

THE IVP SIGNATURE COLLECTION

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*KNOWING
GOD*

J. I. PACKER

FOREWORD BY

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER



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FOREWORD TO THE SIGNATURE EDITION

Knowing Packer: Keeping in Step
with the Last Puritan of Evangelicalism's
Greatest Generation

Kevin J. Vanhooser

I first met J. I. Packer in Cambridge in the mid-1980s when I was a doctoral student at Cambridge University. He was *already* J. I. Packer, the elder statesman of evangelical theology—and had been for some time. *Knowing God* had been published in 1973 and was by then an established bestseller. It was also the first book I gave to the woman who would later become my wife (C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* was the second). It proved to be an apt choice: Packer is one of the handful of authors I've met who lived up to, and in his case surpassed, the mental image I had constructed through reading his works.

Packer had come to Cambridge to give a lecture at Tyndale House, a study center for evangelical biblical scholars. That in itself was impressive, as Jim was decidedly an Oxford man. He obtained all his degrees, including his doctorate, from Oxford University and later served as Warden of Latimer House, the Oxford counterpart of Tyndale House. He later moved from Oxford to Trinity College, Bristol, and eventually to Regent College, Vancouver, where he taught theology from 1979 to 2016, long after his official retirement.

The topic of Packer's Tyndale House address was biblical authority and hermeneutics. This quickened my heartbeat, for I had come to Cambridge to answer the question, What does it mean to be biblical when we speak about God? I had learned that there was no easy way around the challenge of the plurality of interpretations, where everyone, or at least every denomination, finds in the Bible what they think is right in their own eyes. Packer clearly understood the problem and faced up to it. That alone was significant. But there was more to come.

Packer engaged the big names in twentieth-century hermeneutics—Bultmann, Heidegger, Fuchs and Gadamer—and assessed their significance for coming to know God via biblical interpretation. He then went on to set out an evangelical hermeneutic, laying special weight on the importance of the Holy Spirit's work as illuminator and interpreter. After his lecture, I asked him about deconstruction, the latest challenge to biblical interpretation at the time. He confessed that he did not know a lot about it, but said that he was interested. "My windows are open," he commented.

And then he said something to the effect of, "That's for you and your generation to handle." I got the distinct impression that he was passing the baton. I have been running ever since. That handoff symbolized how the church always relays the faith—from one person to the next. It also had a formative influence on the eventual shape of my dissertation, my calling and much of my subsequent work.¹

The book you are about to read is not about hermeneutics, but knowing God. Packer divides it into three sections: why we should know God, what God is like, and the benefits of knowing God. It is only fitting that I structure my introduction in the same way: why readers should get to know Packer, what Packer's books are like, and the benefits of reading Packer.

WHY KNOWING PACKER MATTERS

Packer liked to describe himself as, above all else, a catechist: someone who instructs others in the Christian faith and life. A catechist need not be an academic. By definition, however, a catechist must be an ecclesial theologian, someone whose teaching builds up the church, one disciple at a time. Packer's catechetical fingerprints are all over *To Be a Christian: An Anglican Catechism* (2020), an Anglican Church in North America project for which he served as theological editor, and which he wryly referred to as "Packer's Last Crusade."

As Packer elsewhere points out, Christianity is not instinctive to anyone. It is learned not on the street but in the pew. The content of the Christian faith—what the apostle Paul calls the "good deposit" (2 Timothy 1:14), what accords with sound doctrine, and what Packer calls the "Great Tradition"—is handed from one generation to the next. A Christian catechism teaches people everything they need to know in order to be a Christ-follower. Doctrine and discipleship fit hand in glove: doing without doctrine is blind; doctrine without doing is dead.

The old adage, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach," simply doesn't fit Packer. Packer did Christianity quite well, thank you very much, but what he did best was teach, and it was precisely by teaching that he helped others *do*. The whole point of knowing God (and *Knowing God*) is, after all, practical: to provide direction for life. Packer's love of teaching came not only from his love for the subject matter (the God of the gospel and the gospel of God), or even from his love for his students, but from his love of introducing the one to the other.

To know Packer is to know a master teacher from evangelicalism's "greatest generation," that group of mid-twentieth century architects of a middle way beyond fundamentalist and liberal Christianity—people like John Stott, Billy Graham, Carl F. H. Henry, Bernard Ramm and Harold Ockenga—who affirmed a biblically grounded, orthodox faith even as they brought it to bear on the modern social and intellectual crises of their day.²

To know Packer, finally, is to meet a "theologizer": someone who set out and communicated in crisp, concise speech what there is to be known of the reality of God on the basis of the Scriptures. To read *Knowing God* is to experience the reality of *God*, not simply the reality of J. I. Packer. God is infinite, to be sure, but Packer puts as much of God's reality into prose as a human can: "Packer by name; packer by nature."³

WHAT KNOWING PACKER INVOLVES

Knowing God is best viewed as the first part of a Trinitarian trilogy. Readers are advised to follow up with *Growing in Christ* and *Keep in Step with the Spirit*. All three books teach theology, but the kind of theology that is not meant simply to idle in one's head. Packer himself kept in step with his English Puritan forebears, like William Ames, who defined theology as "the teaching [*doctrina*] of living to God" (*The Marrow of Theology*).

