



Knowing God Study Guide

**An Exercise in Spiritual
Growth and Discipleship
Using the Book by J.I. Packer**

Section One

by

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For Study Groups or Personal Use

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Preface

While many books and authors have passed through Christian awareness over the centuries, periodically a book comes along that strikes a cord deep in the Christian community. *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer is one such example. This insightful book has stood the test of time and has challenged Christians not only to know about the God they profess, but to get off the balcony of observation and get onto the road of discovery and come to know their God intimately and personally.

For a detailed view of the life of James Innell Packer see the biography by Alister McGrath. But to help you get started, here is a quick overview of his life.

Packer began life in the working-class neighborhood of Gloucester, England. He never quite fit in, which is not unusual for a bookish child with an intellectual bent, but a “violent collision with a bread van” at the age of seven set him on the course his life would follow. While running away from schoolboys who were taunting him, he ran out into the street and was hit by a van, resulting in a severe head injury. A metal plate was inserted in his head. Exposed and with rubber softening its edges, Packer felt like “A speckled bird,” making it even more difficult to fit in. The restrictions the accident placed on his teenage life, which meant no sports and limited physical activity, steered him instead to a life of reading and intellectual curiosity. At the age of eleven, expecting a bicycle for his birthday, he instead got a typewriter. That, coupled with the results of his accident, sealed his life’s direction. While he had in many ways an extremely difficult life, he had an innate pluckiness that served him well over the years.

His faith, initially the product of parents with whom he regularly attended church, took a personal turn in secondary school (what we in the U.S. would call high school). In college, reading C. S. Lewis, among others, and his studying the Bible brought him to a point where at a meeting of the Oxford Inter-Collegiate Christian Union (OICCU, or CU) he finally made, “A personal transaction with the living Lord, the Lord Jesus.” His newfound faith did nothing to mitigate his sense of isolation and that might be why he began to appreciate and study the great Puritan authors, themselves isolated from the mainstream of English society in their lifetimes. Several quotes illustrate his attachment. “The Puritans answered those questions that perplexed me. From the Puritans, I acquired what I didn’t have from the start—that is, a sense of the importance and primacy of truth.” Unlike his Puritan mentors and despite his own isolation, he was ordained in the Church of England. However, it was at an accidental speaking engagement that the course of his life would change. He met his wife Kit and at the same time broke through his long-standing fear of being in large public situations. They were married in July of 1954.

After writing his first book, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, a critique of Christian Fundamentalism, in 1958, he has gone on to author over forty books (and still counting) as well as editing countless others. However, he is best known for the book we are studying. Packer is also well known for his linear “habit of mind” and style of communication. Once he starts speaking on a thought he simply cannot stop until he has carried the thought to its logical conclusion. This predilection has led to many difficulties for Packer over the years. I have a very similar bent and I fully understand the problems this state of mind causes both to oneself and those you interact with.

While reading through Packer’s *Knowing God* can be memorable, and has been for uncounted numbers of Christians, studying the book chapter by chapter changes lives. I have seen those changes happen again and again over the years as I have lead cover-to-cover studies, using a one week per chapter format. While this takes about twenty-eight weeks to complete (twenty-two chapters, introductory material, section reviews, and follow-up), it allows ample time for the contemplation of each of the truths that Packer introduces, time to delve into the scriptural references supporting those truths, and the space to consider the depths of each claim that Packer makes. As faithful Christian students, our goal is to be like the Bereans, to question everything that is said to see if it is true. This study should be no exception.

A prayer for this study

However, let me say that while the study of good books can help to focus the growth of a Christian, I have always thought that discipleship can only be successful if it was centered squarely in the cross of Jesus Christ and its true meaning of sacrifice, the “not my will, but thy will be done” that lies at the root of Christ’s sacrificial decision. My goal for everyone who uses these materials to study *Knowing God*, is that they will find the cross of Jesus Christ taking its rightful and necessary place at the center of their lives. If that happens, then I will have been a “good and faithful servant.”

A prayer for this study

Every meaningful endeavor in life should be grounded in prayer, and this is no different.

