

Knowing God *Study Guide*

Section Two: Behold Your God **Student Edition**

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

by

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For Personal Study**

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Preface to Section Two

As we continue our study of *Knowing God*, we, as realistic students, continue to look to the Bereans for inspiration on examining the questions of our faith. Therefore, we scrutinize everything said to see if it is true (using the Scriptures as our arbiter of truth), faithfully moving forward in our efforts to know Him with whom we have to do.

Tolkien on Knowing God

At the age of 77, Tolkien was asked by his publisher's daughter about the meaning of life. In a letter postmarked May 20, 1969, he said (in part):

So it may be said that the chief purpose of life, for any one of us, is to increase according to our capacity our knowledge of God by all the means we have and to be moved by it to praise and thanks. To do as we say in the *Gloria in Excelsis*:

‘. . . We praise you; we call you holy; we worship you, we proclaim your glory; we thank you for the greatness of your splendor.’

“And in moments of exaltation, we may call on all created things to join in our chorus, speaking on their behalf, as in Psalm 148 and The Song of the Three Children in Daniel II. ‘PRAISE THE LORD . . . all mountains and hills, all orchards and forests, all things that creep and birds on the wing.’”

Taken from *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Mariner Books, June 2000.

A prayer for this study

Every meaningful endeavor in life should be grounded in prayer, and this is no different. May this prayer aid you in your efforts as you go through the study.

Dear Lord God, you have challenged us in your Word to study to show ourselves approved and you told us to leave aside the milk of the Gospel and mature into its meat. Open our hearts, O Lord, and prepare us to learn of you, to drink deep of your revelation of yourself. And as we come to know you better, O Lord, may we also know ourselves better. Grant us, by your grace, success in our efforts.

May your Holy Spirit, by his witness, authenticate what we study and learn, and may we always remember that the Spirit testifies and leads us into all truth and knowledge of you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As we struggle to apprehend the faith once delivered to the saints, we thank you, O Lord, for your mercy and patience with us as we endeavor to better understand you and ourselves. May everything we do be done to your eternal honor and glory. Amen.

William (Bill) G. Meisheid

Contents

PREFACE TO SECTION TWO I
 Tolkien on Knowing God i

CONTENTS..... II

SECTION TWO: BEHOLD YOUR GOD!..... 1
 Scriptures.....1
 Quotes1
 The Incomprehensible 1

CHAPTER 7: GOD UNCHANGING..... 3
 Concern: Will we fail to comprehend that God is dependable and unchanging, unlike us? 3
 Interacting With the Text4
 What to Do Next6
 Goal: To ground ourselves in the utter reliability of God.6
 Meditation on Chapter 7: God Unchanging6

CHAPTER 8: THE MAJESTY OF GOD 9
 Concern: Will we be able to come to terms with the utter greatness of God? 9
 Interacting With the Text10
 What to Do Next12
 Goal: To understand God using aesthetics (the nature and expression of beauty) in addition to using
 our reason.....12
 Meditation on Chapter 8: The Majesty of God12

CHAPTER 9: GOD ONLY WISE15
 Concern: That we will not recognize that to be truly wise, we must seek the wisdom of God, wisdom that only He
 can provide 15
 Interacting With the Text16
 What to Do Next18
 Goal: To begin trusting our daily decisions and lives to God’s wisdom.18
 Meditation on Chapter 9: God Only Wise.....18

CHAPTER 10: GOD'S WISDOM AND OURS21
 Concern: We will fail to see that we are truly wise *only* when we learn from God what he wishes to teach us21
 Interacting With the Text22
 What to Do Next24
 Goal: To begin defining our wisdom by God’s standard.24
 Meditation on Chapter 10: God's Wisdom and Ours24

CHAPTER 11: THY WORD IS TRUTH.....27
 Concern: Are we wise enough to seek our truth in God and to let every man be a liar?27
 Interacting With the Text28
 What to Do Next30
 Goal: Always view God’s word in context and allow it to be the touchstone of our existence.30
 Meditation on Chapter 11: Thy Word is Truth30

CHAPTER 12: THE LOVE OF GOD33
 Concern: Will we seek God’s “Luv,” avoiding the real love, the “tough love” of God?33
 Interacting With the Text34

What to Do Next.....	36
Goal: Every day this week, do one act of Godly love.	36
Meditation on Chapter 12: The Love of God	36
CHAPTER 13: THE GRACE OF GOD	39
Concern: Can we humble ourselves to accept God’s grace, the essence of agape, God’s love in action?	39
Interacting With the Text	40
What to Do Next.....	42
Goal: To learn to accept God’s grace by extending it to others.....	42
Meditation on Chapter 13: The Grace (Gift) of God.....	42
CHAPTER 14: GOD THE JUDGE.....	47
Concern: That we will use our measure rather than God’s measuring rod to set the standard of judgment.	47
A mini-survey of judgment and its use in Scripture	47
Interacting With the Text	48
What to Do Next.....	50
Goal: To always remember that God’s judgments are just and true.	50
Meditation on Chapter 14: God the Judge	50
CHAPTER 15: THE WRATH OF GOD.....	53
Concern: Will we soft-peddle God’s wrath and reduce the seriousness of sin and judgment, thereby reducing the uniqueness of Christ’s passion?	53
Interacting With the Text	54
What to Do Next.....	55
Goal: To never lose our proper “fear” of God.....	55
Meditation on Chapter 15: The Wrath of God	56
CHAPTER 16: THE GOODNESS AND SEVERITY OF GOD.....	59
Concern: That we will lose our sense of balance when considering how God interacts with us in living out our Christian lives	59
Interacting With the Text	60
What to Do Next.....	62
Goal: Maintain a balanced perspective on God’s dealings with us as we mature in our Christian walk.....	62
Meditation on Chapter 16: The Goodness and Severity of God.....	62
CHAPTER 17: THE JEALOUS GOD	65
Concern: That we misinterpret God’s jealousy into something we can then self-righteously reject.	65
Interacting With the Text	65
What to Do Next.....	66
Goal: Remember that God is balanced in His approach to us and our growth as His children.”.....	66
Meditation on Chapter 17: The Jealous God.....	67
REVIEW OF SECTION TWO: BEHOLD YOUR GOD!	69
Concern: That we will shrink back from seeing God as He is rather than what we want Him to be	69
In Review of chapters seven through seventeen	69
What to Do Next.....	72
Goal: We want to always remember that when we look at God, He, not we, defines what we see. .	72
Meditation on Review of Section Two: Behold Your God!	73

Section Two: Behold Your God!

We now begin Section Two, looking at the God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) we were introduced to in Section One, the unfathomable Three-in-One.

Scriptures

[Isaiah 35:4](#) Say to those who are fearful-hearted, “Be strong, do not fear! Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God; He will come and save you.”

[Isaiah 40:9](#) O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

[John 14:9](#) Jesus answered: ‘Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?’

[John 20:28](#) “Thomas said to him, ‘My Lord and my God!’”

Quotes

"You see many stars at night in the sky but find them not when the sun rises; can you say that there are no stars in the heaven of day? So, O man! Because you behold not God in the days of your ignorance, say not that there is no God." Anonymous

"Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God, men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance until they have." John Calvin

The Incomprehensible

By Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

FAR in the Heavens my God retires:
My God, the mark of my desires,
And hides his lovely face;
When he descends within my view,
He charms my reason to pursue,
But leaves it tir'd and fainting in th' unequal chase.

Or if I reach unusual height
Till near his presence brought,
There floods of glory check my flight,
Cramp the bold pinions of my wit,
And all untune my thought;
Plunged in a sea of light I roll,
Where wisdom, justice, mercy, shines;
Infinite rays in crossing lines
Beat thick confusion on my sight, and overwhelm my
soul.

Great God! behold my reason lies
Adoring: yet my love would rise
On pinions not her own:
Faith shall direct her humble flight,
Through all the trackless seas of light,
To Thee, th' Eternal Fair, the infinite Unknown.

Chapter 7: God Unchanging

Today's theme: God, the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, forever immutable.

Scriptural background: [Numbers 23:19](#) "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?"

[Psalm 33:11](#) "The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations."

Quotes for the week

"As my high school teacher, Miss Julia Coleman, used to say: "We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles." Jimmy Carter. *Inaugural address*. Thursday, January 20, 1977.

"We need to learn to set our course by the stars, not by the lights of every passing ship." Omar Nelson Bradley. U.S. general, 1893-1981.

"I have my faults, but *changing my tune* is not one of them." Samuel Beckett. *The Unnamable*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1953. English: New York, Grove Press, 1958.

Concern: Will we fail to comprehend that God is dependable and unchanging, unlike us?

The world of the scriptures is so different from our world that sometimes, we find it hard to recognize the God we see in the pages of the Old Testament. Because of this, we must be careful not to see two different Gods (OT and NT) and drive a wedge between our understanding of the God of Moses and Israel and the God and Father of Jesus Christ. They are the same.

1. What problems (think about the surrounding culture) do we encounter when trying to hold fast to unchanging biblical principles in the world in which we live today?

2. What do you (personally) set your course by? Why?

9. Food for thought: How does this unchanging nature of God relate to our understanding of the Trinity and how we view each person of the Godhead, especially God's Son, Jesus Christ?

What to Do Next

Before you read the chapter for next week, look at question 2 in Chapter 8's Concern section. After answering that, read Chapter Eight: *The Majesty of God*. Consider how Biblical figures responded to the majesty of God and then, interacting with their example, decide what your response should be.

Goal: To ground ourselves in the utter reliability of God.

Armed with the truth that God does not change His mind, we can stand on His promises and be confident in His trustworthiness. Remembering that we were created in His image, think about what responsibility lies at our feet.

Meditation on Chapter 7: God Unchanging

In this section, we confront the God who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow, the forever immutable (not subject or susceptible to change) God, to use a nice theological term. In Section Two, Packer introduces the important attributes of God and begins with God Unchanging. Numerous Scriptures deal with our unchanging God, but I want to focus on two:

“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?” ([Numbers 23:19](#))

“The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.” ([Psalm 33:11](#))

The practical issue behind the theological niceties of immutability is whether or not the God with whom we have to do is *absolutely dependable*. The pagan deities in the world surrounding the Hebrews were not. They often appeared petty, vindictive, and completely unreliable, hence the need in their religious systems to make offerings to placate or bribe them into action. This pagan necessity should not be confused with Israelite requirements to make sacrifices for sin.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (YAHWEH) is a God of covenants, of agreements, and they are as reliable as his Word.

The first Scripture, noted above, is from Numbers and says that God does not lie. He is truthful and never has to take back anything he has said. In addition, his yes is yes, and his no is no. So, when he says he will or will not do something, that is the end of the matter.

The second Scripture is taken from Psalm 33, and it assures us that when God gives us guidance or direction or tells us in his Word what we should do or not do, it is not relative or off-handed, but it will stand the test of time and eternity. God's heart, purposes, truth, etc., do not change from generation to generation, so what he has told his followers in the past applies to us here and now. When Paul tells the Corinthians ([1 Corinthians 10:11](#)) that what happened to those in the past was written down for our admonition and benefit many years later, it is because God does not change.

Chapter 7: God Unchanging

With this in mind, Dr. Packer wants us to grasp God's utter trustworthiness and dependability and the validity and reliability of his Holy Word. One of the ways Packer does this is by pointing out six aspects of God's nature that do not change. These include his:

- **Life** – He is from everlasting to everlasting, unchanging, immutable at His core, and reliable in everything.
- **Character** – He is permanently good.
- **Truth** – Always, God does not lie.
- **Ways** – He is the same always: yesterday, today, and tomorrow.
- **Purposes** – His plan is from eternity and his purposes do not change.
- **Son (Trinitarian nature)** – Hebrews 13:8 tells us about the utter reliability of Jesus the Son.

These aspects of God are very different from what makes up who we are. Below, you see how God's aspects are contrasted with our own.

- **Life** – We are born into death, waiting to die.
- **Character** – Our character must be taught goodness.
- **Truth** – We lie.
- **Ways** – We must learn to act properly and not be pathetically inconsistent.
- **Purposes** – While God's are eternal, ours change often, sometimes daily, sometimes moment to moment.
- **and His Son** – We are the prodigals and only his sons by merciful adoption and constant forgiveness through the blood of His Son.