To know Packer, one must understand his passion for the Puritans. The love affair began in a dusty basement in Oxford, where Packer discovered a set of twenty-four volumes of the Puritan divine John Owen (1616–1683). He had to cut open the pages. When he did, what blew out was not musty but fresh air: a serious and realistic account of the Christian life, which acknowledged the reality of indwelling sin—and the means of dealing with it.

Historians of Roman Catholicism see Vatican II (1962–1965) as one of the most important events in twentieth-century church history. Its purpose was to refresh the church and bring it up to date, and it did so by "retrieving" the past—namely, the writing of patristic theologians from the earliest centuries of the church. Packer's discovery of John Owen may not figure in the annals of church history in quite the same way, but to know Packer is, similarly, to appreciate his own retrieval of Puritan theologians.

Packer founded the Puritan Studies Conference after the Second World War. From the start the idea was that the Puritans deserved to be studied not out of some antiquarian interest but for the sake of providing guidance to the contemporary church. He later wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Puritan pastor-theologian Richard Baxter. Packer was never interested in the oft-reviled "Puritan morality" *per se*. The stale stereotype of Puritans as strait-laced, prudish naysayers is simply a caricature of the real thing, which is altogether more glorious and exciting. What attracted Packer to Puritan writing was their compelling vision of teaching people how to live with, for and before God. Here were sharp thinkers who were also deeply spiritual. The Puritans valued doctrine and devotion, in equal measure.

Knowing Packer means coming to grips with the Puritan conviction that all theology is also spirituality. Modern evangelicals who put a premium on having spiritual experiences must learn from seventeenth-century Puritans who put a premium on becoming spiritually mature, which involves forming godly disciplines—habits of life conducive to the formation of godliness. Packer advised people not to read the Puritans

unless they were interested in spiritual growth. My advice is similar: you shouldn't read Packer unless you're serious about spiritual transformation. The knowledge of God does not sit idly in the mind, but is living and active, and insists upon a personal response.

It may be that the church historian who aptly dubbed Packer "the Last Puritan" was right, but if Packer had his druthers, perhaps the last could be first—the first of a new generation of, why not, twenty-first-century Puritans?⁴ After all, the whole point of Packer's retrieving the Puritans is to renew the present.

THE BENEFITS OF KNOWING PACKER

Packer once defined theology as "the use of the mind and the tongue to celebrate God and get clear in one's thinking and talking about him."⁵ The point is that doctrine directs disciples toward doxology in everything they do. ("So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God," 1 Corinthians 10:31.) The glory of God was the motivation of everything Packer did. Knowing God matters because if we do not know God, we cannot glorify him. And glorifying God is why there is something rather than nothing, and why we are all here.

Packer may have been the last of the "greatest generation" of evangelical theologians. He continued to teach into his nineties, and even when classroom teaching was no longer possible, he still found ways to communicate what he was learning. His last book provided wise instruction for those who are nearing the end of their respective races and want to learn how to finish well: *Finishing Our Course with Joy: Guidance from God for Engaging with Our Aging* (2014).

To read Jim's publications is to visit milestones marking his and other pilgrims' progress through the various stages of Christian life. This is the primary benefit of knowing Packer: not to become more like him, but to be inspired to become more like Christ. Every pilgrim needs words to sustain us in the journey. The benefit of knowing Packer is having a wise, godly and winsome companion along the way.

In *The Knowledge of the Holy* A. W. Tozer wrote, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." 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. I don't think Packer ever recovered from this literally earth-shattering knowledge—namely, that the old world is passing away (2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 John 2:17; Revelation 21:1), because in Christ and through the Spirit the Lord is making all things new. The chapter on adoption is, not surprisingly, one of the highlights of the book you are about to read.

As you come to know God better through reading this book, then, remember that God knows you by name as his beloved son or daughter. So: start reading *Knowing God*, open your windows and prepare to be blown away.

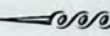
¹For an account of Packer's impact on others, see Timothy George, ed., *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

²See also Alister McGrath: "To study the life of Packer is . . . to explore the story of the emergence and consolidation of the post-war evangelical movement, seen from a particular angle." *J. I. Packer: A Biography* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 280.

³This is Packer's self-description. In context: "I love pregnant brevity, and some of my material is, I know, packed tight (Packer by name, packer by nature)" (cited in McGrath, *J. I. Packer*, 186).

⁴Mark Noll, "The Last Puritan," *Christianity Today*, September 16, 1996, 51-53.

⁵"J. I. Packer: Still Teaching 'The Biggest Thing That Ever Was,'" interview by Amy Anderson, Regent College, May 4, 2016, <https://www.regent-college.edu/about-us/news/2016/ji-packer-still-teaching-and-loving-it>.



PREFACE

1993

When I sent the manuscript of *Knowing God* to the publisher just over twenty years ago, I thought of it as a study book that could hardly be of general interest. I was wrong. It has sold more than a million copies; it has gone into more than a dozen languages; it has become a nurture book for the Christian world. Other nurture books, including some of my own, have fallen by the wayside, but this one keeps going, and a steady flow of letters shows me that it keeps on helping people. I am amazed, awed, humbled and constantly moved to thank God.