Dear Lord God, you have challenged us in your Word to study to show ourselves approved and told us to leave aside the milk of the Gospel and mature into its meat. Therefore, open our hearts, O Lord, and prepare us to learn the essence of who you are, to drink deep of your revelation of yourself. And, as we come to know you better, O Lord, may we also come to better know ourselves. Grant us, by your grace, success in our efforts. We thank you, O Lord, for your mercy and patience with us as we struggle to understand both you and ourselves better. May everything we do be done to your honor and glory. Amen.

William Meisheid

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Knowing God Study Guide

Preface: The Postmodern World

Today's theme: Pushing back the void with anxious activity.

Scriptural background: *Luke 12:29-31*, "And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind. For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you."

Quote for the week

"The 'system' must have freedom; it must have abundance, and it must have infinite variety. Profit is the aim, happiness the desire and consumption the means. Hollywood and company manufacture dreams and models for us to mimic or wish for. Desire is awakened, stimulated, encouraged through the perpetual bombardment of images and wishes." "What is Good and Who Says?" Stuart McAllister, *Just Thinking*, Spring/Summer 1998, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries

Concern: How Modern Influences May Affect This Study

We are all affected by the "water in which we swim" or the gestalt of our daily lives. We cannot avoid our time and how it influences who we are and how we think.

Considering the above quote and the pervasiveness of modern influences and intrusions into our lives, how will you find the necessary quietness, clarity, and perseverance to pursue this study?

Interacting With the Text: Knowing God: The Prefaces (1993 and 1973)

If these kinds of challenges excite you, rouse the best in you, then you are a prime candidate to make this journey with us.

In Packer's 1993 Preface he says the editor who commissioned the original articles that became *Knowing God* wanted something for "readers who were fed up with facile Christian verbiage" [simplistic or too simple explanations]. In effect, Packer was told to write for ordinary people who wanted to dive below the surface and see the glories that resided in the deeper waters of the Christian faith. This approach to Christian study is for people who take Hebrews 6:1-3 seriously.

"¹Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, ²and of instruction about washings, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. ³And this we will do if God permits." Hebrews 6:1-3

Section One: Know the Lord

In Exodus 5:2, the Pharaoh of Egypt said, "Who is the LORD that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."

In Hebrews 8:11 it says, "No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest."

The following is taken from a poem by Edward William Bok (1863–1930). *The Americanization of Edward Bok. 1921. XXXV. At the Battle-Fronts in the Great War.*

I include this because everyone who becomes a child of God and then seeks to know him becomes a soldier in the fight for the Kingdom of God, a warrior standing against the forces of darkness.

"For the passing souls we pray,
Saviour, meet them on their way;
Let their trust lay hold on Thee
Ere they touch eternity.

Holy counsels long forgot
Breathe again 'mid shell and shot;
Through the mist of life's last pain
None shall look to Thee in vain.

To the hearts that know Thee, Lord,
Thou wilt speak through flood or sword;
Just beyond the cannon's roar,
Thou art on the farther shore.

For the passing souls we pray,
Saviour, meet them on the way;
Thou wilt hear our yearning call,
Who hast loved and died for all."

Chapter 1: Theology and the Study of God

Today's theme: The difference between knowing about God and knowing God

Scriptural background: *Psalm 119:105*, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path."

Quotes for the week

"To know God better is only to realize how impossible it is that we should ever know him at all. I know not which is more childish—to deny him, or define him." Samuel Butler (1835–1902), British author. First published in 1912. *Samuel Butler's Notebooks*, p. 194, E.P. Dutton & Company (1951).

"I know things. For instance, there are 108 beads in a Catholic rosary and there are 108 stitches in a baseball. When I heard that, I gave Jesus a chance. But it just didn't work out between us. The Lord laid too much guilt on me. I prefer metaphysics to theology." Annie Savoy in *Bull Durham*, 1988

"Theology, not morality, is the first business on the church's agenda of reform, and the church, not society, is the first target of divine criticism." Michael Horton, Reformed theologian and culture critic

Concern: The effects of existentialism

Existentialism pervades our postmodern world and seeps into our thinking through media, music, friends, news, and our general life experience.

