



## KNOWING GOD BY J.I. PACKER

Packer, J.I.. Knowing God. Intervarsity, Downers Grove, 1993.

J.I. Packer currently serves as the Board of Governors Professor of Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. Knowing God is the simple message of this book, and Packer looks carefully at several aspects of God's nature according to the bible. Part one discusses basic information of the concept of knowing God personally rather than knowledge about God. Part two unleashes a barrage of biblical information on various specific characteristics of God's nature such as His jealousy, love, truth, His word and wisdom. Part three focuses on the heart of the gospel message of God's love through Jesus Christ.

J.I. Packer is widely known as a theological giant among modern evangelicals. He is a passionate follower of Christ and writes with a real sense of urgency for the importance of the message of this book. In addition to his work at Regent College, Packer is also on the editorial council and visiting scholar for the popular Christian magazine, "Christianity Today" (founded by Billy Graham). Knowing God has sold over one million copies and is one of many works that Packer has authored, or co-authored. J.I. Packer has for years had a wise and convicting message for the current culture and church life.

### Summary

The book begins by asking the question, "Who needs theology?" (18). He quickly argues the case that a study of God (theology) is not boring or irrelevant; rather it is the most important endeavor one can participate in. He compares the crucial nature of the process to the "cruelty of flying and Amazonian tribesman 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" (19). The study of God he argues is the most important practice there is on earth. A good portion of Part one is an understanding the difference between knowing God, knowing about God, and actually being known by God. A person can have a great deal of head knowledge about the Jewish God of the Old Testament and categorize "Yahweh" with all the other spiritual gods of the Ancient Near East. Even the historical Jesus can be marginalized as a holy man comparable to others, but Packer identifies evidence that shows if one truly knows God. Knowing God is more complex than any other relationship. The author compares this personal knowledge to meeting the queen of England or the President of the United States. People of such distinction only know us if they allow us into their lives (35). The amazing fact of the universe is that God has made himself known to us, because he initiated the relationship. We are simply required to listen to God's Word and receiving it as the Holy Spirit interprets it (37). The bible gives several different relationship pictures to communicate this idea of knowing and being known. "It tells us that we know God in the manner of a son knowing his father, a wife knowing her husband, a subject knowing his king and a sheep knowing its shepherd (37). Packer takes an honest look at one of the main stumbling blocks that people have in believing in Jesus. God becoming man: in the form of a completely dependent baby no less, is simply a tough pill to swallow every Christmas for many non-believers. The author enlists the help of the apostle John. The first words of the gospel account unveil theological cannonball of a confident description of the Word of God becoming flesh. This is the most important aspect of knowing the God of Adam, Abraham, David and Isaiah, which he explains in more detail in Part three. "The Word was in the beginning, the Word was with God, the Word was God, through him all things were made, in him was life that was the light of men, and the Word became flesh" (56-57). These are the seven things that John tells us in that first chapter about the Word of God becoming flesh through the life of Jesus. But God is not just the God in the burning bush, or the Son of Man; He is also an active spirit in the lives of Christians. Packer's frustration is how largely ignored the Holy Spirit is from the average churches' teaching. His main assumption as to the reason for this neglect is fear, and a lack of understanding. Despite these reasons, the importance of the Holy Spirit's is paramount because with this counselor "there would be no gospel and no New Testament." (69). One of the Holy Spirit's roles in salvation history is to make known the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Another is to be our guide, as we grow closer to a personal knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. Part two focuses on ten characteristics of God that serve as an eloquent bridge between a dynamic introduction and climatic conclusion. The ten characteristics are God's unchanging nature, His wisdom, word, His truth, love, grace, judgment, wrath, goodness, severity, and jealousy. Love is the characteristic of God that the author spends the most time on in Part two, though not by much. He defines the love of God as "an exercise of his goodness toward individual sinners whereby, having identified himself with their welfare, he has given his Son to be their Savior, and now brings them to know and enjoy him in a covenant relation" (123). He breaks down each of these phrases in a few paragraphs and closes with a series of questions the reader is asked to meditate on. These questions are designed to apply this concept of God's love to the reader's life and allow the Holy Spirit to let it be known to everyone the reader encounters.

Part three is the climax of the book. The author unpacks the heart of the gospel with surprisingly few aspects, describes what it means to be adoptive sons of God, how to deal with trials and temptations, and he closes with explanation of Romans. The last chapter entitled "The Adequacy of God," brings everything together. He focuses mainly on Romans seven and eight, eight being one of the most important chapters in the entire bible. It is here that the importance of nearly every other piece of the puzzle comes into full view. The grace of God is especially present emphasizing one of the most essential truths in all of the New Testament: "There is now no condemnation in those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1." There are four truths in the eighth chapter of Romans that Packer explains. "First, If God is for us, who could be against us?" (260). No one has the power to overcome our supreme God "who calls, justifies, and glorifies those who from eternity have predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his own" (261). The second truth is

who from eternity he "predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son" (261). The second truth is that God did not withhold any good thing from humanity (264). God sent his only begotten son to be sacrificed for us. There is no greater display of goodness and love than that gift. The third reason this chapter gives the believer hope is that no one is able to accuse them of anything, because they are the chosen ones of God (271). No one has the ability to condemn the believer because of the adequacy of God. Finally, no one, and no thing can separate us from the love of Christ (274). Once the believer is in a relationship with God, and chosen by God, he or she is sealed by the Holy Spirit in right standing relationship with the king.

#### Critical Evaluation

As you look at the table of contents the collection seems a bit discombobulate, and at times the reader seems to get lost in this section compared to the others. This is because of the depth and knowledge of the author, but also because some of the characteristics are similar while others are not. Packer attempts to build off of some of the distinctions, and while overall the flow of the book is a masterpiece, part two becomes a book unto itself with several rabbits being chased in different directions. The chapters on God's grace, justice and wrath are the best building blocks to Part three of the book. Packer continues to come back to these seemingly negative aspects of God's nature: justice, wrath and jealousy in Part three. One of my favorite parts of the book was how for example, God's jealousy is explained in such a counter cultural way. The thought of God being labeled as jealous as part of such an intimate aspect of His nature (Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. Exodus 34:14) is hard for many to understand (168). However, Packer easily provides a solution by reminding the reader that it is the defining characteristic of any marriage. Spouses do not share the most intimate aspects of their relationship with their partners with anyone. God demands our worship and desires an exclusive, worship-filled relationship with individual people. Each chapter is well written, focused and for most part, a perfect link to the next. There were few points in the book where I felt the author was just filling pages. J.I. Packer is a theological giant of our day and one that every believer needs to learn from. Knowing God is a must read for Christians believers because it will strengthen their faith and help them focus on some of the most important aspects of knowing God. Non-believers will receive an in depth inside what a genuine follower of Jesus prioritizes and will prayerfully be drawn to a loving and holy God who wants to be known.