The person that Shakespeare would have described as the “onlie begetter” of *Knowing God* was the editor of the now defunct *Evangelical Magazine*, who asked me for a series of articles on God angled for honest, no-nonsense readers who were fed up with facile Christian verbiage. The articles flowed out at two-monthly intervals, prompted each time by the question, *What do I tell them next?* and coalesced into a book with very little trouble. Wise editors know how to strike sparks off writers, and the existence of *Knowing God* is due as much to that editor as to this author.

Something has been added to chapter four, but otherwise, apart from Americanization of spelling and corrections of detail, the work is as it was.

The substitution of NIV for the original KJV quotations of Scripture signifies only a wish for my book to have maximum usefulness and at no point changes my meaning. May *Knowing God* continue to convert and upbuild in its new dress.

J. I. P.

Regent College, Vancouver

February 1993

PREFACE

1973

As clowns yearn to play Hamlet, so I have wanted to write a treatise on God. This book, however, is not it. Its length might suggest that it is trying to be, but anyone who takes it that way will be disappointed. It is at best a string of beads: a series of small studies of great subjects, most of which first appeared in the *Evangelical Magazine*. They were conceived as separate messages but are now presented together because they seem to coalesce into a single message about God and our living. It is their practical purpose that explains both the selection and omission of topics and the manner of treatment.

In *A Preface to Christian Theology*, John Mackay illustrated two kinds of interest in Christian things by picturing persons sitting on the high front balcony of a Spanish house watching travelers go by on the road below. The "balconeurs" can overhear the travelers' talk and chat with them; they may comment critically on the way that the travelers walk; or they may discuss questions about the road, how it can exist at all or lead anywhere, what might be seen from different points along it, and so forth; but they are onlookers, and their problems are theoretical only. The travelers, by contrast, face problems which, though they have their theoretical angle, are

essentially practical—problems of the “which-way-to-go” and “how-to-make-it” type, problems which call not merely for comprehension but for decision and action too.

Balconeers and travelers may think over the same area, yet their problems differ. Thus (for instance) in relation to *evil*, the balconeer’s problem is to find a theoretical explanation of how evil can consist with God’s sovereignty and goodness, but the traveler’s problem is how to master evil and bring good out of it. Or again, in relation to *sin*, the balconeer asks whether racial sinfulness and personal perversity are really credible, while the traveler, knowing sin from within, asks what hope there is of deliverance. Or take the problem of the *Godhead*; while the balconeer is asking how one God can conceivably be three, what sort of unity three could have, and how three who make one can be persons, the traveler wants to know how to show proper honor, love and trust toward the three Persons who are now together at work to bring him out of sin to glory. And so we might go on.

Now this is a book for travelers, and it is with travelers’ questions that it deals.

The conviction behind the book is that ignorance of God—ignorance both of his ways and of the practice of communion with him—lies at the root of much of the church’s weakness today. Two unhappy trends seem to have produced this state of affairs.

Trend one is that *Christian minds have been conformed to the modern spirit*: the spirit, that is, that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for only small thoughts of God. The modern way with God is to set him at a distance, if not to deny him altogether; and the irony is that modern Christians, preoccupied with maintaining religious practices in an irreligious world, have themselves allowed God to become remote. Clear-sighted persons, seeing this, are tempted to withdraw from the churches in something like disgust to pursue a quest for God on their own. Nor can one wholly blame them, for churchmen who look at God, so to speak, through the wrong end of the telescope, so reducing him to pigmy proportions, cannot hope to end up as more than pigmy Christians, and clear-sighted people naturally want something better than this. Furthermore, thoughts of death, eternity, judgment, the greatness of the soul and the abiding consequences of temporal decisions are all “out” for moderns, and it is a melancholy fact that the Christian church, instead of raising its voice to remind the world of what is being forgotten, has formed a habit of playing down

these themes in just the same way. But these capitulations to the modern spirit are really suicidal so far as Christian life is concerned.

Trend two is that *Christian minds have been confused by the modern skepticism*. For more than three centuries the naturalistic leaven in the Renaissance outlook has been working like a cancer in Western thought. Seventeenth-century Arminians and deists, like sixteenth-century Socinians, came to deny, as against Reformation theology, that God's control of his world was either direct or complete, and theology, philosophy and science have for the most part combined to maintain that denial ever since. As a result, the Bible has come under heavy fire, and many landmarks in historical Christianity with it. The foundation-facts of faith are called into question. Did God meet Israel at Sinai? Was Jesus more than a very spiritual man? Did the Gospel miracles really happen? Is not the Jesus of the Gospels largely an imaginary figure?—and so on.

Nor is this all. Skepticism about both divine revelation and Christian origins has bred a wider skepticism which abandons all idea of a unity of truth, and with it any hope of unified human knowledge; so that it is now commonly assumed that my religious apprehensions have nothing to do with my scientific knowledge of things external to myself, since God is not "out there" in the world, but only "down here" in the psyche. The uncertainty and confusion about God which mark our day are worse than anything since Gnostic theosophy tried to swallow Christianity in the second century.

It is often said today that theology is stronger than it has ever been, and in terms of academic expertise and the quantity and quality of books published this is probably true; but it is a long time since theology has been so weak and clumsy at its basic task of holding the church to the realities of the gospel. Ninety years ago C. H. Spurgeon described the wobblings he then saw among the Baptists on Scripture, atonement and human destiny as "the downgrade." Could he survey Protestant thinking about God at the present time, I guess he would speak of "the nosedive"!

