

**“Knowing God by J.I. Packer**

**Session 8: Chapters 20-22 (August 1, 2022)**

**Father Jonathan Bailes**



**Lesson Summary:**

*The purpose of “Knowing God,” as J.I. Packer has made clear from the beginning, is not simply to give us information about God. The purpose of this book is to help us to know God personally. Packer returns to that theme in chapters 20 and 21 by focusing on two common mistakes that often hamper our relationship with God, one having to do with how we think of God’s guidance and the other with how we understand His grace. Then, in the final chapter, Packer addresses what he argues is one of the main obstacles in our pursuit of knowing God: the fear that, if we devote ourselves to this purpose entirely, we’ll be forced to give up something essential.*

We've done it! We finally come to the end of our study of J.I. Packer's wonderful book “Knowing God.”

On a personal note, I have to say this has been both a wonderful and challenging experience for me. It's been almost 20 years since I last read this book. I had forgotten just how wise and insightful it is. What I remembered about this book and what I was expecting from it was a book on the doctrine of God; a book outlining what Christians believe about who God is and what he's like. I wasn't disappointed - this book is indeed an excellent discussion of the nature and character of God.

But what I've forgotten (and what really made this book such a challenge) is that it isn't just a book aiming to help us know about God. It's a book that aims to help us know God; to know him on an intimate and personal level; to have a deep and abiding relationship with him. To live the whole of our lives, as the Protestant reformers like to say, “Coram Deo” - before and in the face of God.

That goal is especially prominent in the final three chapters of the book, where Packer focuses on two common mistakes that Christians make in their relationship with God. And then in the final chapter, He reminds us once again, why the call to know God is the one thing that matters above all else. As always, there's an enormous amount of material in these three chapters that I won't be able to discuss. But I would like to briefly summarize what Packer has to say about those two common mistakes that Christians make, before I say something about his final chapter.

So first, what are these two mistakes? How does Packer seek to rectify them?

## (Mis)Understanding God’s Guidance

The first mistake that he talks about (the one he focuses on in chapter 20) has to do with a misunderstanding of God's guidance in our lives.

Guidance is a big deal for Christians. That should come as no surprise. After all, life is filled with choices. And every decision we make involves us saying yes to one option and no to others. Naturally, we want to do the right thing. We want to follow God's will as we make these decisions. So we need his guidance. Packer is very affirmative of that. We should want God's guidance to help us make good decisions. We should expect that God will indeed give us guidance. After all, as Packer points out, the Bible affirms that God has a will for our lives, and that God is a being who has both the ability and desire to communicate that will to us.

The mistake we make has to do with how we go about discerning that will. One way that we do this, according to Packer, is by assuming that God's normal way of directing us is through some kind of inward prompting or direct word from the Holy Spirit. That does happen on occasion. But that's not the normal way that God guides us.

No, the normal way that God guides us is through his teaching in Holy Scripture.



*The fundamental guidance God gives to shape our lives ... is not a matter of inward promptings apart from the Word but of the pressure on our consciences of the portrayal of God's character and will in the Word, which the Spirit enlightens us to understand and apply to ourselves.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 236)

Another mistake that we make is that we over-spiritualize God's guidance, and we overestimate our own grasp of it. Because of that, we tend to fall prey to what Packer identifies as six common pitfalls, which revolve around our unwillingness to engage in hard thinking, and our unwillingness to be suspicious of our own intuitions - and so we don't seek counsel from others.

In order to take advantage of God's guidance, then, we need to use the minds God has given us. Seek out good advice, have patience, and above all, commit ourselves to regular study and reflection of God's Word.

Packer has a lot more to say on the topic than just that. But let's turn our attention now to the second mistake that he identifies - the one he focuses on in chapter 21. That has to do with the way that we misunderstand God's grace.

## (Mis)Understanding God's Grace

Chapter 21 begins with a rather bold and bracing claim.



*A certain type of gospel ministry is cruel. It does not mean to be, but it is.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 241)

But what does he mean by this? What is this ministry of the gospel? Why and how is it so unintentionally cruel?