Existentialism: *n. Philosophy.* A philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and *isolation* of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts. Its adherents often deny anything spiritual as unknowable and irrelevant to life. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

1. Are you influenced by existentialism? If so, how? If not, why not?

2. If existentialism influenced our thinking in the study of God, how would that be a problem?

Chapter 2: The People Who Know Their God

Today's theme: Pharisees as porch sitters, not travelers

Scriptural background: *Jeremiah 9:23-24a*, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me..."

Quote for the week

"Knowing trees, I understand the meaning of patience. Knowing grass, I can appreciate persistence." Hal Borland. *Countryman: A Summary of Belief*. Lippincott, 1965.

"But, with care, knowing danger, I looked at him and saw marriage on his hand." Patricia L Brueckner.

"Writers and travelers are mesmerized alike by knowing of their destinations." Eudora Welty. *One Writer's Beginnings*. Harvard, 1984.

Concern: Being a Greek rather than a Hebrew knower of God

There is a difference between Greek and Hebrew concepts of knowledge. Greeks felt no obligation to or for what they knew; Hebrews did. To know for a Hebrew meant responsibility.

Knowledge for the sake of knowledge—and much of the basis of our current thinking in science and technology—is Greek. With statements like, "Let it take its own course" or "It is not my concern, I am merely an observer," the Greek view avoids responsibility. The epitome of this paradigm is the news/journalistic cameraman or photographer who just records the horror in front of him without doing anything about it.

For a Hebrew, to know something meant they had the moral and ethical demand to act on that knowledge. This is the basic premise underlying God's revelation of Himself in scripture and how we must use that revelation (what responsibilities that knowledge imparts to us) as we study to show ourselves approved.

1. Have you been Greek or Hebrew in your past approach to knowledge? What can you do to become more Hebrew in your thinking?

Interacting With the Text

Goal: You must know your starting point to be able to chart your course. To come to a usable knowledge of God and what He demands from our life, we first have to come to terms with whether we know Him at all and if we do, how well do we know him? In addition, we must accept responsibility for what knowledge we have and what knowledge we acquire.

10. What are the three aspects of relationship that enter into knowing God? Which one has been least accepted throughout the history of the Church?

11. What is unique about our relationship with God and how does grace figure into it?

12. What is the most important thing happening here, which brings utter humility to all who confront it?

What to Do Next

Continue *Section One* by reading Chapter Four: *The Only True God*. Meditate on what it means to believe that there is only one true God. Consider the relevance of the second commandment to your efforts at knowing God.

Goal: Never forgetting that God first loved us.

Remember, you did not first seek out God, He sought out you and the fact that you are graven on His palms should forever be part of your understanding of who you are and who He is.

Chapter 4: The Only True God

Today's theme: To God alone be the glory.

Scriptural background: *Exodus 3:14*. "And God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And He said, "Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you."

Quote for the week

"The God of Moses *IS* God." The Pharaoh Ramses (Yul Brenner). *The Ten Commandments*, Paramount, Cecil B. DeMille, 1956

"God is in the details." Mies van der Rohe. *New York Times*, August 19, 1969.

"God creates, I do not create. I assemble and I steal everywhere to do it—from what I see, from what the dancers can do, from what others do." George Balanchine. *New York Times*, 16 Dec 63.

Concern: I have not apprehended the uniqueness of God

God is. God is before all else, the first cause, the first mover, the first everything.

"He created all that is, seen and unseen." Nicene Creed

1. Do you ever doubt the existence of God? When? Why? Be honest.

2. What is the difference between doubt and unbelief? Why is this distinction important?

Interacting With the Text

Goal: We all need to come to terms with the idolatry in our lives. Then we can grasp how failing to do this separates us from the intimate relationship we seek to have with God and how coming to terms with our idolatries is an important step along the road of discipleship.

Chapter 5: God Incarnate

Today's theme: The Word became flesh.

Scriptural background: *John 1:14*. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Quotes for this section

"I have always had a dread of becoming a passenger in life." Princess Margrethe of Denmark. "On necessity of independent achievement." *Life*, January 12, 1968.

