

**“Knowing God by J.I. Packer**  
**Session 7: Chapters 18-19 (July 25, 2022)**  
**Father Michael Funderburk**



**Lesson Summary:**

*With these chapters in Knowing God, we come to the climax of this classic work. Whereas in previous chapters we unpacked A.W. Tozer’s idea that “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us,” in this lesson, we unpack the idea that what comes into our minds when we think about the word ‘gospel’ is a close second in importance—if not equally as important. Packer’s three-word summary of the gospel is “adoption through propitiation,” and these two chapters unpack the meaning of that phrase. To understand what it means to be God’s adopted children, we must first understand how that adoption was made possible, which is through Christ’s propitiation on the cross. But what do these words mean—adoption and propitiation—and why do they matter so much to Packer and to us? This lesson explores the significance of propitiation (Christ’s atoning sacrifice) and how it leads to our adoption as God’s children.*

With this session of our "Knowing God" study, we have come to what I think J.I. Packer would consider the climax of this entire work. In fact, Kevin Vanhoozer, in the foreword to the version of "Knowing God" that we've been reading, speaks to this when he cites that A.W. Tozer quote that we used at the beginning of this whole series.

Tozer says, "What comes into our minds when we think of God is the most important thing about us." And then Vanhoozer goes on to add:

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*Close on its heels, however, is what comes into our minds when we think about the gospel. Packer packed his thought into a three-word phrase: ‘adoption through propitiation.’ This is why knowing God is, for Packer, much more than an intellectual exercise. To know God is to relate to the Creator of all things as one’s loving Father ... The chapter on adoption is, not surprisingly, one of the highlights of the book you are about to read.*



KEVIN VANHOOZER  
KNOWING GOD (P. 8)

Knowing God, as we made clear early in this study and as Vanhoozer makes clear in this preface, is not about a mere intellectual grasp of some ideas about God. It's about a relationship with Almighty God who wants to be in relationship with us and, in fact, invites us into his life.

But how does that happen? Well, that's what chapters 18 and 19 are all about. What these chapters do is unpack that three word summary of the gospel that Vanhoozer highlights.

“Adoption through propitiation.” But what do those terms mean? There's a lot of unpacking to be done there.

Let's take a look at two highlights from our reading; one from each of the two chapters that we read to see why Packer cares about these terms so much. And why they're so significant to our understanding of the Gospel.

First, let's do this, though. Notice the grammar of that three-word phrase:

Adoption *through* propitiation

Adoption through propitiation. That key word through tells us that one of these things is the result of the other. In this case, adoption happens as a result of propitiation. And that's exactly the order in which these chapters handle these important topics.

So let's look at chapter 18 first and see why Packer thinks propitiation is so crucial for our understanding of the Gospel and for knowing God. But before we go any further, you may be wondering what this word even means. Perhaps you've never heard it before in your life. Propitiation. What is this?

**Defining “Propitiation”**

Let's just begin by giving it a kind of Webster's Dictionary definition, a popular level understanding of what propitiation is. And this is what it is:

Regaining the favor of someone  
by doing something that restores  
a breach in relationship

Now, the problem with this dictionary definition (popular level, common understanding) of propitiation is that the picture of propitiation in scripture is quite different. Packer makes this clear in chapter 18. Of all the things that Packer says about propitiation, it's important that we highlight how Packer says it differs from this common understanding.

First, the way he does this is he seeks to distinguish it from the ancient pagan understanding of propitiation. To distinguish the biblical way of understanding it from that ancient pagan way. In fact, Packer starts off the chapter with a well-known story from Greek mythology about how the Greek army was held up in port because they had offended a god (the goddess Artemis.)

Agamemnon, the leader of the Greeks, had to call for his poor young daughter to be brought to port so that he could sacrifice her to appease Artemis. Artemis was upset because some of the Greeks had hunted one of her sacred stags and killed it and she was angry. So the Greek soldiers had to do something to please her so that they could set sail again.

In other words, there was something within the goddess, there was something that had to be overcome - her anger within her. It had to be appeased so that they could move forward (so that there could be a right relationship.) Now the problem with this view of propitiation, as Packer highlights, is that it images human relations with God as (in Packer's words):



*... a callous commercialism, a matter  
of managing and manipulating  
your gods by cunning bribery.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 180)

That's what pagan propitiation is. It's a kind of transactional relationship. Or in Packer's word, *commercialism* - rooted in manipulation and control.

So how does the biblical view, the view that Packer wants to set forth, differ from that pagan and even, I would say, popular view as we understand propitiation? Of all the things that I can highlight in chapter 18, I want us to look at just one paragraph that I want to commend to you to highlight in your book; literally highlight it, to meditate on it, and to come back to.

Here's the key way a Biblical view of propitiation differs from that ancient pagan view - and from a common modern day view of it as well. It's where in this chapter, Packer tells us that propitiation is the work of God himself.