"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls" (Jer 6:16). Such is the invitation which this book issues. It is not a critique of new paths, except indirectly, but rather a straightforward recall to old ones, on the ground that "the good way" is still what it used to be. I do not ask my readers to suppose that I know very well what I am talking about. "Those like myself," wrote C. S. Lewis, "whose imagination far exceeds their

obedience are subject to a just penalty; we easily imagine conditions far higher than any we have really reached. If we describe what we have imagined we may make others, and make ourselves, believe that we have really been there"—and so fool both them and ourselves (*The Four Loves*, Fontana ed., p. 128). All readers and writers of devotional literature do well to weigh Lewis's words. Yet "it is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak" (2 Cor 4:13)—and if what is written here helps anyone in the way that the meditations behind the writing helped me, the work will have been abundantly worthwhile.

J. I. P.

Trinity College, Bristol

July 1972

CHAPTER VIII
PART ONE

THE STUDY
OF GOD
KNOW THE
LORD

CHAPTER ONE

THE STUDY OF GOD

On January 7, 1855, the minister of New Park Street Chapel, Southwark, England, opened his morning sermon as follows:

It has been said by someone that "the proper study of mankind is man." I will not oppose the idea, but I believe it is equally true that the proper study of God's elect is God; the proper study of a Christian is the Godhead. The highest science, the loftiest speculation, the mightiest philosophy, which can ever engage the attention of a child of God, is the name, the nature, the person, the work, the doings, and the existence of the great God whom he calls his Father.

There is something exceedingly improving to the mind in a contemplation of the Divinity. It is a subject so vast, that all our thoughts are lost in its immensity; so deep, that our pride is drowned in its infinity. Other subjects we can compass and grapple with; in them we feel a kind of self-content, and go our way with the thought, "Behold I am wise." But when we come to this master science, finding that our

plumbline cannot sound its depth, and that our eagle eye cannot see its height, we turn away with the thought that vain man would be wise, but he is like a wild ass's colt; and with solemn exclamation, "I am but of yesterday, and know nothing," No subject of contemplation will tend more to humble the mind, than thoughts of God. . . .

But while the subject *humbles* the mind, it also expands it. He who often thinks of God, will have a larger mind than the man who simply plods around this narrow globe. . . . The most excellent study for expanding the soul, is the science of Christ, and Him crucified, and the knowledge of the Godhead in the glorious Trinity. 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.

And, whilst humbling and expanding, this subject is eminently *consolatory*. Oh, there is, in contemplating Christ, a balm for every wound; in musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief; and in the influence of the Holy Ghost, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go, plunge yourself in the Godhead's deepest sea; be lost in his immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead. It is to that subject that I invite you this morning.

These words, spoken over a century ago by C. H. Spurgeon (at that time, incredibly, only twenty years old) were true then, and they are true now. They make a fitting preface to a series of studies on the nature and character of God.

WHO NEEDS THEOLOGY?

"But wait a minute," says someone, "tell me this. Is our journey really necessary? In Spurgeon's day, we know, people found theology interesting, but I find it boring. Why need anyone take time off today for the kind of study you propose? Surely a layperson, at any rate, can get on without it? After all, this is the twentieth century, not the nineteenth!"

A fair question!—but there is, I think, a convincing answer to it. The questioner clearly assumes that a study of the nature and character of God

will be impractical and irrelevant for life. In fact, however, it is the most practical project anyone can engage in. Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar Square and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so 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. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. 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.

Recognizing, then, that the study of God is worthwhile, we prepare to start. But where shall we start from?

Clearly, we can only start from where we are. That, however, means setting out in a storm, for the doctrine of God is a storm center today. The so-called debate about God, with its startling slogans—"our image of God must go"; "God is dead"; "we can sing the creed, but we can't say it"—is raging all around us. We are told that "God-talk," as Christians have historically practiced it, is a refined sort of nonsense, and knowledge about God is strictly a nonentity. Types of teaching which profess such knowledge are written off as outmoded—"Calvinism," "fundamentalism," "Protestant scholasticism," "the old orthodoxy." What are we to do? If we postpone our journey till the storm dies down, we may never get started at all.

My proposal is this. You will know how Bunyan's pilgrim, when called back by his wife and children from the journey on which he was setting out, "put his fingers in his ears, and ran on crying, Life, Life, Eternal Life." I ask you for the moment to stop your ears to those who tell you there is no road to knowledge about God, and come a little way with me and see. After all, the proof of the pudding is in the eating, and anyone who is actually following a recognized road will not be too worried if he hears nontravelers telling each other that no such road exists.

Storm or no storm, then, we are going to start. But how do we plot our course?

Five basic truths, five foundation principles of the knowledge about God which Christians have, will determine our course throughout. They are as follows:

1. God has spoken to man, and the Bible is his Word, given to us to make us wise unto salvation.

2. God is Lord and King over his world; he rules all things for his own glory, displaying his perfections in all that he does, in order that men and angels may worship and adore him.

3. God is Savior, active in sovereign love through the Lord Jesus Christ to rescue believers from the guilt and power of sin, to adopt them as his children and to bless them accordingly.