As you read further, you'll discover that what Packer has in mind is a certain way of talking about the grace of God. Some Christians, he says, so strongly emphasize the joy and blessings and peace that a person receives when she embraces the gospel, that they end up setting that person up for failure by giving her false expectations. From what she's heard, she expects her life as a Christian to be filled with nothing but joy and peace and victory over sin. But inevitably, that turns out not to be the case. As it turns out, the influence of sin remains. Things aren't always so joyful as expected. The Packer describes the experience this way:



*On this basis, [such people] are converted; they experience the new birth; and they advance into their new life joyfully certain that they have left all the old headaches and heartaches behind them. And then they find that it is not like that at all ... As the first great waves of joy rolled over them during the opening weeks of their Christian experience, they had really felt that all problems had solved themselves, but now that they see it was not so, and that the trouble-free life which they were promised has not materialized.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 245-246)

Then, because they had wrong expectations, because they thought that God's grace was supposed to fix all of their problems, then they begin to doubt whether it "really took" ... whether perhaps they really are converted, whether maybe they just need to try to rededicate their lives anew; maybe that's the problem.

Now maybe you're familiar with this experience. If so, you'll be glad to know that Packer has a solution, which is really just to change your expectations. Understand that God in His grace has not promised you an immediate release from all of the troubles and temptations of life. To the contrary, God has promised that you will continue to experience trouble and temptation.

But - don't lose heart. Because God in His grace has a purpose for these "inward trials" as Packer calls them. He allows us to continue to struggle with sin and He allows us to experience hardships and trouble in life for a reason. Because he wants us to learn what it means to trust in Him.



*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 step to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in himself—in the classical scriptural phrase for the secret of the godly life, to ‘wait on the Lord.’*

KNOWING GOD (P. 250)

This brings us to the final chapter of the book, which is entitled “The Adequacy of God.” In many ways, this entire chapter is just one long commentary on a few verses that come out of the eighth chapter of Romans, where the apostle Paul asks the question:



*If God is for us, who can be against us?*

ROMANS 8:31

And then just a few verses later:



*Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?*

ROMANS 8:35

Then of course, both of these questions are rhetorical for Paul since the answer is quite obviously, no one. But the questions are also revealing because they give voice to real (if sometimes unacknowledged) fears.

Fear, according to Packer, is one of the great obstacles to knowing God. It's one of the primary reasons that we hesitate to give ourselves over completely to the call to know and follow Christ. We shrink back from this call, Packer says, because we are afraid. Afraid of material insecurity, afraid of being taken advantage of by other people, afraid of not being able to bear one another's burdens, afraid that if we really devote

ourselves to this call, that we will be sacrificing (giving up) the things in life that really make us happy.



*It is these half-conscious fears, this dread of insecurity, rather than any deliberate refusal to face the cost of following Christ, which make us hold back. We feel that the risks of out-and-out discipleship are too great for us to take. In other words, we are not persuaded of the adequacy of God to provide for all the needs of those who launch out wholeheartedly on the deep sea of unconventional living in obedience to the call of Christ.*

KNOWING GOD (P. 269-270)

That, more than anything else, is what is keeping us back from truly knowing God. And yet, as the last chapter so wonderfully explains, what is the message of the book of Romans - indeed, of the whole Bible - if not that God is MORE than adequate. Not only to meet the needs and desires that we know we have, but to meet the needs and desires of which we haven't even yet allowed ourselves to dream.

As St. Augustine said, so well, so long ago:



*You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.*



AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Whether we recognize it or not, we were made for this purpose, and nothing else will truly suffice. We were made to know God. I hope and I pray that this book, and this study has furthered you along toward that purpose.

#### Group Discussion Questions

1. What is one thing from this week's assigned chapters that stood out to you?
2. Chapter 20 focuses on the ways in which God provides guidance to our lives. How have you experienced God's guidance in the past? How have you heard other Christians describe their experience of God's guidance? What do you make of Packer's

suggestion that the primary way God guides us is not “a matter of inward promptings,” but rather through the portrayal of God’s will and character in Scripture?

3. In chapter 21, Packer says that sometimes Christians talk about God’s grace in a way that is unintentionally “cruel.” He goes on to explain that this cruelty occurs when people give false expectations to others that the Christian life is one filled with constant blessing, happiness, and spiritual victory, when in fact the Christian life is often one of hardship, suffering, and ongoing temptation. Do you think that you have sometimes had wrong expectations of the Christian life or what a relationship with God would be like? How has your understanding changed over time? How have you learned what Packer refers to as the “secret of the godly life”—to “wait on the Lord”?

4. Discuss the following quote from pages 269-270:  
*“It is these half-conscious fears ... which make us hold back. We feel that the risks of out-and-out discipleship are too great for us to take. In other words, we are not persuaded of the adequacy of God to provide for all the needs of those who launch out wholeheartedly on the deep sea of unconventional living in obedience to the call of Christ.”*

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?