God is the one who means what he says, keeps his promises, and is utterly reliable, trustworthy, truthful, and dependable. Not one jot or tittle will change from what he has declared until it has achieved its eternal purpose.

God's unchangingness is essential for us to live out the Christian life since our sanctification and ultimate justification rely totally on Jesus the Son, who is the author and finisher of our faith, the one who has begun this good work in us, and will *himself* bring it to completion ([Philippians 1:6](#)). That gives us all hope, hope when we fail, when we sin and seek repentance, hope when it seems that what is arrayed against us is overwhelming, yet we still have hope. We have Jesus on our side, and he told us that while we are in his hand, he is in the Father's hand, and no one, not anyone, can take us out of the Father's hand. See [John 10:28-29](#) and [Roman's 8:31-39](#).

Without God's unchanging immutability, what would be the consequence of those promises? He could change his mind tomorrow as the Gentiles believed their pagan gods did. But no, YAHWEH our God assures us that he is reliable and that his eternal Son, our Savior, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." ([Hebrews 13:8](#)). This is the foundation for our strength to get up when we have fallen, to continue against the obstacles we face, to have hope when all around us hope is gone. We have an eternal destiny. God's gifts to us and his calling on our life are irrevocable ([Romans 11:29](#)), so we persevere to the end, sure in the hope set before us.

I pray that God will grant you both the grace and the help required in your times of need. I pray that you may always rest in the assurance of his everlasting faithfulness and eternal loving kindness to you and to all whom he has called unto himself. Grace and peace. Amen.

7. Why is understanding this distinction from Job important to living a successful, humble, Christian life?

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Nine: *God Only Wise*. Think about the source of wisdom. Is it something we discover (it already “exists”) or something we create for ourselves? That answer should give the title of this chapter additional weight.

Goal: To understand God using aesthetics (the nature and expression of beauty) in addition to using our reason.

The Psalmist reminds us, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.” (Psalm 19:1). In our attempt to “study to show ourselves approved,” we sometimes forget that the beauty and majesty of God, are on display all around us. Think back and remember how you felt about this aspect of God when you were first saved. This week, try to recapture your appreciation of this aspect of God’s nature.

Meditation on Chapter 8: The Majesty of God

In the last lesson, we began examining the attributes of God by exploring his immutability [not subject or susceptible to change]. That seldom-discussed attribute forms the bedrock foundation of our understanding of God since it makes all of His other attributes eternally consistent. It also makes God completely dependable, so utterly reliable that we can have unremitting confidence in his trustworthiness. Because of his immutability, we know that he will keep every last promise he has made to us, both corporate and personal, including the most important promise of all: our everlasting salvation in Jesus Christ.

Thus, having secured the base of our understanding of God, we now look at the crown of that understanding: God’s majesty. Of all of God’s attributes that Packer addresses in his book, this is the one that most of the people that I have studied with have the hardest time grasping. Part of the problem lies in the word itself; just what is majesty? It is not a word found in common usage, and historically, it is a word associated with things belonging to a monarchy rather than the republics or democracies to which moderns relate. Outside of its use in royal contexts, majesty finds almost all of its usage within a Christian framework. The only place Americans come in contact with the word is in the lyrics to *America the Beautiful* and the line “For purple mountain majesties.” The song’s most famous version is the one sung by [Ray Charles](#).

However, majesty gets its fullest meaning when the word is applied to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Packer notes in this chapter’s beginning sentence that the word comes from Latin, meaning greatness. Yes, the mountains are great. Royalty is supposed to be great, but the greatest of all greatness resides in God himself. The famous American preacher and philosopher Jonathan Edwards expressed the overwhelming sense of God’s majesty that he experienced one day while out walking.

Chapter 8: *The Majesty of God*

“As I was walking...and looking upon the sky and clouds, there came into my mind so sweet a sense of the glorious majesty and grace of God, as I know not how to express. I seemed to see them both in a sweet conjunction; majesty and meekness joined together; it was sweet, and gentle, and holy majesty; and also a majestic meekness; an awful sweetness; a high, and great, and holy gentleness.” Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) quoted in *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* in 18 Volumes.

In the past, I have asked those studying this book with me to answer this question before reading this chapter: “If I asked you to apply the concept of majesty to God, what would you say it could tell you about God?” The answers cluster around words like great, awe-inspiring, and overwhelming. Indeed, I would agree that seeing God in all his glory and majesty would be overwhelming. In [Exodus 33](#), Moses asked to see that very thing, but God had to hide him in the cleft of a rock and cover him with his hand as his glory passed by to preserve Moses from the destruction his overwhelming majesty would cause.

“...you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live.” And the LORD said, “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.” [Exodus 33: 20-33](#) ESV

Most of the uses of majesty in the Bible are grouped in the Psalms and the words of the prophet Isaiah. For example:

“...the power of God, whose majesty is over Israel.” Psalm 68:34

“The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty.” Psalm 93:1

“...you are clothed with splendor and majesty.” Psalm 104:1

“Arrayed in holy majesty...” Psalm 110:3

“On the glorious splendor of your majesty...I will meditate.” Psalm 145:5

“...hide in the ground from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty!” Isaiah 2:10

“They will flee...from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty, when he rises to shake the earth.” Isaiah 2:21

“They raise their voices, they shout for joy; from the west they acclaim the LORD’s majesty.” Isaiah 24:14

In contrast to these expressions of God’s majesty, his Son, the Messiah of Israel, would appear common in his manhood.

“He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” Isaiah 53:2

This biblical use of majesty is in direct contrast to God’s accessibility as our heavenly Father, our *abba*, as expressed by Jesus in the Lord’s Prayer. This is important since God’s majesty helps to balance our tendency to get a little too familiar, almost casual, in our approach to God. I believe Packer effectively deals with that issue in this chapter.

However, I often find myself investigating God’s majesty in a new way. I sometimes go in a direction that Packer had not followed. Let me explain, but first, let me say that I put this idea forward as a personal observation only, not as a condemnation of or demand upon anyone, including any church or denomination. Please keep that caveat in mind.

Much of what I see as I view the world around me, including the world of my faith, which I see symbolically. I see and think in images, and I have longed to believe that much of what God says directly to our hearts is said symbolically, whether in nature, in his Word, or in the worship he gave to Israel. One of my foci in the last several years has been on worship, so when I look at the worship of Israel, I see many of the things that were done and the cultic elements used within worship as heavily symbolic. When we move into the age of the Church, I see that symbolism carried over into the historic Christian liturgy. In addition to its obvious scriptural and sacramental aspects, the Church’s historic liturgy is filled with symbolism.

One of the things that I have always liked about liturgy is its sense of propriety, decency, and order to use Paul's phraseology and how it imparts a sense of God's majesty. I see much of this propriety and majesty communicated through the symbolism contained in the liturgy, including such mundane things as the congregational positions of standing, sitting, kneeling, and bowing, depending on what is happening in the service. Everything means something much more than is casually obvious.

Having once been a member of an evangelical, charismatic Episcopal Church, I always felt that I had the best of all possible worlds: good preaching, good worship, and good liturgy, which helped me to maintain a balanced sense of who God was and how I related to him, including an abiding sense of the holy. I have always missed this when attending Anabaptist and Presbyterian-style worship and, honestly, in their rather mundane, almost cafeteria-style communion services. From my perspective, these non-liturgical traditions leave the problem of balancing my interaction with God primarily on my shoulders, with very little, if any, help imbued into the community's shared worship.

So, at least for me, God's majesty is also directly linked to my sense of worship, the historic Christian liturgy, and the proper balance between God as my Abba Father and God as King and Lord of all that was and is and is to come. I know this goes beyond chapter eight in *Knowing God*, but I felt it was important to share it with you.

7. Why are these biblical models or examples of God's wisdom in action important to us as Christians today, two to three thousand years after they happened?

8. Why are your examples of God's wisdom working in your life important to your fellow travelers and your fellow believers in their journey? Think about the importance of testimony in the life and mission of the Church.

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Ten: *God's Wisdom and Ours*. Consider the difference between the two, and then, since we are made in the image of God, why is there a difference? Finally, following Packer's lead, think about what we must learn to change our wisdom into God's.

Goal: To begin trusting our daily decisions and lives to God's wisdom.

Learning from Biblical figures such as Joseph and Paul, we too should strive to see and trust the wisdom of God in every situation in life, just as they did. This week, I want you to take some time each night to review the course of your day. Evaluate your progress and growth in trusting God and his wisdom that day. Do not be discouraged; always remember this is a lifelong journey.

Meditation on Chapter 9: God Only Wise

As we continue our study, we progress from God's eternal and glorious majesty to this week's examination of the LORD's deep and abiding wisdom. Indeed, Packer makes the claim that only God is truly wise. That statement is powerful, especially in our post-modern, secular scientific age. I think two quotes from Thomas Jefferson are apropos here:

- Honesty is the first chapter in the book of Wisdom.
- In Great Britain, it is said that their constitution relies on the House of Commons for honesty and the Lords

Chapter 9: God Only Wise

for wisdom, which would be a rational reliance if honesty were to be bought with money and if wisdom were hereditary.

So, to be wise, we must first be honest, but honesty is not for sale, and wisdom can't be inherited. Emerson had an idea of where wisdom might come from.

Wisdom has its root in goodness, *not goodness its root in wisdom*. [*Emphasis added.*] Ralph Waldo Emerson.

So, Emerson believed that to be wise, you must first be good since bad men will delude themselves into thinking they are wise, and only a good man will honestly separate wisdom from folly. This aligns with the biblical concept that wisdom has a moral and intellectual component. However, Walter Lippman, the founding editor of The New Republic, identified another problem.

Understanding wisdom requires wisdom: the music is nothing if the audience is deaf.

This feeds nicely into Paul's biblical argument in [1 Corinthians 1:18-24](#).

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

From this, we learn that Christ is the wisdom of God, which is why he is foolish to those who are perishing, the natural man, but in those who have received salvation, who have the Spirit of Christ in them, the wisdom of God is made real. They have solved Lippman's dilemma. At least they have begun to.

But it can also be seen that the reality of life is that there must be a transition from the old man to the new, an ongoing growth in maturity in the Lord. Packer uses several Old Testament saints as examples of the growth and maturity that occurs over time due to encounters with God. He uses Abram, who became, after as many failures as successes, Abraham, the father of Israel; Jacob, who went from a practitioner of deception to the Patriarch of Israel; and Joseph, who went from condemned slave to vizier over all of Egypt, saving the future Israel from a devastating famine.

Packer also corrects a common misconception about wisdom, that being wise means avoiding all problems and living a happy and carefree life.

(p. 101-102) But this idea of God's intention is a complete mistake. God's wisdom is not, and never was, pledged to keep a fallen world happy, or to make ungodliness comfortable. Not even to Christians has he promised a trouble-free life; rather the reverse. He has other ends in view for life in this world than simply to make it easy for everyone.

What is he after, then? What is his goal? What does he aim at?...His ultimate objective is to bring them to a state in which they please him entirely and praise him adequately, a state in which he is all in all to them, and he and they rejoice continually in the knowledge of each other's love – people rejoicing in the saving love of God, set upon them from all eternity, and God rejoicing in the responsive love of people, drawn out of them by grace through the gospel.

As Christians, we must accept and understand that trials and tribulations are a normal part of our lives in this fallen world. Suffering is normative, so much so that even Jesus himself “learned obedience through what he suffered...being made perfect...” ([Hebrews 5:8-9](#)) With that in mind, how should we, who are called to follow in his footsteps, expect anything less?

In the end, gaining wisdom means gaining a deep trust in God our Father and believing not only that his grace is sufficient for whatever needs we have but that no matter what happens, it cannot separate us from His

everlasting love.

“Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know...we know that for those who love God all things work together for good...What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?...Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?...No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Selections from [Romans 8:26-39](#))

As you continue your study in *Knowing God*, may you grow in grace and wisdom, and may the peace that passes all understanding guard your heart and mind in the knowledge of your salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord, to the praise and glory of His Name. Amen.

9. Ultimately, what form should our quest for wisdom take? What are the things we are questing after?

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Eleven: *Thy Word is Truth*. Consider why truth is significant to God's Word. Also, think about Pilate's question to Jesus (*What is truth?*) and ponder what this reveals about us and how we approach this significant aspect of God's revelation of himself.

Goal: To begin defining our wisdom by God's standard.