4. God is triune; there are within the Godhead three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; and the work of salvation is one in which all three act together, the Father purposing redemption, the Son securing it and the Spirit applying it.

5. Godliness means responding to God's revelation in trust and obedience, faith and worship, prayer and praise, submission and service. Life must be seen and lived in the light of God's Word. This, and nothing else, is true religion.

In the light of these general and basic truths, we are now going to examine in detail what the Bible shows us of the nature and character of the God of whom we have been speaking. We are in the position of travelers who, after surveying a great mountain from afar, traveling around it, and observing how it dominates the landscape and determines the features of the surrounding countryside, now approach it directly, with the intention of climbing it.

THE BASIC THEMES

What is the ascent going to involve? What are the themes that will occupy us?

We shall have to deal with the *Godhead* of God, the qualities of deity which set God apart from humans and mark the difference and distance between the Creator and his creatures: such qualities as his self-existence, his infinity, his eternity, his unchangeableness. We shall have to deal with the *powers* of God: his almightiness, his omniscience, his omnipresence. We shall have to deal with the *perfections* of God, the aspects of his moral character which are manifested in his words and deeds—his holiness, his love and mercy, his truthfulness, his faithfulness, his goodness, his patience, his justice. We shall have to take note of what pleases him, what offends him, what awakens his wrath, what affords him satisfaction and joy.

For many of us, these are comparatively unfamiliar themes. They were not always so to the people of God. There was a time when the subject of God's attributes (as it was called) was thought so important as to be included in the catechism which all children in the churches were taught and all adult members were expected to know. Thus, to the fourth question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "What is God?" the answer read as follows: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." This statement the great Charles Hodge described as "probably the best definition of God ever penned by man."

Few children today, however, are brought up on the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and few modern worshipers will ever have heard a series of sermons covering the doctrine of the divine character in the way that Char-nock's massive *Discourses on the Existence and Attributes of God* (1682) did. Few, too, will ever have read anything simple and straightforward on the subject of the nature of God, for scarcely any such writing exists at the present time. We can expect, therefore, that an exploration of the themes mentioned above will give us much that is new to think about and many fresh ideas to ponder and digest.

KNOWLEDGE APPLIED

For this very reason we need, before we start to ascend our mountain, to stop and ask ourselves a very fundamental question—a question, indeed, that we always ought to put to ourselves whenever we embark on any line of study in God's holy book. The question concerns our own motives and intentions as students. We need to ask ourselves: What is my ultimate aim and object in occupying my mind with these things? What do I intend to *do* with my knowledge about God, once I have it? For the fact that we have to face is this: If we pursue theological knowledge for its own sake, it is bound to go bad on us. It will make us proud and conceited. The very greatness of the subject matter will intoxicate us, and we shall come to think of ourselves as a cut above other Christians because of our interest in it and grasp of it; and we shall look down on those whose theological ideas seem to us crude and inadequate and dismiss them as very poor specimens. For, as Paul told the conceited Corinthians, "Knowledge puffs up. . . . The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know" (1 Cor 8:1-2).

To be preoccupied with getting theological knowledge as an end in itself, to approach Bible study with no higher a motive than a desire to know all the answers, is the direct route to a state of self-satisfied self-deception. We need to guard our hearts against such an attitude, and pray to be kept from it. As we saw earlier, there can be no spiritual health without doctrinal knowledge; but it is equally true that there can be no spiritual health *with* it, if it is sought for the wrong purpose and valued by the wrong standard. In this way, doctrinal study really can become a danger to spiritual life, and we today, no less than the Corinthians of old, need to be on our guard here.

But, says someone, is it not a fact that a love for God's revealed truth, and a desire to know as much of it as one can, are natural to every person who has been born again? Look at Psalm 119: "teach me your decrees"; "open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law"; "Oh, how I love your law!"; "How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!"; "give me discernment that I may understand your statutes" (vv. 12, 18, 97, 103, 125). Do not all children of God long, with the psalmist, to know just as much about our heavenly Father as we can learn? Is not, indeed, the fact that we have received a love for his truth in this way one proof that we have been born again? (See 2 Thess 2:10.) And is it not right that we should seek to satisfy this God-given desire to the full?

Yes, of course it is. But if you look back to Psalm 119 again, you will see that the psalmist's concern to get knowledge about God was not a theoretical but a practical concern. His supreme desire was to know and enjoy God himself, and he valued knowledge about God simply as a means to this end. He wanted to understand God's truth in order that his heart might respond to it and his life be conformed to it. Observe the emphasis of the opening verses: "Blessed are they whose ways are blameless, who *walk according to the law of the LORD*. Blessed are they who *keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart*. . . . Oh, that my ways were steadfast in *obeying your decrees!*" (vv. 1-2, 5).

The psalmist was interested in truth and orthodoxy, in biblical teaching and theology, not as ends in themselves, but as means to the further ends of life and godliness. His ultimate concern was with the knowledge and service of the great God whose truth he sought to understand.

And this must be our attitude too. Our aim in studying the Godhead must be to know God himself better. Our concern must be to enlarge our acquaintance, not simply with the doctrine of God's attributes, but with the

living God whose attributes they are. 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.