### God **ACTIVE** in Propitiation

Packer begins by distinguishing in this paragraph that pagan view of propitiation from Christian views of it, by referring to that pagan view once again as a kind of commercialism, a form of manipulation and bribery. But in Christianity, propitiation isn't about overcoming some barrier within God. That is, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross doesn't change the mind of an angry and capricious father. It is not like how the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter changed the mind of the goddess Artemis. No, in fact, as Packer goes on to say:



*The idea that the kind Son changed the mind of his unkind Father by offering himself in place of sinful man is no part of the gospel message—it is a sub-Christian, indeed an anti-Christian, idea, for it denies the unity of will in the Father and the Son and so in reality falls back into polytheism, asking us to believe in two different gods. But the Bible rules this out absolutely by insisting it was God himself who took the initiative in quenching his own wrath against those whom, despite their ill-desert, he loved and had chosen to save.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 185)

In other words, I think of all the things that Packer tries to get across in this chapter to us, this is the one I think he believes to be central to the biblical understanding of propitiation. Namely, that **God is not a passive object when it comes to our salvation.** He's not standing there with arms folded, waiting to

be pleased. No, in the biblical equation that Packer is trying to get us to see, **God is the active subject!** And Christ's willingness to go to the cross is the revelation of the lengths that God is willing to go to rescue His creation from their separation from Him.

If that is what is at the heart of propitiation in scripture and according to Packer, then what are propitiation's benefits? What do we gain from it? Again, remember Packer's three-word summary of the Gospel - "adoption through propitiation."

Through propitiation, we receive, adoption. That's the benefit. And that's the focus of chapter 19. And don't know if this struck you as peculiar, but Packer makes adoption central to salvation. Much of evangelical preaching and teaching, perhaps of the last 50 or 100 years even, has often focused on the theological idea of justification as the key benefit of God's propitiatory work in Christ.

But Packer in this chapter says "no." Justification – (that is, in Packer's words):



*... God's forgiveness of the past together with his acceptance for the future ...*

KNOWING GOD (P. 206)

... is just the beginning! Justification is the threshold into the fuller life as God's son or daughter.

In fact, as you may recall, Packer says that while justification (forgiveness of sins; being made right with God) is the fundamental and primary (first) blessing of the Christian life, it is not the highest blessing. Adoption is the highest blessing of the Gospel. Why? Packer says:



*... because of the richer relationship with God that it involves ... Justification is a forensic idea, conceived in terms of law, and viewing God as judge ... Adoption is a family idea, conceived in terms of love, and viewing God as father. In adoption, God takes us into his family and fellowship—he establishes us as his children and heirs. Closeness, affection, and generosity are at the heart of this relationship. To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 206-207)

So just as I tried to give you a hub around which to center your thinking about propitiation in chapter 18, that it's all about God's work through and through. So also here, I want to commend this excerpt to you as the hub around which to think about this important idea of adoption in this chapter.

In other words, to sum up what Packer is saying, if we content ourselves with a faith that is only about justification, that is the forgiveness of our sins, then we're missing out on our true end. Our true end is not just a right relationship with God, not just the forgiveness of sins, but a loving relationship with God, an intimate relationship of trust and delight.

Packer emphasizes this toward the end of chapter 19, when he writes about assurance. As Packer in that final part says, the reformers, and, in particular, Martin Luther, like to distinguish what they called an historical faith. That is, a belief in the facts of Christianity, even the facts of salvation, without a response or commitment. Without an inner change. Comparing that to true faith or contrasting that with true faith, or, in the reformer's words, using the Latin "fiducia" (confidence.)

So to come full circle from where we started this session and really this whole series, Packer emphasizes that we need more than just a mere cognitive acknowledgement of God's forgiveness to have the life that God desires for us. A life of being made more and more into Christ's likeness. We need *fiducia* ... confidence.



... first, in the truth of God's promise of pardon and life to believing sinners, and second, in its application to oneself as a believer. 'Faith,' declared Luther, 'is a living deliberate confidence in the grace of God, so certain that for it one can die a thousand deaths, and such confidence ... makes us joyous, intrepid, and cheerful towards God and all creation.'

KNOWING GOD (P. 224)

At the beginning of this session, I said, I believe Packer is reaching the climax of our study of "Knowing God" in these chapters.

Because if we're to know God better through this book...

not just as a good judge who justifies us and acquits us and sets us free, but as a loving father who longs to dwell with us (just as the father of the prodigal son longed to be united with his son)

...then what more glorious truth can there be than the truth of our adoption in Christ?

Again, not just that we're justified (forgiven), but that we're given the very privileges Christ has as God's well-beloved Son. The privileges of sonship; of being a child of God.

Does your faith (in Luther's way of saying it) give you confidence so certain that for it, you could die a thousand deaths? A confidence that makes you joyous, intrepid, bold, and cheerful towards God and your neighbor (the world.)

I think if it doesn't, then Packer would encourage you; I think Holy Scripture would encourage you to meditate on this truth of your adoption in Christ, especially as J.I. Packer lays it out in this chapter 19.

Or perhaps knowing J.I. Packer and his fondness for St Paul and the letter to the Romans, he might encourage you to focus on this brief passage from that book that says:



... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

ROMANS 5:8

*So may the wonders of God's love for us in Christ so capture our imagination and our hearts that we may live more and more into our status as God's adopted sons and daughters.*

#### Group Discussion Questions

1. What is one thing from this week's assigned chapters that has really stuck with you?
2. What is propitiation according to Packer? What is it not? How did his explanation help you understand a biblical view of this important theological idea? Or did it? If not, what questions do you still have?
3. According to Packer, adoption is a "higher" blessing than justification, which he calls the "primary" blessing of salvation. What is Packer's reasoning for making this claim? Did this challenge your understanding of the gospel at all? Why or why not?
4. The word propitiation is used only four times in the New Testament and adoption is used only five times, according to Packer, and yet he argues both provide the foundation upon which our understanding of the gospel should be built. What do you think about this assertion? Is Packer missing other key ideas from Scripture to round out our understanding of salvation? Why or why not?
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?