Because we were both created in God's image and reborn to renew that image within us, take some time this week to think about how accurately you are reflecting the image of God to the world around you. Then, consider what you can do to make that reflection more faithful.

Meditation on Chapter 10: God's Wisdom and Ours

Last week, we focused on God's deep and abiding wisdom in our study of God Only Wise. This week, we look at our apprehension of God's wisdom, one of the greatest gifts he gives his adopted (all but one of God's children are adopted) children. The importance of this gift is a recurring theme at the beginning of the Old Testament book of Proverbs.

Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom; she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore, get wisdom. Though it costs all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you. She will set a garland of grace on your head and present you with a crown of splendor. [Proverbs 4:5-9](#)

However, wisdom is a double-edged sword; being wise alone doesn't mean a successful life (ask Solomon), and people who think they are wise often aren't. Being wise is one of those situations where the knowledge and acceptance of your limitations are integral to getting wisdom and maintaining it. Let's look at Solomon, who, by God's statement, was the wisest man who ever lived or will live.

And God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and breadth of mind like the sand on the seashore so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt. For he was wiser than all other men... 1 Kings 4:29-31a

However, when we look at his eventual failures, it becomes obvious that Solomon, despite his wisdom, could not maintain its integrity. Toward the end of his life, he may have completely lost even his great wisdom due to his disobedience.

And the LORD was angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice and had commanded him concerning this thing, that he should not go after other gods. But he did not keep what the LORD commanded. [1 Kings 11:9-10](#)

True wisdom is rooted in learning what God wants to teach us and acting on it, so we must always be on guard not to close our ears to the Lord's admonition and correction. [Proverbs 15:33](#) holds the key.

Chapter 10: God's Wisdom and Ours

The fear of the LORD teaches a man wisdom, and **humility comes before honor** [*emphasis added*].

Without proper respect for God our Father and the willingness to bow our knees daily in ready submission, wisdom will either elude or leave us.

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time because the days are evil. ([Ephesians 5:14-16](#))

So, your mental and spiritual attitude is just as important as anything else (maybe more so) in acquiring and maintaining wisdom.

However, we can aspire to wisdom, according to Packer, because we are made in God's image; further, as Christians, we are "being renewed in the image of Christ and God." Because we are made in God's image, we possess that portion of his communicable attributes (of which wisdom is one), which, as created beings, God could give us and still maintain the integrity between the creator and the created. Therefore, as his unique creation, we have the God-given capacity for wisdom.

Despite that, Packer believes some preconditions or prerequisites must be met. These include reverence and willingness to receive, which require acknowledging God as the source of wisdom while being willing to receive his wisdom by interacting with and embracing His Word, the Scriptures. Only with a submitted heart will we do these two things. In the New Testament, that submitted heart comes only from those who have been born again.

When we look at the Word of God as the door into wisdom, we should appreciate that his Word views things as they are; it is realistic above all else. The scriptures see the depravity and spiritual hunger of mankind, the willing personal sacrifice alongside the deception and treachery that mark out the human race, even the chosen of God (i.e., King David). In addition, the scriptures clearly show the nature of wisdom and how abandoning it leads to vanity and then destruction, as is so eloquently illustrated in Ecclesiastes, which could be seen as the "Confessions of Solomon."

Packer closes this chapter by exposing the problems of sloth and pride and their intimate connection to each other. Pride prevents us from seeing our lives as they are; instead, it colors everything so things appear as we want them to be. Pride creates the pretense or illusion of wisdom.

Sloth, on the other hand, despite being an outdated word, turns out to be very descriptive of the problems we face in our pursuit of wisdom. Packer argues that much of the sloth or apparent laziness we see in Christians comes from wounded pride and is a direct result of rejecting the reforming lessons of humility. Discouraged, we internalize an aversion to the work required to admit to our error, repent, and amend our ways. We avoid the necessary work because it is extremely painful, in all circumstances humbling, and means the admission of abject failure, which is the antithesis of pride.

Packer argues that the simplest definition of wisdom is that it always pursues "***the best means to the best end***", which he notes is God's "chosen end of restoring and perfecting the relationship between himself and human beings—the relationship for which he made them."

In the end, what is wisdom, according to Packer? It is this:

... a disposition to confess that he [God] is wise, and to cleave to him and live for him in the light of his Word through thick and thin.

I like that, "through thick and thin." And it will:

... make us more humble, more joyful, more godly, more quick-sighted as to his will, more resolute in the doing of it and less troubled (not less sensitive, but less bewildered) than we were at the dark and painful things of which our life in this fallen world is full. The New Testament tells us that the fruit of wisdom is Christlikeness..."

It seems God's wisdom offers us what we need in life. Contrary to the problems Solomon faced with his gift of wisdom, Christians have the advantage of the new birth and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit to guide and convict their use of that wisdom. While it does not mean we won't fail like Solomon, we have a significant advantage in the struggle.

I close this lesson with the fervent desire that you continue to grow in Christlikeness and put aside, as the author of Hebrews says, anything that hinders your pursuit, especially the sin that so readily and easily entangles all of us. May God's grace and peace be with you today, and may your pursuit of wisdom be diligent and never-ending.

Chapter 11: Thy Word is Truth

Today's theme: It is God who defines the nature of truth, and He does that for us in His Word.

Scriptural background: Deuteronomy 32:4 "He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He."

Quotes for the week

"Truth is truth, to the end of reckoning." William Shakespeare (1564–1616). *Measure for Measure*. Act v. Sc. 1.

"You will find that the truth is often unpopular, and the contest between agreeable fancy and disagreeable fact is unequal." Adlai E. Stevenson. Commencement address at Michigan State, *NY Times* 9 June 1958.

"We seek the truth and will endure the consequences." Charles Seymour, President, Yale. Recalled on his death 11 August 1963.

Concern: Are we wise enough to seek our truth in God and to let every man be a liar?

"For the word of the LORD is right, and all His work is done in truth." [Psalm 33:4](#)

1. Why is the truthfulness of God so important to everything we are?

"The Elder, to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I but also all those who have known the truth, because of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever." 2 John 1-2

2. What is the truth that abides in us forever? Why will it be with us forever? (Consider [John 14:6](#))

Chapter 11: Thy Word is Truth

4. What important fact do we learn about God's Word in the lives of Jeremiah and Isaiah? Find New Testament examples that illustrate this same thing. How does this knowledge affect your life?

5. What other claim does Packer argue that the word of God has on us besides that it comes from our Creator? How does this other claim affect you personally?

6. God's utterances to man generally fall into three categories. What are these categories, where are they found in the Bible, and how do they relate to your life?

7. How does Packer define a Christian? Is his definition biblical? Why or why not? How does this definition relate to you and your concept of what it means to be a Christian?

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Twelve: *The Love of God*. Consider the significance of St. John's great statement in [1 John 4:8](#), whose main point is repeated in verse 16. Think about how easy it is to misuse that statement to justify that which God condemns by twisting its context. This week, examine yourself in relation to this concern.

Goal: Always view God's word in context and allow it to be the touchstone of our existence.

Pledge that from this day forward, you will always be a spiritual Berean (see [Acts 17:11](#)), a believer who rightly and humbly uses the Word of God as the arbiter of all that is true and right. Now, follow through on it.

Meditation on Chapter 11: Thy Word is Truth

The title of this chapter, *Thy Word Is Truth*, comes from the King James Version of the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17:17: "*Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.*" This is the foundation of everything that enables us to live out our lives as Christians. When the Apostle Thomas touched the wounds of Jesus in the upper room and sealed his faith, Jesus told him:

Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." John 20:29

Jesus was talking about everyone who did not see him post-resurrection, which includes all of us and 99.9999% of all those who have accepted Christ throughout history. We have all depended on past witnesses and the primary witness of the Word.

Before I get onto the veracity of the Word, which is the central theme of this chapter, let me observe the statement "and yet have believed." The grammatical construction is past perfect tense. Even though I was not yet born when Jesus said this, the way I interpret that statement is that Jesus, the author, and finisher of my salvation, is saying that my saving faith was already a fact, not a supposition, and was signed, sealed, and delivered even at this moment when he was conversing with Thomas. I know this is hard for people with difficulty with the Reformed perspective, but this is a big part of the rock I stand on.

After spending the two previous chapters establishing the significance of God's wisdom over ours and identifying how important it is to rely on God's guidance in formulating and living out our lives, Packer now addresses how we access that wisdom. According to Dr. Packer, the access mechanism is two-fold. Yes, it is the Word, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, but it is also plain ordinary language (commerce Greek) and not a special priestly language designed for God talk. It was the everyday language of the day, written by common men trying to convey what God had given them to say in an everyday vernacular.

Chapter 11: Thy Word is Truth

However, when Dr. Packer wrote this short chapter in 1973, post-modernism and deconstructionism had not ascended to their current prominence in the day-to-day understanding of things. While situational ethics and relativism had taken root in Packer's day, the essential nihilism of our post-modern deconstructed mindset was still twenty-five years away from beginning to impact the person on the street through the now ubiquitous media, entertainment, literature, and music.

Today we have to deal with the problem that rather than argue with us over the meaning of biblical passages or engage us in reasonable debate over what God intended us to understand through Paul or Peter or John or Luke, we have to deal with outright dismissal of the text and the argued fundamental irrelevance of anything and everything in our sacred writings. Language, it is argued, is only an approximate abstraction that carries no concrete reality, so whatever was written 2000-3000 years ago carries no substantive or even determinable meaning for anyone today. Instead, the ineffable creative force of the universe speaks to each heart uniquely, but only in the broadest of contexts. With that backdrop, we are told that we cannot depend on the shifting sands of another's poor attempts to codify the uncodifiable (read the Bible here). Rather than attack the Scriptures themselves, the approach used during the Enlightenment and subsequent scholarly attempts to shred any objectionable element in the sacred writings, which probably reached its zenith in the Jesus Seminar and its personally defined categories based on internal prejudices, what is now attacked is the ability of language itself to convey any sustentative meaning and thereby the Scriptures, being rooted and grounded in language, are essentially meaningless (according to this argument) as vehicles of truth. While I claim no deep and extended knowledge in these areas of our Christian God and Scripture bashing (just voracious reading, half of which I can never remember...), I believe my take on this is accurate.

While dealing with this pervasive nihilism, I concluded that although the "scholarly science" of these current attacks is relatively new, their essence is first-century and rooted in the ecstatic mystery religions of the Roman Empire that competed with emergent Christianity and demanded a personal and transcendent experience of the indescribable and inexpressible (what we know now as Gnosticism). God was melded with us at what we would call a precognitive level in deep, ecstatic spiritual moments. This approach was contrasted with Christianity, which, while having a deeply experiential component, was fundamentally rooted in historical fact and objective reality, passed on by witness and the written Word. If you need help here, think of the Bereans (Acts 17:11) who determined the truth of Paul's teaching by comparing his words with God's Words. God was assumed to be true, as defined in his revealed Word; the teaching of a man as suspect until it passed the necessary tests. The reality of truth and the understanding and apprehension of God was rooted in the Word, which by its very nature depended on language and its reliable meanings and constructs.

This whole non-Christian milieu in which we now swim contrasts with Packer's first section heading: *The God Who Speaks*. Compare that with the post-modern deconstructed (PMD) god who mumbles in non-verbal emoting felt by a postulated celestial detection grid uniquely created by our individual higher consciousness networked into a cosmic global mind. What kind of god is that? The God of the Bereans and Packer is personal, has direct conversations with his human creations, actually lived among them through his Son Jesus Christ, and expects us to **read, mark, and inwardly digest** what he has said, expecting not a single jot or tittle to pass away until everything is accomplished. The PMD god can't "speak" because "it" is non-personal. While *it* may possess a form of consciousness on a grand universal scale, it is a desireless ground of being, which, in my opinion, needs to be turned over by a good cosmic roto-tiller and shot through with an ample dose of weed killer.

As William Shakespeare so aptly said, "Truth is truth, to the end of reckoning." Measure for Measure. Act v. Sc. 1. So, in the end, our first fight is to make the actual words of the scriptures meaningful and worthy of consideration, not to those outside the faith. However, evangelism can be important, but as far as our understanding, it has been ruefully tainted by the PMD influences around us. Our sanctification depends on the Word and its eternally significant language. Our ability to read, mark, and inwardly digest requires it. How can we study to show ourselves approved if we don't accept the fundamental source material God has given us as absolutely meaningful?