MEDITATING ON THE TRUTH

How are we to do this? How can we turn our knowledge *about* God into knowledge *of* God? The rule for doing this is simple but demanding. It is that we turn each truth that we learn *about* God into matter for meditation *before* God, leading to prayer and praise *to* God.

We have some idea, perhaps, what prayer is, but what is meditation? Well may we ask, for meditation is a lost art today, and Christian people suffer grievously from their ignorance of the practice.

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. It is an activity of holy thought, consciously performed in the presence of God, under the eye of God, by the help of God, as a means of communion with 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. It is a matter of talking to oneself about God and oneself; it is, indeed, often a matter of arguing with oneself, reasoning oneself out of moods of doubt and unbelief into a clear apprehension of God's power and grace.

Its effect is ever to humble us, as we contemplate God's greatness and glory and our own littleness and sinfulness, and to encourage and reassure us—"comfort" us, in the old, strong, Bible sense of the word—as we contemplate the unsearchable riches of divine mercy displayed in the Lord Jesus Christ. These were the points stressed by Spurgeon in the passage which we quoted at the beginning, and they are true. And it is as we enter more and more deeply into this experience of being humbled and exalted that our knowledge of God increases, and with it our peace, our strength and our joy. God help us, then, to put our knowledge about God to this use, that we all may in truth "know the Lord."

CHAPTER TWO

THE PEOPLE WHO KNOW THEIR GOD

I walked in the sunshine with a scholar who had effectively forfeited his prospects of academic advancement by clashing with church dignitaries over the gospel of grace. "But it doesn't matter," he said at length, "for I've known God and they haven't." The remark was a mere parenthesis, a passing comment on something I had said, but it has stuck with me and set me thinking.

Not many of us, I think, would ever naturally say that we have known God. The words imply a definiteness and matter-of-factness of experience to which most of us, if we are honest, have to admit that we are still strangers. We claim, perhaps, to have a testimony, and can rattle off our conversion story with the best of them; we say that we *know* God—this, after all, is what evangelicals are expected to say; but would it occur to us to say, without

hesitation, and with reference to particular events in our personal history, that we *have known* God? I doubt it, for I suspect that with most of us experience of God has never become so vivid as that.

Nor, I think, would many of us ever naturally say that in the light of the knowledge of God which we have come to enjoy, past disappointments and present heartbreaks, as the world counts heartbreaks, *don't matter*. For the plain fact is that to most of us they do matter. We live with them as our "crosses" (so we call them). Constantly we find ourselves slipping into bitterness and apathy and gloom as we reflect on them, which we frequently do. The attitude we show to the world is a sort of dried-up stoicism, miles removed from the "joy unspeakable and full of glory" which Peter took for granted that his readers were displaying (1 Pet 1:8 KJV). "Poor souls," our friends say of us, "how they've *suffered*." And that is just what we feel about ourselves!

But these private mock heroics have no place at all in the minds of those who really know God. They never brood on might-have-beens; they never think of the things they have missed, only of what they have gained.

"But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ," wrote Paul. "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him. . . . I want to know Christ" (Phil 3:7-10). When Paul says he counts the things he lost *rubbish*, or *dung* (KJV), he means not merely that he does not think of them as having any value, but also that he does not live with them constantly in his mind: What normal person spends his time nostalgically dreaming of manure? Yet this, in effect, is what many of us do. It shows how little we have in the way of true knowledge of God.

KNOWING VERSUS KNOWING ABOUT

We need frankly to face ourselves at this point. We are, perhaps, orthodox evangelicals. We can state the gospel clearly; we can smell unsound doctrine a mile away. If asked how one may know God, we can at once produce the right formula: that we come to know God through Jesus Christ the Lord, in virtue of his cross and mediation, on the basis of his word of promise, by the power of the Holy Spirit, via a personal exercise of faith. Yet the gaiety, goodness, and unfetteredness of spirit which are the marks

of those who have known God are rare among us—rarer, perhaps, than they are in some other Christian circles where, by comparison, evangelical truth is less clearly and fully known. Here, too, it would seem that the last may prove to be first, and the first last. A little knowledge *of* God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge *about* him.

To focus this point further, let me say two things:

1. *One can know a great deal about God without much knowledge of him.*

I am sure that many of us have never really grasped this. We find in ourselves a deep interest in theology (which is, of course, a most fascinating and intriguing subject—in the seventeenth century it was every gentleman's hobby). We read books of theological exposition and apologetics. We dip into Christian history, and study the Christian creed. We learn to find our way around in the Scriptures. Others appreciate our interest in these things, and we find ourselves asked to give our opinion in public on this or that Christian question, to lead study groups, to give papers, to write articles, and generally to accept responsibility, informal if not formal, for acting as teachers and arbiters of orthodoxy in our own Christian circle. Our friends tell us how much they value our contribution, and this spurs us to further explorations of God's truth, so that we may be equal to the demands made upon us.

All very fine—yet interest in theology, and knowledge *about* God, and the capacity to think clearly and talk well on Christian themes, is not at all the same thing as knowing him. We may know as much about God as Calvin knew—indeed, if we study his works diligently, sooner or later we shall—and yet all the time (unlike Calvin, may I say) we may hardly know God at all.

