

Introduction

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[0:00] Well, believers, I have a question for you to think about just for 10 seconds.! J.I. Packer makes a case in a book, Knowing God, that that is precisely your greatest need, to know God better.

Now, that might not be the first thing that came to your mind and mine as we think, what do I need? What do I need most? We have many felt needs that perhaps jumped right to the foreground of our minds.

It's this and that problem shouts at us and grabs our attention and bothers and hurts and worries and perplexes us. And we think that our greatest moment or our greatest need for this moment would be to have all these problems gone from our lives, little knowing that according to God, our greatest need is to get to know him better.

And that's why he sends those problems our way. Eight years ago, we did a study on J.I. Packer's book, Knowing God.

It's one of the classic books of the last century. And today we're beginning another study of this book, believing that it helpfully addresses a critical need that we all have to know God better.

[1:48] There really is nothing more important, a greater need that we have than to know God better. So how are you doing in the lifelong study of knowing God?

Well, Packer didn't sit down one day and decide, I'm going to write a book on God. Rather, what he did is month by month, he wrote an article for a magazine called Evangelical Magazine, in which he spoke of God and different attributes and studies about God.

And then he gathered them all together in one volume, and hence the book, Knowing God. Now, the book's divided into three parts.

The real meat of the book is part two, and in part two, he gives us ten attributes of God. And right away, we see the book is not exhaustive because there's more than ten attributes about our God. So it wasn't written to be an exhaustive book on God. But before part two, part one tells us the importance of this study and how it is that we get to know God better.

[3:04] And then part three will follow the attributes of God and show us other benefits and applications that flow to us as we get to know God better.

Now, three men will be teaching this study, Jason Webb, Dave Wessner, and myself, and I ask you to pray for us. That we might know God better through our study.

Though we're using Packer's book, we're also giving liberty to the teachers to supplement the study with outside sources. And so I just need to make the disclaimer that not everything that you hear will be from J.I. Packer.

It may be from Heaney or Webb or Wessner. It's been said before, if it's helpful and profitable and insightful, it's probably Packer. And if it's not, it's probably us.

So our desire is to know God better as we proceed through this study. Now, as we begin, I do want to begin with a quote from Packer himself as to the conviction that lies behind the book that he wrote.

[4:11] He says, The conviction behind the book is that ignorance of God lies at the root of much of the church's weakness today. So Packer, looking out on the church, saw signs of sickness.

An anemic church. A church that had lost power. A church with a form of godliness, but no power of a godly life. A church with little holiness, but with compromise.

A church that was earthly minded and was not distinctly different from the world, but rather more like the world than it was different from the world.

And as he looks at the problems and the sick condition of the church, he goes right to the cause and says that at the root of it, you might attribute many different problems to different sources.

But at the root, right at the bottom, the problem is that there is this great ignorance about God. Now Packer wrote that in 1973.

[5:21] And I have no doubt that if he would write a sequel or speak again today, as he still is speaking and writing, he would not retract that statement, but make it with all the more emphasis.

Because we have the same symptoms of an anemic and sick church. And though we have all sorts of Christian books and CDs being published and Christian TV and radio programs, as I drove through Tennessee and South Carolina especially, I was struck again with how many churches there are in the land.

And yet with all of the churches and all of these information on the internet, ignorance of God still lies at the root of the church's weakness today.

For several decades, George Barna and others have chronicled the decline of biblical knowledge. And they've done it by taking surveys, religious surveys of people in the church as well as America at large.

Gary Burge is professor of New Testament at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. And he asserts that biblical illiteracy is at a crisis level, not just in our culture at large, but within our churches.

[6:48] And he's monitored the biblical literacy of incoming freshmen into Wheaton. And they draw from almost every Protestant denomination in the land and literally from every state of the Union.

And he found from incoming freshmen that one third could not put the following four things in order. Now, this is a test for you. Can you put these following four things in order?

Abraham, the Old Testament prophets. I'm talking about chronological order. Abraham, the Old Testament prophets. The death of Christ.

And the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Now, I gave them to you in order, didn't I? Yeah? Okay. But one third of Christian students growing up in the church couldn't put those four basic things in order.

One third could not identify Matthew as an apostle out of a list of New Testament names. George Lindbeck is a theologian and professor at Yale.

[8:00] And he has this to say about the decreasing knowledge of Scripture among his students. He says, Theologian and author David Wells says in his book, No Place for Truth.

I have watched with growing disbelief as the evangelical church has cheerfully plunged into astounding theological illiteracy.

We don't know God in the churches anymore. Now, this question is for your response. What is so alarming about such ignorance of the Bible within the church?

After all, you don't need to know that Matthew was an apostle in order to be saved. So, why are these statistics and why are these surveys such a bother to Packer and others and to us?