In the closing portion of this chapter, Packer defines a Christian as one who acknowledges and lives under the Word of God. The Word rules them, not they it. In [Daniel 10:21](#), the angel sent to protect Daniel in the lion's den tells him, "*But I will tell you what is noted in the Scripture of Truth.*" We must choose as Christians seeking to work out our sanctification (why else are you doing this study?) in fear and trembling (honor and respect),

what do we finally depend on? How do we judge what we see, hear, and experience? That is the question on which our eternal destiny turns.

To quote my personal story about my dependence on sola scriptura:

You have to understand that I had wallowed in the subjective experience of the occult for years. I sought out the dark side, and the devil found me during one hellaciously bad acid trip, where the floor of my townhouse opened up, exposing the fires of hell. The devil looked at me and said, "It's time to go!" Through direct and dramatic experience, I know how easy it was for your own subjective experiences and the witness of others to see their experiences lead you astray. For me to go forward with my newly accepted Christianity, I had to make a choice similar to the choice I had made to follow Christ. I knew there had to be a trail, a path, a roadmap for me to use on my perilous journey. I also knew that my chosen map would determine where I ended up. So, with an oppressive darkness pressing in all around me, I decided that the Bible, the eternal Word of God, was my only possible guide. At that moment, in my van, I sealed the course of my remaining life. It was sola scriptura from that point forward.

So, good Christians, choose this day for what you will follow and what will be the basis of your understanding. It is the Word of God, the Scriptures for me and my life. What is it for you?

Chapter 12: The Love of God

Today's theme: God's greatest mystery, His enduring love of mankind.

Scriptural background: [1 John 4:7-9](#) "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this, the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him."

Quotes for the week

"One unquestioned text we read, all doubt beyond, all fear above; nor crackling pile nor cursing creed can burn or blot it—God is love." Oliver Wendell Holmes (1809–1894).

"I am a little pencil in the hand of a writing God who is sending a love letter to the world." Mother Teresa MC. News summaries, 1 September 1982.

"Thou canst not pray to God without praying to Love, but mayest pray to Love without praying to God." Richard Garnett (1835–1906). *De Flagello myrteo*. xiii.

"I have learned that human existence is essentially tragic. It is only the love of God, disclosed and enacted in Christ, that redeems the human tragedy and makes it tolerable. No, more than tolerable. Wonderful." Angus Dun, former Episcopal Bishop of Washington DC. Recalled on his death, 12 August 1971.

Concern: Will we seek God's "Luv," avoiding the real love, the "tough love" of God?

"And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more *in knowledge and all discernment*, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with *the fruits of righteousness* which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God." [Philippians 1:9-11](#)

1. Why is this passage important to understanding how God's love should grow and mature within us?

2. "A Song of God's Majesty and Love: I will extol You, my God, O King; And I will bless Your name forever and ever." [Psalm 145:1](#)

What is the significance of the psalmist linking majesty and love together? How does that inform our understanding of the nature of God's love and how His love transforms whatever it touches?

7. How do the questions Packer asks in the last section affect your view of God's love? Think of applying the reality check of chapter 10 (God's wisdom vs. our wisdom) to these questions. What effect does it have?

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Thirteen: *The Grace of God*. Throughout the history of the Christian Church, men have tried to use their actions instead of God's grace to find justification and eternal worth in themselves. Can grace be grace if you earn it? Think about that this week.

Goal: Every day this week, do one act of Godly love.

Great changes often result from accumulating many small changes until a tipping point is reached. Begin tipping your life toward God's loving kindness by doing at least one small act of Godly love each day this week.

Meditation on Chapter 12: The Love of God

It has taken us eleven chapters and two Prefaces to reach this point. Still, today, we address what some believers argue is the central theme of humanity's relationship with God, not just Christianity's core theological truth: the love of God. While examining this essential attribute of God's nature and a fundamental aspect of his relationship with us, his creation, we must ask ourselves a very important question: in the expression "the love of God," what does love mean? When John says in [3:16](#), the most famous of all biblical passages:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

We rightfully have to ask ourselves to define the meaning of love as it is used in this pivotal assertion. This is not an attempt at obfuscation like the famous Clinton line, "It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is." No, it is because in English, the word "love" covers such a broad range of connotations that its meaning can easily be distorted to support things that are not related to biblical love. Why else would Paul have to offer the Philippians a clarifying statement on the expression of love in his prayer for them ([Philippians 1:9-11](#))?

In addition, our problem is not helped by the popular misconceptions surrounding John's statement ([1 John 4:8, 16](#)), "God is love." While being, as Packer says, "one of the most tremendous utterances in the Bible," it has also been so thoroughly misunderstood and misused that what should be the most wondrous view possible, as if seen from the top of the world, instead in the hands of many, is like being caught down in a valley of sticky syrup.

However, before he examines the significant passages in John's first epistle, Dr. Packer begins his discussion with an important clarifying statement made by Paul in Romans.

"Now, hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, who was given to us." [Romans 5:5](#)

As Packer notes, Paul uses the same word Luke used to outpour the Holy Spirit in Acts. It carries the idea of being *flooded* with God's love, not hidden away as some barely noticeable event, but a deep and overwhelming expression of his love. Packer then points out that the tense used in Greek (perfect) is a settled and completed state. God's love poured out on us is a completed, settled act. With that in mind, we should also notice the agent,

Chapter 12: The Love of God

the Holy Spirit. This is not something we do ourselves, something we must gin up or strive to be worthy of; it just is!

Why is this infilling with the love of God so important for Christians? The answer is in the thirteenth chapter of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he explains the primacy of a heart filled with love and how a person with such a heart acts not only to God but amongst its brothers and sisters in Christ; it explains how the vertical (loving God) defines the horizontal (loving our fellow man). It is interesting, Packer notes, how Pentecostals and Charismatics focus on spiritual gifts like tongues and healing, which Paul argues all are not meant to have (some, some, some) while giving such short shrift to what should be every Christian's primary goal, the overwhelming love of God flowing out of their hearts to everyone around them. Dr. Packer laments this "cul-de-sac of new Corinthianism." Instead, we should follow Paul's example and remember what he told the Ephesians.

For this reason, I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. [Ephesians 3:14-19](#)

So, if we are supposed to be so filled with God's love that it becomes an essential part of our being, we should understand what that love is, especially in light of John's passages in which he says, "God is love." To assist us, Dr. Packer makes two important statements that clarify and balance our consideration of John's passages.

- First. He reminds us that these statements, no matter how wonderful and awe-inspiring they appear to be, are not the complete truth about God. Instead, they are summary statements, much like Jesus summarized the law in [Matthew 22:37-40](#).

"And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'"

Packer goes on to use two similar biblical statements to illustrate John's approach in his "God is love" passages: "God is spirit" ([John 2:24](#)) and "God is light" ([1 John 4:5](#)). He can make these valid comparisons because the same person, the Apostle John make all of these statements.

- Second. While these declarations of John are not the complete truth about God, they are for us as Christians all we need to know. John's statement means "that his [God's] love finds expression in everything he says and does." In other words, God will never be unloving to us, his children. So "God is love to us—holy, omnipotent love—at every moment and event of daily life. Even when we cannot see the why and the wherefore of God's dealings, we know that there is love in and behind them, and so we can always rejoice, even when, humbly speaking, things are going wrong. We know that the true story of our life, when known, will prove to be, as the hymn says, 'mercy from first to last'—and we are content." Festal Song, W. H. Walter, 1825-1893.

How shall we meet those eyes?
Ours on Himself we'll cast
And own ourselves the Saviour's prize,
Mercy from first to last.

Now that Packer has helped us deal with the context of John's great statements, he defines God's love, not just circumscribe it ("showing in general terms how and when it operates"). Instead, Packer expands our understanding of the concept by saying:

God's love is 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.

He then proceeds to disassemble his statement and explain why God's love is an exercise of his goodness, especially of his goodness toward sinners, and how, as a covenant relationship, it binds together both parties in a

deep, abiding, and eternal relationship.

Packer finishes the chapter by fleshing out this explanation. However, I should point out a clarification, which I must admit was influenced by my study of the book [Megashift](#) by James Rutz. One point that Rutz makes that I both agree with and find relevant at this juncture is “while God’s unfathomable love loved us while we were yet sinners, we (those of us who have accepted God’s Son as our Lord and Savior and have been born again by the action and work of the Holy Spirit) are no longer sinners, but saints.”

Did you flinch at that statement? I am not surprised. I did when I first heard it. Despite that, it is true. Yes, we continue to sin. We agree with the Apostle John, who said, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” ([1 John 1:8](#)). But there is a significant difference, well beyond semantics, between a saint who sins and sinner in need of salvation. We are no longer sinners, defined by our continuing separation from God, by our ongoing sinful rebellion, but saints, albeit struggling saints in constant need of forgiveness, who are “working out our salvation in fear and trembling”, but saints all the same.

I believe this is a significant distinction and enables us to better understand God’s love and why, when Jesus’ disciples asked him to teach them how to pray, he began his example by addressing God as Father. As the Father loves the Son, so he loves us, and since he loved us while we were sinners, how much more is his love shed upon us now that we are saints? We are his adopted children, called out from our former life to be a new creation in Christ Jesus our Lord, a saint of God. Isn’t that the most wonderful, marvelous, stupendous thing you could imagine?

So, with that wondrous truth ringing in your soul, may your day be filled with grace and peace, and may the love of God find lasting purchase in the deep recesses of your heart, filling, changing, empowering, and uplifting your life into the glorious company of the saints of God.

Chapter 13: The Grace of God

Today's theme: God's greatest gift, salvation through grace.

Scriptural background: Titus 2:11 "The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared."

[Ephesians 2:8-9](#) "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast."

Quotes for the week

"In this awfully stupendous manner, at which Reason stands aghast, and Faith herself is half confounded, was the grace of God to man at length manifested." Richard Hurd (1720–1808). *Sermons*. Vol. ii. p. 287.

"This is Daddy's bedtime secret for today: Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue." Eugene O'Neill (1888 - 1953) US dramatist. *The Great God Brown*. 1926.

"The fast pace of our lives makes it difficult for us to find grace in the present moment, and when the simple gifts at our fingertips cease to nourish us, we have a tendency to crave the sensational." MacRina Wiederkehr. *A Tree Full of Angels: Seeing the Holy in the Ordinary*. Harper, San Francisco. 1995

"In life as in the dance: grace glides on blistered feet." Alice Abrams. Carolyn Warner. *The Last Word: A Treasury of Women's Quotes*.

Concern: Can we humble ourselves to accept God's grace, the essence of agape, God's love in action?

"I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." [Romans 9:15](#) looking to [Exodus 33:19](#)

1. How does this idea that God has no obligation to show mercy or compassion strike you? How do you reconcile this with God's love (agape)?

"Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens." [Romans 9:18](#)

2. This carries the previous thought one step further. Does this go against your ingrained sense of fairness? Do you feel God is being unfair? How do you come to terms with this scripture?

Chapter 13: The Grace of God

- **Spiritual Impotence of man**—we cannot save ourselves
- **Sovereign freedom of God**—God is not beholden to anyone but himself

Mankind's failure and impotence intersect God's justice and sovereignty. In the end, understanding grace requires the submission of our wills and the understanding of ourselves to God, something man, since the fall, has always had problems doing. This rebellion is echoed through history by the hearts that assert, "I don't need your help or charity," and is rooted in the genesis of the self-made person, the icon of American individualism. Let me qualify by saying that I am not talking about taking responsibility for your life and actions or disrespecting hard work and industry. With the right heart, those things are necessary to meet the demands of God. As Paul says:

Therefore, my dear ones, as you have always obeyed [my suggestions], so now, not only [with the enthusiasm you would show] in my presence but much more because I am absent, work out (cultivate, carry out to the goal, and fully complete) your own salvation with reverence and awe and trembling (self-distrust, with serious caution, tenderness of conscience, watchfulness against temptation, timidly shrinking from whatever might offend God and discredit the name of Christ). [Not in your own strength] for it is God Who is all the while [b]effectually at work in you [energizing and creating in you the power and desire], both to will and to work for His good pleasure and satisfaction and delight Amplified [Philippians 2:12-13](#)

Work out (the word carries the meaning of intense, uninterrupted labor carried on to completion) your salvation. Be responsible, work hard, and be industrious in all your efforts to perfect your life in Christ. That part most people can respect. Yes, I have to accept responsibility and make the effort. What is skipped over is the second half of the verse and the qualifier in the next verse.