"Charm is a glow within a woman that casts a most becoming light on others." John Mason Brown. *Vogue*, November 15, 1956.

"You can get help from teachers, but you are going to have to learn a lot by yourself, sitting alone in a room." Theodor Geisel ("Dr Seuss"). "On becoming a writer," *NY Times*, May 21, 1986.

Concern: Do we really understand who Jesus is?

"True God, from true God." Nicene Creed

Theologically we could say he is the human expression of all that is knowable of the Godhead.

1. Do you ever doubt that Jesus is God? Why do you think some people claiming to be Christians do not accept his unique divinity?

2. What is the difference between being divine and being God? Why is this distinction important?

Interacting With the Text

Goal: To come to terms with the great mystery of creation, that God should become a creature for any reason, not the least of which was to die for me.

10. How does how we view Jesus' "emptying" determine our view of scripture? Why is this important?

11. What is the significance of the incarnation to the celebration of Christmas? Why can't it just be a pretty story filled with "Christmas spirit", whatever that is?

What to Do Next

Continue *Section One* by reading Chapter Six: *He Shall Testify*. Meditate on the "three in one" and what that means to the Christian's understanding of the nature of God, and especially of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Goal: Never to diminish the significance of the incarnation or the awe that it inspires.

When Paul suggests that we should have the same sacrificial attitude as Jesus Christ when he laid aside his Godly prerogatives, how can we deny anything that he asks of us after considering what he was willing to do for us.

7. How do we honor or dishonor the Holy Spirit in our daily walk? How should we relate to the Holy Spirit?

8. Explain the Trinity in your own words. Try use plain English. Why is it important to try and do this?

What to Do Next

Review *Section One: Know The Lord*. Consider what God has revealed to you about Himself in your study of this section and how it might change your life going forward.

Goal: To always give the Holy Spirit His proper place in the Godhead.

Remember, Jesus called the Holy Spirit counselor, the one who would guide us into all truth. How can He do his proper work within us if we do hold him in proper regard?

Review of Section One: Know the Lord

Today's theme: Pondering the significance of knowing the Lord and not just knowing God.

Scriptural background: *Psalm 89:8* "O LORD God Almighty, who is like you? You are mighty, O LORD, and your faithfulness surrounds you."

Quote for the week

"The Holy Spirit makes a man a Christian, and if he is a Christian through the work of the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit draws him to other Christians in the church. An individual Christian is not Christian at all." John Rudolph Brokhoff, Author, seminary professor and pastor.

"If there is one God, and one Lord, then those who celebrate and worship this one God and Lord become one people, transcending differences of race, gender, class and geography." N. T. Wright, *Ex Auditu*, "Christology and the Incarnation." Volume 7, 1991

Concern: That we never forget that among all of the things that are true about God is the fact of His Lordship

It is interesting that we call the prayer that Jesus taught us *The Lord's Prayer*. While it is true that Jesus is Lord, the prayer itself harkens not just to our Father, but also to He who is hallowed, who is coming, and to whom and whose will we need to submit ourselves, in essence the Lord of Lords.

1. When you think of the Lord, have you always thought of Jesus in that category or have you also considered the Father as Lord also? Has your view changed as you have studied this section?

In Review of chapters One through Six

1. Do you now consider yourself a traveler? Why or why not?

6. How strong is your immunity to briars and brambles of the human condition? Explain.

7. What do you now consider idolatrous? Why?

8. Is there anything you used to think was idolatrous that you believe is not? Why?

9. What new aspect of the incarnation is now part of your thinking? Explain.

10. How has the meaning of Lord changed for you? If not, why not?

11. Have you learned anything new about the Holy Spirit? If so, what?

What to Do Next

Begin *Section Two* by reading Chapter Seven: *God Unchanging*. Meditate on what it means when Scripture says that God is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Think about how this truth should impact your daily life.

Goal: Always remembering that God “is” and the beginning of His *is*ness for us is His Lordship.

Remember, fear of the *Lord* is the beginning of wisdom. In order for any of the other aspects of God, His relationship, and revelation of Himself to have meaning in our lives, He must first be our Lord.