Roger? Anybody read the Bible? Hmm. Okay. So, the knowledge of Matthew being an apostle, the lack of the knowledge of that, is indicative of just a general ignorance of the Bible, right?

[9:22] That's what you're saying. Though that may not be all that significant in the overarching scheme of salvation, to know that Matthew was an apostle, yet if you don't know that fact, can you know much else that the Bible is about?

All right? Any other reasons? Why should this bother us? Jim? It just makes it the churches and teaching, not the Bible. Okay. It evidences that something other is being done than instructing.

Was it Dale? People are very satisfied with being religious, but not knowing God. Okay. So, we have a lot of religion that may satisfy people, and yet without knowing God.

Raj? I think that the danger goes to the fact that if we don't know God, we're really worshiping the Bible. Going back to the Pharisees, they knew the God of Yahweh, they claimed to worship the God of Abraham.

But because they didn't know the Scriptures, they didn't truly know God, and God said, the truth of God is the devil. Hmm. So, if you can read...

[10:32] Hmm. What book? If you can read Jack and Jill went up the hill, read that little ditty, and not know that they were going up to fetch a pail of water, then we might ask you, well, do you know what happened to them?

If you don't know that they were going up to fetch a pail, do you also not know that they came tumbling down? What else do you not know if you don't know this and that?

And so, though they don't know these facts, now, what is alarming is that if they don't know these obvious facts and teachings of the Bible, what else do they not know about God himself and about

critical doctrines of the Christian faith?

Knowing God is far more than just knowing facts about God, but none can know God apart from the facts about him. So, we are concerned when we see biblical illiteracy.

Among church-going, professing Christians, that is what we find. That it's not just that they're not able to give us more than three or four of the disciples' names, but that there are critical doctrines that are no longer believed.

[11 : 56] The most widely known Bible verse among adult and teen believers today is God helps those who help themselves. Now, what's wrong with this?

Okay, you all are shaking your head and saying it's not in the Bible. It isn't, but that's the favorite Bible verse of adult and teenage churchgoers today. God helps those who help themselves.

What else is wrong with that picture? Mark? I think it just speaks to the fact that the church is not fulfilling the Christ mandate to teach everything that I've commanded.

Okay, excellent. That's more the general issue. I'm speaking now of, thank you, Mark, you're absolutely right. We've got other things we're taken up with rather than the mandate from Christ as he left us.

But I'm asking, what else is wrong with the fact that the favorite Bible verse among churchgoing people today is God helps those who help themselves? Not only that it's not in the Bible, but what else is seriously wrong?

[13 : 05] Mike? Just assimilated so much of man's thoughts and ideas into what we think Scripture says. Okay. Evie, did you have something? Yeah, well, I'm thinking of if you knew your strength, you know that.

What else is it talking about? So not only is it not in the Bible, it is at odds with the very gospel of Jesus Christ that God helps those who can't help themselves.

And that God saves sinners when they acknowledge the fact that they can't help themselves. And so not only are we terribly off base by claiming something that's not in the Bible, but what we're holding on to is antithetical to the gospel of Christ, the only saving gospel.

It reveals that self-help theology which is so prevalent today.

Among Baptists of all stripes, only 43% believe that works don't earn heaven. That means more than not believe that your works will earn you heaven.

[14 : 21] Protestants, Baptists, among mainline Protestants, 83% believe that your works will save you. Only 55% of Baptists affirm that Christ was sinless.

Okay, now we're into the knowledge of God. We're talking about knowing God. And here's a statement. Was Jesus Christ without sin? And only 55% of Baptists said yes.

What is so serious about belief in Christ being sinless? Michael?

Christ was perfect. Christ was perfect. Excellent. Excellent. If he was not sinless, holy, blameless, and pure, then his blood could not avail for himself, much less for us sinners.

So just one leak in the ship will sink it. And just one sin in Christ will do away with salvation for any of us. And so we're talking almost half of the people, church-going, professing Christians, do not believe Christ is sinless.

[15 : 36] Recent surveys found that 25% of U.S. Christians, including born-again Christians, embrace reincarnation as their favorite end-of-life view.

Someone suggested that they should be called born-again and again Christians, believing that you're just cycled over and over again. You're born again and again and live another life.

Many Christians, Barnen and Hatch, right, accept elements of unbiblical worldviews without even knowing it.

Quote, the average born-again, baptized, church-going person has embraced elements of Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, Scientology, Unitarianism, and Christian science without any idea that they have just created their own faith.

We cannot really call the faith of American Christians a Bible-based faith. It is a synthetic, syncretic faith, a mixture, a combination of all sorts.

[16 : 45] Now something's wrong then when such ignorance of God is found within the church, not just the culture at large, but among the initiated, among the membership, the inside, the insiders.

And that's the conviction behind this book that Packer wrote, that ignorance of God lies at the root of much of the church's weakness today.