"...with reverence and awe and trembling (self-distrust, with serious caution, tenderness of conscience, watchfulness against temptation, timidly shrinking from whatever might offend God and discredit the name of Christ)." Pretty powerful stuff there. "[Not in your strength] for it is God who is all the while effectually at work in you [energizing and creating in you the power and desire], both to will and to work for His good pleasure and satisfaction and delight." We can't take credit for it because God sustains and enables us according to his will.

The essence of this grace that God gives us, his effective work within us, Packer notes, is undeserved. It cannot be earned. Instead, it reflects a state of being, which, to me, is one of the hardest things said in the Gospels:

Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So, when you have done everything you were told, you should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty." [Luke 17:9-10](#)

Instead, we want credit for what we have done. We want to be elevated, rewarded, and told how great we are. We want to be acknowledged as the victor and given props for our efforts. Instead, when we use the street's parlance, it appears God disses us.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves; it is the gift of God. [Ephesians 2:8](#)

It is a gift. It is grace. It is not you. It is God. No wonder when we sing Isaac Watts's amazing song, we no longer sing its fourth verse.

A guilty, weak, and helpless worm,
In thy hands I fall;
Thou art the Lord, my righteousness,
My Savior, and my all.

Watts says we are worms. Are we? How does that jibe with my argument last week that we are all saints, not sinners? If you thought that great, because that is a good, right, and proper question, it shows me that you have been taking these lessons to heart. The quick answer is attitude. Saints know that they are adopted by grace into the family of God and have been rescued from the orphanage of sin and death. A sinner struggles to find their own way in the world, trying to make their own family, their own identity. A saint knows they once were lost, but now they are found. A saint understands that as guilty sinners, we fall as helpless worms into the arms of God, who weaves about us a cocoon of grace and then empowers us to be reborn into butterflies of light, his

adopted children and brothers of Christ Jesus, our Lord.

A saint is no longer a worm, but it is good to remember that from which we were rescued. What I argued against last week was not allowing that orphanage of sin and death to define us even after the rebirth through grace into butterflies of light. The song does not say we stay helpless worms; only that is where we start until we fall into the hands of God, the loving Father who fashions us from darkness into light. Our fundamental nature has changed, as Paul says so gloriously.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! [2 Corinthians 5:17](#)

and again

Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. [Colossians 6:15](#)

It is not our efforts (circumcision—or its rejection) but God’s adoption (our new creation) that matters. Glory be! That flips everything upside down, doesn’t it? So, are you a saint or a sinner? Are you a butterfly or a worm? Joshua told the children of Israel at the Jordan River crossing, “Choose this day who you will serve.” So, who is it? Yourself or God, it’s your choice. I’ve made mine and have been testing these Butterfly [capitalized on purpose] wings for over 35 years. Make your choice while you still can.

May the grace of God fill your soul unto life everlasting, and may his sustaining grace carry you through each moment of every day, nourishing you through the dry times, uplifting you during the down times, and ultimately bringing you into the habitation prepared for you from before the foundation of all creation.

A Personal Witness

I was saved (I knew I had, by my conscious decision, accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior) in the early summer of 1976. However, I would not have been alive, but for the grace of God, to reach that point in my life. I know of four instances and possibly numerous others where God saved me from death. Here is one harrowing example:

When you are twenty-two, you think you will live forever, even in the middle of a war. You tell yourself that death will always knock on the other guy's door. Losing my brother in the year (1968) in the Vietnam mini-Tet offensive only brought home the pain of loss, not the reality of dying.

Being in the Air Force and stationed in Thailand only helped distance the possibility of death from my doorstep. My biggest problems were boredom, fatigue, and venereal disease, in that order. The planes took off; the planes came back. Once in a while, there was an accident. We lost no planes to missions and only two men to a take-off malfunction that blew a fire control helicopter out of the sky when a B-52 nosed into the runway and exploded a few minutes later.

The most violence I got to see was on the screen at the beach theater or during an occasional drunken brawl. That helped make the life-and-death situation so unreal to me when it happened.

It was about twenty miles from the airbase at Utao, where I was stationed, to Sattahip, the closest real town and Thailand's only deep-water port. The U.S. had constructed it to transport the bombs for the B-52s flying out of the airbase.

If you wanted to do anything interesting, Sattahip was the only place to go. Newland, the locally regulated red-light district, was closer, but that only had bars and women, and its ambiance was strictly whorehouse neon. For clothes, jewelry, local crafts, or anything else, Sattahip was your only choice unless you could find an overnight pass to Bangkok (I say overnight because we worked 12 hours a day/6 days a week).

There were three ways to get to Sattahip: taxi, regular bus, or baht (5 cents) buses. A taxi was expensive except for rare trips, even in this relatively cheap economy. The regular bus was irregular at best, and there was no way of knowing what condition an open seat might be in. That left the baht bus as the least expensive and generally quickest option. Baht buses were Toyota or Datsun (now Nissan) pickups with a sun cab and seats along both sides of the rear bed. You hailed one going by, gave the driver your baht, and

Chapter 13: The Grace of God

rode till you wanted to get off. The roundtrip into Sattahip cost 2 baht, though we usually tipped the driver another baht each way.

During the early part of my tour, I always went into town with a buddy, never alone, but after a few months, when I had picked up enough of the language to get around, I would take a baht bus into town by myself.

One of my roommates had been a freelance photographer for several magazines, and he drove my interest in photography by telling me I had a natural eye. We worked out an economical relationship with a local photo shop for developing and proof sheets. I regularly visited Sattahip to look at proofs and work on finished prints in the darkroom with the owner.

On one of these trips, no different at first than many others I had taken, everything stepped out of the routine and into the place reserved for nightmares. Nothing was ever the same for me after that.

I caught a baht bus in the late afternoon at the base's main gate and headed into town. There were no other Americans on the ride. In the front seat was a large Thai woman holding a full basket in her lap. As I got into the back, I said, "Sattahip?" The driver shook his head yes and pulled away.

At first, I was alone, but as we headed down the road, the truck would frequently stop to pick up and discharge passengers. About halfway to Sattahip, there is a crossroads intersection with a busy marketplace. The cross street to the south went to an American Army base. About three miles from the market, the road passes through a relatively deserted countryside section for about four or five miles. The area is gently rolling hills, and the road is almost straight as it parallels the ocean about two miles inland. It is an area of large tapioca farms that stretch on seemingly forever, similar to some of the orange orchards in Florida, my home state at the time.

I was riding along this stretch of highway with three passengers: the lady up front with the full basket of clothes, a young boy about 8 or 9, and a teenage girl, his sister. Thais drive on the left side of the road, like the British, but some of their cars have steering wheels on the same side as ours. This truck had American steering, which meant the driver was on the vehicle's curbside. I was riding next to the tailgate, on the passenger side, with the center white line racing behind me. The boy was next to me on the right, and the girl was opposite.

It was a hot, humid day, and the rush of wind in the open cabin felt good. I was leaning against the rear roof post and watching the road rush out from under the truck's rear. The tires were humming a steady note, and it was mildly hypnotic. It was another boring ride into Sattahip, or so I thought.

The late afternoon sun was to our rear. I don't know if I noticed it coming up behind us or just realized it was there when its shadow crossed the edge of my vision on the road behind us. A two-door dark blue Datsun sedan had pulled up behind us, carrying a driver and passenger. Noticing that he was following close, I snapped back from my lazy, drifting to a sudden thought of, "What's going on here?"

As I looked at the two men, the car slowly pulled out to pass us. At the same time, the passenger, because that vehicle was a British model, would be on the center line opposite me as they passed. The man leaned over and reached behind the driver's seat, bringing into the front seat a lever-action rifle. Resting the barrel on the window sill, he cycled through the action, ejecting a shell out the top while looking straight at me through the windshield.

I turned and looked at the Thai girl across from me and she said in broken English, "He shoot you." My heart started racing. There was nowhere to go, and I was unarmed except for a pocket knife. It was a very strange feeling, not having any control over what was occurring. I felt like a spectator, watching things unfold from a detached distance, while at the same time being pumped full of adrenalin, ready to flee but having nowhere to go. I just sat there staring incredulously as the pursuing vehicle edged forward.

You may have heard how, in times of grave danger, things seem to go into slow motion, and your whole life flashes before your eyes. Well, time did distort, and there was a strange duality where everything was going along at normal speed, but at the same time, it seemed to take forever to happen. Both vehicles were doing about 50 mph, yet the car seemed to crawl forward toward us.

Just as the car pulled almost close enough that the passenger could get a clear shot at me and he was lifting his rifle, we crested a low hill. Suddenly, a bus came in the other direction. With the bus's horn blaring, the Datsun braked and swerved back in behind us.

Here is the God part. For the previous two or three miles, we hadn't passed a single vehicle coming in the other direction, but now, unbelievably, there was a steady stream of vehicles coming in the other direction. The Datsun tried several times to pull up beside us. He would pull out into a gap and then be forced to swerve back in. Pull out; serve back in; the barrel of the rifle resting on his window sill the whole time, waiting for a chance. Several concerns rushed through my mind, primarily that the baht bus driver might stop for someone or let the woman in the cab get off. "Please," I implored God, "Don't let anyone get off or want to get on." If we stopped, I was as good as dead. I had already told the girl and her brother, "No stop!"

Miraculously, the line of traffic kept the car from pulling alongside of us all the way into the outskirts of Sattahip. As we turned into town and the car went on, the passenger used his fingers like a gun, pretending to shoot at me twice as they disappeared down the road.

I am a living testament to the truth that God's grace has been with us all along, from before time began and through every moment of life, rooted in the willingness of the Son to die, always steering us to that penultimate moment when we, at a time chosen by God, finally confront our eternal destiny and are born again. Thank you, God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for the gift of grace and life eternal.

Chapter 14: God the Judge

Today's theme: Being willing to face the music, we accept God as our judge.

Scriptural background: [Acts 10:42](#) "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead."

Quotes for the week

"We judge ourselves by what we feel capable of doing, while others judge us by what we have already done." Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, quoted by Glenn van Ekeren. *Speaker's Sourcebook I: Quotes, Stories, & Anecdotes for Every Occasion*. Prentice Hall Press, 1993.

"Good judgment comes from experience and experience—well, that comes from poor judgment." Cousin Woodman.

"Mistakes are a fact of life. It is the response to error that counts." Nikki Giovanni. "Of Liberation," *Black Feeling/Black Talk/Black Judgment*, 1970.

Concern: That we will use our measure rather than God's measuring rod to set the standard of judgment.

A mini-survey of judgment and its use in Scripture

"For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." [Hebrews 10:30-31](#)

Word study: judge/judgment

1. The Greek root biblical word is: (noun) - *krima* meaning dispute, decision, verdict, judgment; (verb) – *krino* meaning separate, judge, consider, decide.

Used in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament) extends its meaning to punish, wrangle, vindicate, and obtain justice for (e.g., [Gen 15:14](#), [30:6](#), [Deut. 32:36](#), [2 Sam 19:9](#), [Ps. 54:3](#), [Jer 5:28](#)).

It eventually came to mean to rule, and he who rules and judges brings salvation, peace, and deliverance to the persecuted and oppressed ([Deuteronomy 10:18](#)).

"Even though men may sit in judgment, it is God who is Lord and Judge." ([Deuteronomy 1:17](#), [Romans 13:1-7](#)).

2. The NT adds the meanings distinguish, give preference, resolve, approve, speak or think ill of, bring to trial, condemn, punish, and dispute.
3. [Under God's judgment](#), we are also called to judge each other ([1 Cor 5:12](#), [6:2](#) contrasted with [Mat 7:1](#)) but never arrogantly and always with our sacrifice in view.

4. Think how [1 Cor 13](#) influences judgment. The key is understanding agape (personal self-sacrifice).
5. The one who bore sin for us now judges us ([2 Cor 5:21](#)), and true judgment comes when we reject him ([John 3:16](#), [11:25](#)).

Question: How are word studies such as this useful?