2. *One can know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God.* It depends on the sermons one hears, the books one reads, and the company one keeps. In this analytical and technological age there is no shortage of books on the church booktables, or sermons from the pulpits, on how to pray, how to witness, how to read our Bibles, how to tithe our money, how to be a young Christian, how to be an old Christian, how to be a happy Christian, how to get consecrated, how to lead people to Christ, how to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit (or, in some cases, how to avoid receiving it), how to speak with tongues (or, how to explain away Pentecostal manifestations), and generally how to go through all the various motions which the teachers in question associate with being a Christian

believer. Nor is there any shortage of biographies delineating the experiences of Christians in past days for our interested perusal.

Whatever else may be said about this state of affairs, it certainly makes it possible to learn a great deal secondhand about the practice of Christianity. Moreover, if one has been given a good bump of common sense one may frequently be able to use this learning to help floundering Christians of less stable temperament to regain their footing and develop a sense of proportion about their troubles, and in this way one may gain for oneself a reputation for being quite a pastor. Yet one can have all this and hardly know God at all.

We come back, then, to where we started. The question is not whether we are good at theology, or “balanced” (horrible, self-conscious word!) in our approach to problems of Christian living. The question is, can we say, simply, honestly, not because we feel that as evangelicals we ought to, but because it is a plain matter of fact, that we have known God, and that because we have known God the unpleasantness we have had, or the pleasantness we have not had, through being Christians does not matter to us? If we really knew God, this is what we would be saying, and if we are not saying it, that is a sign that we need to face ourselves more sharply with the difference between knowing God and merely knowing about him.

EVIDENCE OF KNOWING GOD

We have said that when people know God, losses and “crosses” cease to matter to them; what they have gained simply banishes these things from their minds. What other effects does knowledge of God have on a person? Various sections of Scripture answer this question from different points of view, but perhaps the most clear and striking answer of all is provided by the book of Daniel. We may summarize its witness in four propositions.

1. *Those who know God have great energy for God.* In one of the prophetic chapters of Daniel we read, “The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits” (11:32 KJV). RSV renders thus: “The people who know their God shall *stand firm and take action.*” In the context, this statement is introduced by “but” and set in contrast to the activity of the “contemptible person” (v. 21) who sets up “the abomination that causes desolation” and corrupts by smooth and flattering talk those whose loyalty to God’s covenant has failed (vv. 31-32). This shows us that the action taken

by those who know God is their reaction to the anti-God trends which they see operating around them. While their God is being defied or disregarded, they cannot rest; they feel they must do something; the dishonor done to God's name goads them into action.

This is exactly what we see happening in the narrative chapters of Daniel, where we are told of the “exploits” of Daniel and his three friends.

These were four men who knew God, and who in consequence felt compelled from time to time actively to stand out against the conventions and dictates of irreligion and false religion. Daniel in particular appears as one who would not let a situation of that sort slide, but felt bound openly to challenge it. Rather than risk possible ritual defilement through eating palace food, he insisted on a vegetarian diet, to the consternation of the prince of the eunuchs (1:8-16). When Darius suspended the practice of prayer for a month, on pain of death, Daniel not merely went on praying three times a day, but did so in front of an open window, so that everyone might see what he was doing (6:10). One recalls Bishop Ryle leaning forward in his stall at St. Paul's Cathedral so that everyone might see that he did not turn east for the creed!

Such gestures must not be misunderstood. It is not that Daniel, or for that matter Bishop Ryle, was an awkward, cross-grained fellow who luxuriated in rebellion and could only be happy when he was squarely “agin” the government. It is simply that those who know their God are sensitive to situations in which God's truth and honor are being directly or tacitly jeopardized, and rather than let the matter go by default will force the issue on men's attention and seek thereby to compel a change of heart about it—even at personal risk.

Nor does this energy for God stop short with public gestures. Indeed, it does not start there. People who know their God are before anything else people who pray, and the first point where their zeal and energy for God's glory come to expression is in their prayers. In Daniel 9 we read how, when the prophet “understood from the Scriptures” (v. 2) that the foretold time of Israel's captivity was drawing to an end, and when at the same time he realized that the nation's sin was still such as to provoke God to judgment rather than mercy, he set himself to seek God “in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes” (v. 3), and prayed for the restoring of Jerusalem with a vehemence and passion and agony of spirit to which most of us are complete strangers.

Yet the invariable fruit of true knowledge of God is energy to pray for God's cause—energy, indeed, which can only find an outlet and a relief of inner tension when channeled into such prayer—and the more knowledge, the more energy! By this we may test ourselves. Perhaps we are not in a position to make public gestures against ungodliness and apostasy. Perhaps we are old, or ill, or otherwise limited by our physical situation. But we can all pray about the ungodliness and apostasy which we see in everyday life all around us. If, however, there is in us little energy for such prayer, and little consequent practice of it, this is a sure sign that as yet we scarcely know our God.

2. Those who know God have great thoughts of God. There is not space enough here to gather up all that the book of Daniel tells us about the wisdom, might, and truth of the great God who rules history and shows his sovereignty in acts of judgment and mercy toward individuals and nations according to his own good pleasure. Suffice it to say that there is, perhaps, no more vivid or sustained presentation of the many-sided reality of God's sovereignty in the whole Bible.

