forever.

Well, what does all this mean for us? It means that when you and I seek to know God, we're seeking to know the same God whom David knew and Isaiah and Mary and all those other biblical figures. It means that the God who Moses met on Mt. Sinai and John saw in a vision on the Isle of Patmos, that's the same God that we meet with every time we open Scripture or sit down or kneel to privately pray or sit in the pew of a church.

It means, in short, that we need to expand our conception of God because clearly our God is too small.

Now, all of this discussion of how God doesn't change in chapter 7 leads very naturally into what Packer addresses in his next chapter, fittingly titled "The Majesty of God." The Bible speaks often infrequently about the greatness and majesty of God. But that's not really the case today. One of the reasons that's not really the case, at least according to Packer, is that today people like to think of God in a very familiar and personal terms.



Today, vast stress is laid on the thought that God is personal, but this truth is so stated as to leave the impression that God is a person of the same sort as we are—weak, inadequate, ineffective, a little pathetic.

KNOWING GOD (P. 83)

There is great truth to the statement that God is personal. God is not an impersonal force. He is not simply a remote, powerful, authoritative figure. The God of the Bible regularly and gladly enters into personal relationship with his people. That is true right from the very beginning. Just think about the portrait we have of God in Genesis 3, where we're told that Adam and Eve heard the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, calling out to them by name. You can't get much more personal than that.

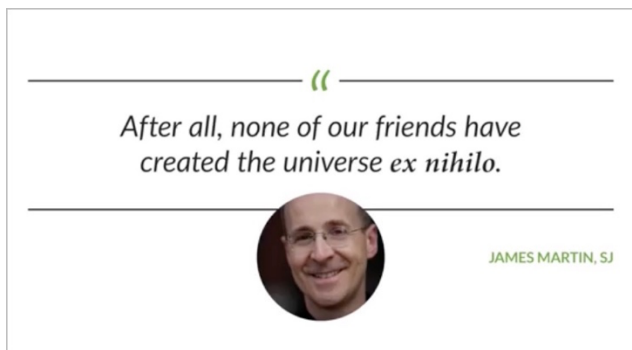
At the same time, it would be very misleading to say that just because the God of Genesis is personal, having a relationship with him is just like having a relationship with another person.

After all, what we're told about in the very first chapter of Genesis is that this same God is the one who called all of creation, both heaven and earth, into existence

simply by the word of his mouth. He was the one who ordered the stars and set boundaries for the ocean and filled the skies and seas and land with creatures of every kind.

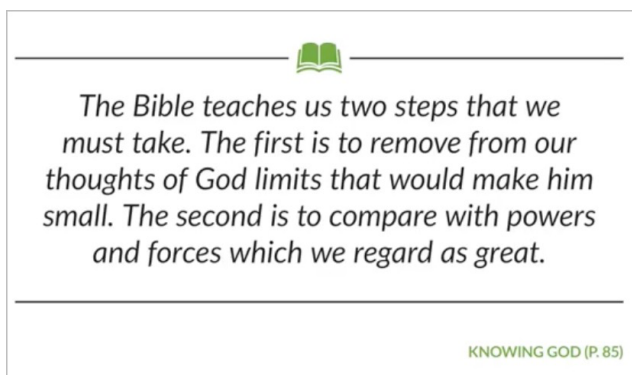
So God is personal? Yes. But he is no mere person like you and me. Unfortunately, a lot of people today seem to think of God in just that way, almost as if he was just like any other person.

I thought about this recently when I was reading a book by a Jesuit priest who was talking about prayer. He spoke about prayer at one point by describing it as friendship with God. But then he cautioned against taking that analogy too far.



Now, that's a hard thing to do, you know, to relate to God as a friend. And yet remember that he is not merely a friend. He is the one, as the Apostle Paul said, in whom we live and move and have our being.

How are we supposed to maintain this balance? How can we know God in a personal way without losing sight of His majesty? How can we form a right understanding of His greatness? Packer says that the Bible has an answer to that question.



Remove from your thoughts of God anything that might make him small and then compare him with anything that you find to be great and glorious, overwhelming, and majestic.

And in every case, see how the greatness of God outstrips anything else that you can possibly imagine. That, Packer says, is how the Bible teaches us to keep in mind the majesty of God. And that is how you can begin to know him rightly.

Group Discussion Questions

1. What is one thing from this week's assigned chapters that stood out to you?
2. What do you make of J.B. Phillips's claim that God—at least God in the way that most of us imagine him—is “too small”? How has your understanding of God changed or developed as you've aged and grown in your faith?
3. Packer says that, when we read the Bible, many of us feel detached from its description of the experience of God in the lives of biblical saints. And yet, as he goes on to point out in chapter 7, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob (and Moses and Hannah and Isaiah, etc.) is exactly the same God whom we are invited to know and experience. Why, then, do so many people feel distanced from the description of God that they read in the Bible? How might Packer's emphasis on the changelessness of God's life, character, truth, ways, and purposes help you to find more common ground with the stories of believers in the Bible?
4. Chapter 8 discusses the theme of God's majesty and transcendence. How have you experienced the majesty of God? Can you think of any particular moments in prayer or worship when you have been particularly reminded of the greatness of God? What are some ways that we can remind ourselves of the incomparable majesty of God?
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?