Interacting With the Text

Goal: To submit our hearts to the correction and judgment of God, in whom we trust and, in that trust, live and move and have our being

If there is one thing that our fallen human nature (the “old man”) rebels against, it is allowing anyone, including God, to sit in judgment over us. We are quick to accept forgiveness, love, and the other “compassionate” virtues and attributes of God, but we bristle when someone brings up judgment. Against that, we will resist to the very core of our “old man.” Even when we bow our knees to God, that old nature is still there, trying to resist. Accepting judgment from any source means giving up control and relinquishing choices since, by its very nature, judgment strips these things from us, which goes against our sinful self.

1. How is [Ecclesiastes 12:14](#) “For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether good or bad” significant for the focus of this chapter (hint: look at “good or bad”)?
2. How does the idea that not only does God see everything about you, even the hidden things, but He will bring everything into judgment affect your daily living? Answer in practical terms.
3. Packer lists four things that encompass the idea of a judge. What are they, and how do they relate to the character of God?

8. What is the terror of the Lord? How does this concept square with your image of forgiveness and a loving God?

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Fifteen: *The Wrath of God*. We will now consider the most difficult aspect of God's nature: his anger and wrath. While doing this, we **must not forget** the assurance of [Hebrews 12:5-6](#) "And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: 'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and *do not lose heart when he rebukes you*, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.'"

Goal: To always remember that God's judgments are just and true.

As Christians and children of God, we know His judgments are always for our betterment, not our destruction. God loves us. Remember the truth that every athlete knows, "No pain, no gain," and remind yourself that all God's correction is for your eternal well-being.

Meditation on Chapter 14: God the Judge

We now move from grace to judgment, from God the loving Father, about whom songs are written extolling his graciousness, to God our judge, who can see the innermost workings and essence of our being.

Great God of wonders! all thy ways
Display the attributes divine;
But countless acts of pardoning grace
Beyond thine other wonders shine;
Who is a pardoning God like Thee?
Or who has grace so rich and free?
Great God of Wonders – Samuel Davies (1723-1761)

"For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." [Hebrews 4:12](#)

Chapter 14: God the Judge

Most of our public outpourings, which are best reflected in the songs we sing, shrink back from this aspect of God's nature. The song *All My Soul to God I Raise* by Bortnianski and Dudley-Smith is a good example.

Graciously my sins forgive
Help me by Your truth to live
In Your footsteps lead me Lord
Joy renewed and hope restored
Knowing every sin forgiven
Learning all the ways of heaven
Mercies manifold extend
Not as judge but faithful friend
O my Saviour hear my prayer
Pluck my feet from every snare
Quietude be mine at last
Rest from all my guilty past

We seek a faithful friend who extends many varied mercies rather than a judge and, in so doing, diminishes one fundamental aspect of God's nature at the expense of another. As Packer notes and our popular worship music reinforces, we want a God who is a Father, friend, helper, healer, giver of strength and encouragement, and generally supportive, good guy. However, Packer also notes, "There are few things stressed more strongly in the Bible than the reality of God's work as a judge."

Now, I know some people will immediately postulate that this judgment talk is Old Testament thinking and that we Christians live in the Church age, the age of grace. That is true; we live under grace, which Paul makes clear in his letter to the Galatians, but that doesn't mitigate God's role as judge. Think about Ananias and Sapphira ([Acts 5:1-10](#)), Elymas and his opposition to the gospel ([Acts 13:8-12](#)), or the Christians at Corinth at whose feet Paul laid the responsibility for their illnesses and death due to their not properly discerning the Lord's Supper ([1 Corinthians 11:29-32](#)). Paul specifically talks about God's judgment to the Corinthians. We could go on, but Ecclesiastes' verses put it all into perspective.

"God will judge you...God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil." [Ecclesiastes 11:9, 12:14](#)

Even the Nicene Creed, which is recited (however rote) in most liturgical churches and in some other settings, makes this significant point about the Son:

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

Yes, judgment, especially the judgment of God, is not a popular subject in today's Christianity or the world at large. Anyone talking about hell and judgment is seen as decidedly radical and populating the fringe, and dare I say it, "unloving" and "judgmental." It has gotten so bad that the great apologist for apostasy, retired Episcopal "Bishop" [John Shelby Spong](#), wrote the book [The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love](#) in which he continued down his long-traveled road of the denial of any judgment by God, going so far as to deny even the historical understanding of theism itself, the idea that God possesses any personality or personhood. If God is not a person and takes no cognitive and rational action, then, of course, he cannot act as a judge, and sin has no absolute meaning. However, I find it oxymoronic that one who vehemently denies sin at every turn suddenly finds it relevant when it suits his twisted purpose (see his oxymoronic title as a sadly ironic slip of his tongue). Sadly, he died in 2021 without ever repenting of his heresies, and now he has been judged by God, using God's requirements and not his.

The real issue, as I see it, is the statement of Paul in [Philippians 2:10-11](#)

"At the name of Jesus, every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Spong and those who moved alongside him did everything possible to avoid the bent knee and confession of Lordship. Submission is unacceptable and absolutely to be avoided. Rather than agree with Job that God has all the rights, after all, he IS God, they want to transfer the power of choice and decision entirely to themselves, in

essence recommitting the first sin. Eve was tempted by Satan to “be like God, knowing good and evil.” She could then choose and arbitrate what was right and wrong. Are not those who resist God as judge doing the same thing, accruing to them the right to decide? How sad it will be when they, like Adam and Eve, try to hide from the overwhelming presence of the one true Lord and Judge of all creation. On the other hand, we, those who bend and bow, proclaiming Christ not only Savior but Lord, sing with heartfelt thanksgiving the words of the hymn Rock of Ages, with which Packer closes this chapter.

Whilst I draw this fleeting breath;
When my eyelids close in death;
When I soar through tracts unknown,
See thee on thy judgment-throne;
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in thee.

May God give us the grace not to shrink back from his judgment, but in submission and repentance, as saints and his adopted children, to continually seek his forgiveness so that by judging ourselves and repenting from our sin, we would not need to be judged by our Heavenly Father. [1 Corinthians 11:31](#)

Chapter 15: The Wrath of God

Today's theme: Facing the absolute terror, the wrath of God.

Scriptural background: [Hebrews 10:30-31](#) [30](#) "For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

[Job 9:33-35](#) "If only there were someone to arbitrate between us, to lay his hand upon us both, someone to remove God's rod from me, so that his terror would frighten me no more. Then I would speak up without fear of him, but as it now stands with me, I cannot." NIV

Quotes for the week

WRATH, n. Anger of a superior quality and degree, appropriate to exalted characters and momentous occasions; as "the wrath of God," "the day of wrath," etc. . . . Ambrose Bierce (journalist, short-story writer). *The Devil's Dictionary*, 1911.

"There were times when I drove along the Sunset Strip and looked at those buildings or when I watched the fashionable film colony arriving at some premiere . . . that I fully expected God in his wrath to obliterate the whole shebang." S J Perelman (humorist and writer). "On Hollywood", *Paris Review*, Spring 1964.

"I suggest that we can never truly understand why it is that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, had to come into this world unless we understand this doctrine of the wrath of God and the judgment of God." D. Martin Lloyd-Jones. "The Wrath of God". Sermon at Westminster Chapel.

Concern: Will we soft-peddle God's wrath and reduce the seriousness of sin and judgment, thereby reducing the uniqueness of Christ's passion?

"And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and the mind, and *were by nature children of wrath*, just as the others." [Ephesians 2:1-3](#)

1. Looking at this scripture, why isn't God's wrath part of discipleship?

"You have not yet resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin. And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: 'My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.'" [Hebrews 12:5-6](#)

2. How is the scourging of God, to which this verse refers, different from His wrath? Why is this distinction important?

Chapter 15: The Wrath of God

5. Explain how God's wrath has meaning to you personally and your life as a Christian.

6. What three things does the book of Romans tell us about God's wrath?

7. What is the solemn reality of God's wrath? Does this truth change your view of the cross? If so, how?

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Sixteen: *The Goodness and Severity of God*. We must see the balance in God's dealings with mankind and His utter graciousness to those whom he calls His children.

Goal: To never lose our proper "fear" of God

Think of Aslan, C.S. Lewis's personification of Jesus Christ in his Narnia series. "Is he safe?" Lucy asks. "Safe? Of course not, he's a lion!" is the reply. Hold onto that this week while remembering that He is our Father, who loves us with everlasting love.

Meditation on Chapter 15: The Wrath of God

If you thought last week's lesson on *God the Judge* was hardcore, well, this week takes us a giant step further when we must deal with the unpalatable subject of wrath and the God who has it, not only as part of his active vocabulary but part of his essential nature.

Packer uses the combined definition of three words: wrath, anger, and indignation to explain the biblical context of God's wrath. This is necessary because the definition of wrath as "deep, intense anger and indignation" requires it. Therefore, he defines anger as the "stirring of resentful displeasure and strong antagonism, by a sense of injury or insult." He stirs indignation into the mix as "righteous anger roused by injustice and baseness." So, to pull that together, we can say that God can have a righteously deep and intense displeasure at what he also has a righteously strong antagonism to, which are fundamental injustices and base behaviors. In other words, SIN.

That offends most of the post-Christian, post-modern Western world. It appears violent, and even the post-modern Christian rejects it outright. As I noted in last week's post, John Shelby Spong, a retired post-modern pseudo-bishop of the Episcopal Church, in his book, *The Sins of Scripture: Exposing the Bible's Texts of Hate to Reveal the God of Love*, continues down his long-traveled road of spiritual denial, in this case of the possibility that God can even experience wrath. Interestingly, his "God" can only "love," especially when he denies personhood to Him. How does an impersonal ground of being demonstrate "love"? Don't ask Spong about his non sequitur, oxymoronic arguments. I had the unfortunate opportunity to listen to this man's obfuscating convolutions for an entire evening. He speaks theological word salad but in a way that always sounds reasonable despite not having any real substance. He is not unique and, thankfully, is passing from the scene of influence one day shortly to meet up with the personal God he denies and the wrath he dismisses.

However, if we intend to be Christian, we have to deal with the unpleasant (to us) fact that God gets angry; God gets indignant; God executes wrath on those disserving of it. Yes, He does. Just ask your heart of hearts; it knows.

One thing is sure: everybody dies. What most people don't realize is we die as a direct result of God's wrath toward sin. A disturbing number of people are going to burn in hell. Sorry, but that's an unalterable biblical fact, and it directly results from God's wrath toward sin. We may not like it; we may rail against it, but that is the way it is, and nothing we do or say will change one jot or tittle about it.

When I was a relatively new Christian, I was being discipled by a married couple who had come out of the Dutch Reformed Tradition. I liked them because they never shrank back from the hard questions. Early in my discipleship journey, they sang in the choir with me at our charismatic, evangelical Episcopal Church. One night, while giving them a ride home after choir practice, we began discussing the bumps ahead for me in my Christian life. The wife, Sheila, said, "Bill, one day you will have to face up to the wrath of God, and how you deal with that will determine the depth of your future walk in Christ." It was an uncomfortable moment, but how true were her words. I have since stubbed my toe many times on God's judgment, wrath, and Fatherly correction. But as Sheila warned me, advising me to read Job and Lamentations carefully, it was my problem, not God's. It is hard to learn, but it is so true and significant to advancing my Christian maturity.

As a study group, you should know that in all the times I have gone through this book, this chapter has been the most difficult for those I have been shepherding along its byways. That's because this topic is so alien to most Christians. Even those who tacitly accept that God has wrath as part of his repertoire don't want to dwell on the subject for more than a few minutes; they immediately want to move on to something "uplifting." For them, it is like the Victorian bathroom: better to keep the door closed except when necessary, and then to get in and out as quickly as possible, and never, no, never talk about it in public.

Well, Packer forces us to deal with it for nine pages and through many arguments. He could have gone on longer but was merciful, understanding our deep aversion to the required medicine. He closes the chapter with a quote from a Reformed favorite, A. W. Pink, in which he earnestly enjoins us to meditate on the solemn reality of God's wrath.

I won't belabor the point this week, seeing the difficulty of the subject matter. Still, I will say that one of the reasons that the observance of Lent has meant so much to me over the years is how it makes the starkness of Holy Week so real and then the joy of Easter into an overwhelming joy. It is the contrast, you see. In the same

Chapter 15: The Wrath of God

way, to understand the real hard wood of the cross, you have to understand divine wrath, and when you do that, divine love will never sink into the disgusting parody put forth by idiots like Spong. Instead, by properly appreciating the wrath of God, we can at last understand the motivation behind Paul's words in [Philippians 1:9-11](#), taken from the Amplified Bible.