In the face of the might and splendor of the Babylonian empire which had swallowed up Palestine and the prospect of further great world empires to follow, dwarfing Israel by every standard of human calculation, the book as a whole forms a dramatic reminder that the God of Israel is King of kings and Lord of lords, "that Heaven rules" (4:26), that God's hand is on history at every point, that history, indeed, is no more than "*his story*," the unfolding of his eternal plan, and that the kingdom which will triumph in the end is God's.

The central truth which Daniel taught Nebuchadnezzar in chapters 2 and 4, and of which he reminded Belshazzar in chapter 5 (vv. 18–23), and which Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged in chapter 4 (vv. 34–37), and which Darius confessed, in chapter 6 (vv. 25–27), and which was the basis of Daniel's prayers in chapters 2 and 9, and of his confidence in defying authority in chapters 1 and 6, and of his friends' confidence in defying authority in chapter 3, and which formed the staple substance of all the disclosures which God made to Daniel in chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, and 11–12, is the truth that "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men" (4:25; compare 5:21). He knows, and foreknows, all things, and his foreknowledge is foreordination; he, therefore, will have the last word, both in world history and in the destiny of every man; his kingdom and righteousness will triumph in the end, for neither men nor angels shall be able to thwart him.

These were the thoughts of God which filled Daniel's mind, as witness his prayers (always the best evidence for a man's view of God): "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom. He knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him" (2:20-22); "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands. . . . Lord, you are righteous. . . . The Lord our God is merciful and forgiving. . . . The LORD our God is righteous in everything he does" (9:4, 7, 9, 14).

Is this how we think of God? Is this the view of God which our own praying expresses? Does this tremendous sense of his holy majesty, his moral perfection and his gracious faithfulness keep us humble and dependent, awed and obedient, as it did Daniel? By this test, too, we may measure how much, or how little, we know God.

3. *Those who know God show great boldness for God.* Daniel and his friends were men who stuck their necks out. This was not foolhardiness. They knew what they were doing. They had counted the cost. They had measured the risk. They were well aware what the outcome of their actions would be unless God miraculously intervened, as in fact he did.

But these things did not move them. Once they were convinced that their stand was right, and that loyalty to their God required them to take it, then, in Oswald Chambers's phrase, they "smilingly washed their hands of the consequences." "We must obey God rather than men!" said the apostles (Acts 5:29). "Neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy," said Paul (Acts 20:24 KJV).

This was precisely the spirit of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It is the spirit of all who know God. They may find the determination of the right course to take agonizingly difficult, but once they are clear on it they embrace it boldly and without hesitation. It does not worry them that others of God's people see the matter differently and do not stand with them. (Were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego the only Jews who declined to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image? Nothing in their recorded words suggests that they either knew or, in the final analysis, cared. They were clear as to what they personally had to do, and that was enough for them.) By this test also we may measure our own knowledge of God.

4. *Those who know God have great contentment in God.* There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that

they have known God, and God has known them, and that this relationship guarantees God's favor to them in life, through death and on for ever.

This is the peace of which Paul speaks in Romans 5:1—"Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"—and whose substance he analyzes in full in Romans 8. "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. . . . The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. . . heirs of God. . . . We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. . . . Those he justified, he also glorified. . . . If God is for us, who can be against us? . . . Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . I am convinced that neither death nor life. . . neither the present nor the future. . . will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 1, 16-17, 28, 30, 31, 33, 35, 38-39).

This is the peace which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego knew; hence the contentment with which they stood their ground in face of Nebuchadnezzar's ultimatum (Dan 3:15): "If you do not worship [the image], you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?" Their reply (3:16-18) is classic. "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter." (No panic!) "If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king." (Courteous, but unanswerable—they knew their God!) "But even if he does not"—if no deliverance comes—"we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods." (It doesn't matter! It makes no difference! Live or die, they are content.)

*Lord, it belongs not to my care
Whether I die or live;
To love and serve Thee is my share,
And this Thy grace must give.*

*If life be long, I will be glad,
That I may long obey;
If short—then why should I be sad
To soar to endless day?*

The comprehensiveness of our contentment is another measure whereby we may judge whether we really know God.

FIRST STEPS

Do we desire such knowledge of God? Then two things follow.

First, we must recognize how much we lack knowledge of God. We must learn to measure ourselves, not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts. Many of us, I suspect, have no idea how impoverished we are at this level. Let us ask the Lord to show us.

Second, we must seek the Savior. When he was on earth, he invited ordinary people to company with him; thus they came to know him, and in knowing him to know his Father. The Old Testament records pre-incarnate manifestations of the Lord Jesus doing the same thing—companying with men and women, in character as the angel of the Lord, in order that they might know him. The book of Daniel tells us of what appear to be two such instances—for who was the fourth man, “like a son of the gods” (3:25 RSV), who walked with Daniel’s three friends in the furnace? And who was the angel whom God sent to shut the lions’ mouths when Daniel was in their den (6:22)? The Lord Jesus Christ is now absent from us in body, but spiritually it makes no difference; still we may find and know God through seeking and finding Jesus’ company. It is those who have sought the Lord Jesus till they have found him—for the promise is that when we seek him with all our hearts, we shall surely find him—who can stand before the world to testify that they have known God.

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