And this I pray: that your love may abound yet more and more and extend to its fullest development in knowledge and all keen insight [that your love may display itself in greater depth of acquaintance and more comprehensive discernment], so that you may surely learn to sense what is vital, and approve and prize what is excellent and of real value [*recognizing the highest and the best and distinguishing the moral differences*], and that you may be untainted and pure and unerring and blameless [so that with hearts sincere and certain and unsullied, you may approach] the day of Christ [not stumbling nor causing others to stumble]. May you abound in and be filled with the fruits of righteousness (of right standing with God and right doing) which come through Jesus Christ (the Anointed One), to the honor and praise of God [that His glory may be both manifested and recognized].

Yes, love with comprehensive discernment will see all of God and understand real righteousness and its fruit.

My prayer for you this week is that you will never have to experience God's wrath. Instead, since you are surely one of his beloved children, albeit corrected and disciplined, you will be able to understand it at least and, with his help, forever flee from it. Grace and peace be with you now and forever.

Chapter 16: The Goodness and Severity of God

Today's theme: God always pitches to both sides of the plate

Scriptural background: [Job 2:10](#) "He replied, '...Shall we accept good from God and not trouble?' In all this, Job did not sin in what he said."

Quotes for the week

"Yet neither have I forgotten, nor will I pass over the severity of Thy scourge and the wonderful swiftness of Thy mercy." Saint Augustine (354–430). "The Confessions of St. Augustine. The Ninth Book," *The Harvard Classics*. 1909–14

"If I were to say, "God, why me?" about the bad things, then I should have said, "God, why me?" about the good things that happened in my life." Arthur Ashe (1943 - 1993). US tennis player, AIDS spokesperson. *The Ultimate Success Quotations Library*, 1997.

"Never forget that [God] tests his real friends more severely than the lukewarm ones." Kathryn Hulme (1900 - 1981). US writer. "The Nun's Story," Little, Brown, 1956.

"God promises a safe landing but not a calm passage." Bulgarian Proverb

Concern: That we will lose our sense of balance when considering how God interacts with us in living out our Christian lives

"Therefore, consider the goodness and severity of God: on those that fell, severity; but toward you goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off." *Romans 11:22*

1. Looking at this scripture, what is the only way to escape God's severity?

"And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: 'My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives.'" [Hebrews 12:5b-6](#)

2. This scripture makes it appear that we cannot escape what we commonly call the severity of God. How does this scripture relate to the scripture from Romans above?

8. Look at the last sentence in this chapter. What important truth does that scripture reveal about God's severity?

What to Do Next

Read Chapter Seventeen: *The Jealous God*. Jealousy has an extremely bad rap, but Packer raises the question, based on specific scripture statements, whether there are legitimate forms of jealousy. Approach this chapter with an open mind, and you will be surprised by what you learn.

Goal: Maintain a balanced perspective on God's dealings with us as we mature in our Christian walk.

Remember Job's words, "He replied, '...Shall we accept good from God and not trouble/evil?' In all this, Job did not sin in what he said." Maintain your equilibrium when responding to the vicissitudes of life. [Job 2:10](#) Our strength is the same strength that Paul drew on in [Philippians 4:11b-13](#). "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Meditation on Chapter 16: The Goodness and Severity of God

In the years I have been shepherding people through this book, I probably have lost close to half of them by the time we get to this chapter. There has only been one exception: a group of young adults in my YADM (Young Adult Discipleship Ministry) class. We didn't lose anyone and picked up a couple along the way. God did something very special during that year with those young adults.

While the subject of this book is daunting in itself, most people begin their real struggling at about chapter nine, *God Only Wise*, recover a little with the chapters on love and grace, but then hit the pavement on the last four chapters of this section. However, this is usually the last straw for those who struggled along, feeling beaten and bruised by the *Wrath of God*. So, if you are still with us, I praise God and ask with heartfelt earnestness for his love and grace to continue to sustain you.

Nobody, even atheists, has a problem with the goodness of God. For most people, the definition of God encompasses two words: love and goodness. It is, however, very wrong. It is not incorrect to say that God loves and that he is, by his very nature, good; he is. The problem is that those who only accept those two aspects of God's infinitely expansive nature cannot couple his loving goodness with his judgment, wrath, and absolute severity.

Packer chooses the opening words of this chapter from Paul's first half of [Romans 11:22](#), so eloquently expressed in the original King James.

Behold, therefore, the goodness and severity of God. (KJV)

Later translations sometimes express it a little less starkly.

Consider, therefore, the kindness and sternness of God (NIV)
Now you see both how kind and how hard God can be. (CEV)
We see how kind God is. It shows how hard He is also. (NLV)
See how kind God is. And see how hard he is. (WE)

Chapter 16: The Goodness and Severity of God

Using the words sternness and hard is less intimidating than the blunt word severity. Though Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of *The Message* has serious problems in some areas, I like how he expresses this context.

If God didn't think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches, why would he hesitate over you? He wouldn't give it a second thought. Make sure you stay alert to these qualities of gentle kindness and ruthless severity that exist side by side in God—ruthless with the deadwood, gentle with the grafted shoot. But don't presume on this gentleness. The moment you become deadwood, you're out of there. [Romans 11:21-22](#)

Eugene pulls no punches with “ruthless severity.” I especially like “that exist side by side in God.” Side by side captures the truth of the passage and Packer’s argument in this chapter. They are both essential parts of God’s nature; he expresses them fully and completely with righteous holiness.

While this is another short chapter, only eight pages, Packer successfully welds these two aspects of God’s nature together. He argues that to understand the utter goodness of God, you have to accept his severity or use Peterson, his ruthless severity. On balance, you can also say that if you want to argue for God’s severity against sinners, then you also have to accept his goodness toward the redeemed, for the second half of [Romans 11:22](#) says:

...on those who fell, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off.

Dr. Packer decries the modern muddle-headedness of floundering fellows who cling to a hodgepodge of fancies about God. How’s that for a mouthful? He feels these lost and confused souls are mired in pride, pushing their relativistic equivalence of God and explicitly denying the severity of sin. Hmm, it sounds a lot like a definition of my previous example, the wrongly Reverend Bishop John Shelby Spong.

Ultimately, we need to ask ourselves, “What has God promised us?” There is a Bulgarian proverb that says, “God promises a safe landing but not a calm passage.” I think the unknown author of that adage had Paul’s Mediterranean Sea journey to Rome in mind. Even though it was filled with storms and a shipwreck, it resulted in a safe passage for all hands.

From a bit closer to home, tennis great Arthur Ashe, a sort of Tiger Woods of my young adulthood, said,

If I were to say, “God, why me?” about the bad things, I should have said, “God, why me?” about the good things that happened in my life.

Arthur said this in response to questions about the certainty of his faith during his AIDS struggle, gotten from a blood transfusion, which eventually took his life. This soft-spoken, elegant man mirrored the words of [Job 2:10](#),

Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?

My chief goal for all who study this book has been to assist them in maintaining their sense of balance in understanding God and living out their Christian lives. Our aim should not be to minimize God’s severity while relishing his goodness. The Book of Job gives us a sobering premise: that we should accept *everything* from the hand of God. To be blunt, as our creator, God has the right to do with us as he sees fit. I can almost hear the gears of resistance grating against the sense of pride and self-worth, and the whole thing seems unfair and flies in the face of our sense of self-significance (But God, don’t I matter?). Remember, however, what God told Moses. He made the blind or the seeing, the deaf or those who hear. [Exodus 4:11](#) Hearing that, we all, at one time or another, shout at God, “Why?” God’s only reply (re: Job) is, “Because I am God, and you need to know no more.” Asking is not a sin (Job did not sin; only his friends sinned). The key is whether or not we can, like Job, accept what God has done even without an answer (or even with an unfair answer). Our response goes to the heart of our heart and eventually to the success or failure of our effort to grow as Christians and understand the God with whom we have to do.

Underneath all of this is the foundation of trust, the rock, and essence of saving faith; either God can be trusted, or he cannot. Satan told Eve and every human since then that God cannot be trusted. It is the first and root temptation we all face. The essence of being Christian, being a child of God, is believing in your heart of hearts that God can be trusted, even, as Job said:

Though He slays me, yet will I trust Him...He also shall be my salvation, for a hypocrite could not come before Him. [Job 13:15-16](#)

I hope that we will never be hypocrites, and as you ponder these truths about His Holy Spirit, you will find that it will give you the grace to maintain your equilibrium through the vicissitudes of life. As Christians, our strength is the same strength that Paul drew on in [Philippians 4:11b-13](#)

I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need and what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want. I can do everything through him, who gives me strength.

May God bless you and keep you, may his grace and goodness always shine upon you, and if you must taste of his severity may the time of its testing be short with his mercies arriving on swift feet to comfort you.

Chapter 17: The Jealous God

Today's theme: God, The Jealous Lover

Scriptural background: [Exodus 20:5](#) "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God..." [34:14](#) "Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, *whose name is Jealous*, is a jealous God."

Quotes for the week

"God enters by a private door into every individual." Ralph Waldo Emerson

"The idea that we are physical beings descended from primeval cells in nutrient soups, that idea does violence to my intuition, stomps all over it with football shoes. The idea that we are descended from a jealous god who formed us out of dust to choose between kneel-and-praying or fires-of-damnation, that stomps me worse."
Richard Bach, American author.

"But the true God hath this attribute, that he is a jealous God; and therefore his worship and religion will endure no mixture nor partner." Francis Bacon. *Of Unity in Religion, Essays, Civil and Moral*. The Harvard Classics, 1909–14.

Concern: That we misinterpret God's jealousy into something we can then self-righteously reject.

Jealousy (in the biblical sense) is essentially a passionate commitment to someone for their well-being. It can be morally good or bad, depending on the motive behind the zeal and its context. We should note that God is not jealous *of*, as we so often are, but jealous *for*. There is a significant difference. We often fail to appreciate the intensity of the yearning of God's heart *for* us, something the OT prophets understood very well.

1. Can you think of a time when you were righteously jealous? How did that appear different to you than common jealousy?

Interacting With the Text

Goal: See God's jealousy as an active component of His everlasting love for us.

1. Is it hard for you to accept jealousy as part of God? What about in the believer? What about jealousy causes you problems, if any?

Meditation on Chapter 17: The Jealous God

This week, in closing Section Two of our study, we will venture into an area that most Christians consider outright sinful and find the possibility of ascribing to God such feelings downright unchristian, if not blasphemous. The subject is jealousy, and today, we examine the *Jealous God*.

[Richard Bach](#), the famed author of [Jonathan Livingston Seagull](#), said it for most people:

The idea that we are physical beings descended from primeval cells in nutrient soups, that idea does violence to my intuition, which stomps all over it with football shoes. The idea that we are descended from a jealous god who formed us out of dust to choose between kneel-and-praying or fires-of-damnation, that stomps me worse.

Bach rebelled against both of those choices. He fits in well with most Christians. They rightly rebel against being considered children of an evolutionary accident while at the same time having a serious problem seeing themselves as the created beings of a jealous God.

In this short chapter (to the relief of many readers, he keeps the unpalatable discussions brief), Dr. Packer deals head-on with the idea that any of this jealousy stuff is the imagination of the biblical writers. He says outright, “Nobody would imagine a jealous God.” While I understand where he is coming from, I have to respectfully disagree since the Greeks were adept at imagining gods who were jealous and petty. I think he forgot to include the qualifier “Christian” so that nobody would imagine a jealous Christian God.

That said, Dr. Packer centers the understanding of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as jealously recorded within the sacred scriptures and not in someone’s fevered imaginings. In the end, the sum and substance of our historic Christian faith is in the written record, where we find God declaring himself as jealous. In the second commandment given to Moses and inscribed by His own finger, God says:

“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God ***am a jealous God***, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.” [Exodus 20:5](#)

I think any reasonable and objective person should be able to understand how God would be jealous of his people turning away from him and going after any false god. They should be able to see it as a fundamental perversion of their relationship with him. But given that context, God goes a step further. He tells Moses and the people,

Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst. You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their Asherim (for you shall worship no other god, for the LORD, ***whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God***), lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. [Exodus 34:12-16](#)

Whose name is Jealous...think about that. This is the great I AM, who just a moment earlier had said,

The LORD, the LORD, a God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin... [Exodus 34:6-7](#)

Oh yes, we love that statement while shrinking back from the others. Just so you can’t argue that this is all Old Testament overstatement or hyperbole, Paul asks this fundamental question of the Corinthians.

Shall we provoke the Lord to ***jealousy***? Are we stronger than he? [1 Corinthians 10:22](#)

Paul’s question/warning is given in the similar context of idolatry that we saw in Exodus so that one thing appears obvious in both the Old and New Testaments: God is decidedly jealous of those whom he calls his own when it comes to any form of idolatry. Packer further amplifies this context by referring to [James 4:4-5](#) where

the author presents God as jealous of our wholehearted love and devotion and is concerned that we do not grieve the Holy Spirit that resides within us.

You adulterous people! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you suppose it is to no purpose that the Scripture says, “He yearns *jealously* over the spirit that he has made to dwell in us”?

Having biblically established that God is a jealous God, Packer then asks the fundamental question: How can what is normally a vicious vice when seen in us be a virtue in God, a matter worthy of praise? He answers this question in two ways.

1. ***Jealousy in God is anthropomorphic.*** God uses the concept of jealousy to help us understand something fundamental about himself. It is not the “frustration, envy, and spite” that we commonly evoke, but in God, it is a “praiseworthy zeal to preserve something supremely precious.”
2. ***Not all human jealousy is wrong.*** We are all familiar with mad obsessiveness, which, being infantile and covetous, should be condemned wherever we see it. But there is also a fervent zeal to protect, to guard that which is fundamental, e.g., a marriage relationship. That is not wrong, but right and true.

From the beginning, God’s relationship with his people has been cast in the image of marriage. Even Jesus Christ calls the Church, his chosen called-out ones, his bride. Throughout the Scriptures, Old and New, God is seen as a husband who brooks no defilement of the marriage bed. This marriage between God and his people is the fundamental covenant, the sealing of his eternal love for his chosen, and as Paul reminds us in [Ephesians 5:27](#), it reflects his ultimate purpose.

...so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot, wrinkle, or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

So great is God’s love/agape that he is jealous that his bride be undefiled. Think about it. Isn’t that a reasonable way for God to be?

Packer ends this chapter with this question: do we have a zeal for God? Do we have the same passion to cleanse our own lives that Jesus had when he cleansed the temple? It was said of him, “Zeal for your house will consume me.” [John 2:17](#) Does zeal for our temple (our body), the home of the Spirit of God, consume us? Are we jealous that God should receive us spotless, holy, and without blemish? If not, why not? Do we want to provoke his jealousy?

These are hard questions and tough demands. The ending chapters of this section have been difficult in that they end under the weight of four difficult examinations. It is not a pleasant or easy task to face up to the demands made on pages 138-175, but it is a necessary one, a very necessary one.

In all the years I have been teaching my way through this book, these are the chapters where most people abandon the study as the topic is too much for them to deal with.

Next week, we will review this difficult section and try to put everything in context. Until then, remember to always see God’s jealousy as an active component of his everlasting love for us. Do not forget that jealousy is a treacherous emotion. It is easily perverted into something extremely ugly and dangerous. That said, we still have to learn how to apply this emotion whenever the context demands it properly. Always remember, righteous jealousy is jealous *for* not jealous *of*.

May God bless and keep you, and may He guard your heart and mind, keeping it pure, holy, and blameless, to His honor and glory. Amen.

Review of Section Two: Behold Your God!

Today's theme: Pondering the significance of what it means to have beheld the Lord our God.

Scriptural background: Matthew 5:8 "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*"

Isaiah 40:9 "*O Zion, You who bring good tidings, Get up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, You who bring good tidings, Lift up your voice with strength, Lift it up, be not afraid; Say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God!'"*

Quotes for the week

"How shall I behold the face, henceforth of God or Angel, earst with joy and rapture so oft beheld? Those heav'nly shapes will dazzle now this earthly, with their blaze insufferably bright." John Milton (1608–1674), British poet. *Paradise Lost* (1. Bk. IX, l. 1080–1098).

"People see God every day; they just don't recognize Him." Pearl Baily.

"Two men please God -- who serves Him with all his heart because he knows Him; who seeks Him with all his heart because he knows Him not." Nikita Ivanovich Panin, mentor to Catherine the Great.

Concern: That we will shrink back from seeing God as He is rather than what we want Him to be

In the first section of this book, Packer deals with idolatry. One form of that sin is creating invalid mental images of God. We do this when we try to mold God into something that is pleasing to our sensibilities rather than taking Him as He reveals Himself to be. We, in essence, attempt to recreate God in an image we find acceptable.

1. When you think of God, what image comes to mind? How does this fit with what you have learned in this section?

In Review of chapters seven through seventeen

Goal: To know God as he is, not as we want him to be.

1. Why is God's immutability important? Why do you think Packer started with this attribute of God?

Review of Section Two: Behold Your God!

4. From the moment Pilate responded to Jesus with “What is truth?” our unwillingness to be tied down to absolutes was painfully apparent. Why is the truth of God’s Word so significant to us, especially today?

5. Love is bandied about these days like an emotional volleyball, being redefined within each existential moment. Why is love, as defined by the very nature of God, so important?

6. When we hear grace, we think of someone who acts with an elegant gentleness. However, our culture has lost the Biblical concept of grace, as the unmerited favor of God. How can we make it real again?

7. It is politically incorrect to judge anyone, to make them uncomfortable, to *diss* them in any way. Does our culture let anyone or anything sit in judgment? How does that influence us, whether we want it to admit it or not, and what do you think God thinks about it?

8. When was the last time you heard wrath used in a sentence that wasn't Christian-related? It is not a popular concept. However, why is it so significant to the Christian message?

9. Our idea of fairness doesn't seem to include anything that could be judged severely. God is both good and severe. Why is this balance so important to our Christian life?

10. People hate the idea of a jealous God. Why? What demand does God's jealousy make on them? What demand does it make on you?

What to Do Next

Begin Section Three by reading Chapter Eighteen: *The Heart of the Gospel*. Meditate on what it means to pay an unpayable debt and what that means to Jesus Christ, the Son.

Goal: We want to always remember that when we look at God, He, not we, defines what we see.

Remember, God is. He is YAHWEH, the I AM. It is not for us to try and change Him. It is for Him to change us and our understanding of who He is. Moses wanted to see God face to face but was told that would destroy him. We, His children, however, reborn in Jesus Christ, will one day know Him as we are known, will see Him face to face.

Review of Section Two: Behold Your God!

Meditation on Review of Section Two: Behold Your God!

Taking a moment to look back and review what you have just completed is an important part of the learning experience, especially when you ask yourself some basic questions such as:

1. What things stick in my mind about this section?
2. Why are those things important to me?
3. How will dealing with those things change my life?

Teachers often have their own agenda. They have important points they want you to get out of the information they have just presented to you. While that is a valid and necessary approach to learning, creating a foundation on which to build the next story of your understanding, I have found through experience that when you study God, no teacher can direct what happens to, is important to, or the changes to those who enter this journey. It is one thing to study God, say in a class on theology, and it is another thing to desire with all your heart to know God, which is the study's goal.

So, while I may point out some of the high points of this section, I believe those three questions are the most significant elements of your interaction with what you have just completed. Having read Packer's book thus far, you have been systematically exposed to the important and foundational material you need to know God. However, our loving Father deals with each of us individually, and because of that, what he is dealing with you from Section Two is unique to your relationship with him. That is why I do not worry too much about whether the students joining me on this journey get it all worked out. Your only job is to deal with what God is doing in you right now, and the rest will follow in due course.

The early 21st Century has presented the challenge of open theism (see this [posting at Challes.com](#)) to the Christian Church. I disagree with this theology, but without being sidetracked by the argument, I do want to say that the problem Packer addresses in this section is whether or not we are satisfied with seeing God as he is, what Scripture and his witness in creation tell us about him, or do we want to remake God in an image that is more pleasing to how we think he ought to be. This is the path of open theism.

In the last four chapters of this section, Packer tackles this problem head-on by addressing the attributes of God that most Christians find difficult to deal with. I think the underlying premise of the open theism argument is its dissatisfaction with our understanding of God as presented and understood. That leads them to cast about for a different way to see God, to find a way to speak reasonably (from their perspective) to contemporary science and philosophy.

I believe that Packer faces that issue directly and does it by letting God be God. In doing so, he allows God to define himself by his revelation in both Word and Creation, as well as in deed and flesh (Christ Jesus). Since that approach may not answer all the seemingly urgent questions raised by science and philosophy, open theism comfortably postulates a God who has limits, especially as related to the future and God's ability to control the course of historical events (we should note that this approach frees the holders to be meaningful change agents and personally powerful), which frees them from many of the thorny questions. The problem is that it does not match the biblical God of Scripture and creation. I will forever embrace Yul Brenner's straightforward statement in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, where, playing Ramses, he tells his queen, after the destruction of his chariots in the Red Sea, "Moses' God is God."

It may be fashionable to feel that due to the current pace of scientific inquiry and the expansion of the human knowledge base, we should be able to place demands on our understanding of God. Indeed, if we acknowledge him, we can redefine our past views. Some argue that God is no longer absolute but instead relative and limited. However, we must respond that Scripture does not support this view and remind them of Paul's argument: "Let God be true, and every man a liar." [Romans 3:4](#)

Rather than becoming Pharisees seeking some reasonable and logically manipulative way to get our views of God to fit into how we want things to be, we need to bow our knees in submission to God, as all creation will do in the end. [Philippians 2:9-11](#) In a way, this is a rerun of Job's discussion with God. Why, how, what for? I want to know. I need to know. In the end, God said no. You need to trust me and take what I say as what I say. Job

complied and said shut my mouth. In the end, he never learned the reason, but he did learn submission, something in short supply today, even among professing Christians.

Theology presents us with both a great opportunity and great danger. It allows us to learn more about the God we worship. The danger arises when we think we know enough to define God ourselves and, in the process, discover something new about him, something earlier Christians missed. Compounding the danger is the modern educational and doctrinal system, which requires novelty to support itself and its proliferating degree system. It needs new ideas, new theories, and new postulations. In science, this is seen as good, as these explorations enlarge our circle of knowledge. However, in theology, especially Christian biblical theology, what we know about God is limited by revelation embedded within the Word. While applying that limited knowledge is endless, the revealed knowledge is finite. After 2000 years of Christian theology, we constantly bump up against the limits of revelation. When that happens, we have a choice, the same choice offered to Job and his counselors: to trust God and accept that our knowledge is limited or to speculate and try and extend our knowledge of God with reason and philosophy, trying to drive back the edges of the mist by the force of our logic and our accumulated knowledgebase from all areas of human understanding. Ultimately, I think it comes down to the first question and the first temptation, "Did God really say? You will know..." [Genesis 3:1-4](#)

God, from the beginning, set limits on our knowledge, and from the beginning, we have rebelled against those limits. Eve came up against those limits and rebelled. Job came up against those limits and accepted them. God put them there for a reason, and he has told us to trust him. We all face the same choices Eve and Job faced. Some have responded by chucking out the whole framework and redefining everything (witness the modern Episcopal Church and its apostles of modernity). Others respond by redefining God, in my mind, committing the same sin Job's counselors who God judged.

After the LORD had spoken his demands to Job, who accepted them, the LORD said to Eliphaz the Temanite:

My anger burns against you and against your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. Now, therefore, take seven bulls and seven rams and go to my servant Job and offer up a burnt offering for yourselves. And my servant Job shall pray for you, for I will accept his prayer not to deal with you according to your folly. For you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. [Job 42:7-8](#)

So, our ultimate folly is wanting God to be other than he is, demanding that our understanding, our will, and our desire define him. No. In the end, we need to echo Job.

I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore, I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. 'Hear, and I will speak; I will question you, and you make it known to me.' I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore, I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes. [Job 42:1-6](#)

That is where we stand: either to be like Job and be willing to repent in dust and ashes of our desire to press past the boundaries God has set or refuse and be like Eve (and Job's counselors) and use whatever we can find so that we can know (or pretend to know) what we want to know. It's your choice.

May God give us the grace to see by faith with the eyes of Job, thereby avoiding the errors of his counselors. May we always be willing to accept God as he is and submit to whatever he demands of us. In the end, He will have the final Word, not us. He is, after all, God.