Now this is no novel diagnosis of the problem. It's not like Packer's one of these weird doctors that see some strange diagnosis.

God weighed in on this matter before. You remember as we're reading through Hosea, we're seeing all the sins of Israel and how they've gone after idols and after they're full of immorality and injustice.

These were the symptoms of their sickness. They're stumbling around in the dark, falling into all kinds of sins. But the cause, God says, in Hosea 4.6, is that my people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.

[17 : 50] It's a lack of knowledge that has brought this state of affairs into being. There's no knowledge of God in the land. Verse 1 of chapter 4.

Jeremiah the prophet. Chapter 3 and verse 21. A cry is heard on the barren heights, the weeping and pleading of the people of Israel because they have perverted their ways and have forgotten the Lord their God.

When the Lord is forgotten, man's ways get perverted. It's at the root of it. The lack of knowledge of God. Judges chapter 2 and verse 10.

Joshua led the children of Israel into the promised land. Then Joshua and his generation died. And now we read, after that, the whole generation, after that, the whole, after that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up who knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel.

Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals and forsook the Lord. When did the Israelites forsake the Lord and do evil?

[18 : 58] When they no longer knew the Lord and forgot what he had done for Israel. When do I stray off the path of what's right and the obedience of God's word?

When do I go after some worldliness or some idolatry? When I forget the Lord and no longer remember what he has done for the Israel of God.

So ignorance about God. It's a most dangerous condition for people to be in. And the cure is to know God. It's to get the knowledge of God.

And we do so not by turning to men to tell us their thoughts about God, teach us how to think about God, but we go right to God himself. And God teaches us who he is and what he's like and what he requires and how we should respond to who he is.

And that's what we have in the scriptures. God telling us how to think about himself, who he is. Now turn in your Bibles to 2 Peter. The whole book is, the whole letter is a warning against false teachers and their damning doctrines.

[20 : 21] By calling them damning doctrines and destructive heresies, Peter's letting us know that there are some things if a man believes that will damn him.

He cannot be saved while he holds to these truths, or teachings, excuse me, not truths, but false teachings. No wonder that knowledge of God receives such an emphasis in this letter.

I want you to see that just very quickly. Verse 2, grace and peace of chapter 1, grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

That's where grace and peace flows from. The knowledge of God and Jesus our Lord. Verse 3, his divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and power.

Where does everything we need come from? Through our knowledge of him. And then for this very reason, we're told in verse 5 to make every effort to add to your faith goodness and to goodness knowledge.

[21 : 27] We must ever be adding knowledge to our faith and we're told later on in this chapter that if you do these things, you'll never fall and you'll receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom. In chapter, later in the chapter, Paul says, we're not following cleverly invented stories, but we're following the word of the prophets of scripture.

And he says in verse 19, and you will do well to pay attention to it, that is to the scriptures as a light shining in a dark place. And then chapter 2 talks all about the false teachers and their false doctrines and God's attitude toward them.

And then chapter 3 says that, Peter says, I just want to stir you up to remember the words spoken in the past and by the holy prophets and our Lord.

Chapter 3 and verse 16, we're told that ignorant and unstable people distort the scriptures to their own destruction. Yes, they use Bible passages, but they so twist them that they themselves are destroyed eternally and so are those who follow them.

So here's the dangerous situation in which the church always lives, where false teachers and false teaching and damning teachings abound.

[22 : 46] What are we to do? We're to be ever adding knowledge to our faith. Look at how the book ends, verses 17 and 18. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position, but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

To him be glory both now and forever. Amen. What is the cure? What is the preventative to allowing error to pull us away from Christ?

It is to always be growing in the knowledge and grace of Jesus himself. Sometimes the word that God brings us in scripture is not the word that we expect.

I think that Isaiah chapter 40 is such a passage. And in that passage, Judah is under the judgments of God.

they have forsaken him and God is judging them. And even the righteous remnant in Judah is growing weary. They're getting tired as they suffer along with the unfaithful nation.

[24 : 05] When enemy nations came down and devastated Judah, God didn't build a wall around the faithful and protect them. They suffered right along with unbelieving Judah.

It made them weary. It made them lose heart and wonder, has the Lord forgotten us? And so God sends Isaiah with words of comfort to them. Comfort my people. Speak tenderly to them, he says here in Isaiah 40.

Well, what will be spoken to them for their comfort? Well, he tells them precisely what to say in verse 9. You who bring good tidings to Zion, you go up on a high mountain.

Some place where you'll be, your voice will be heard. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout. Lift it up. Do not be afraid.

Say to the towns of Judah, behold your God. That's what she needs to hear. She needs to see her God for who he is.

[25 : 05] And what follows is an amazing picture of God. His majesty and his power over creation, over the nations. And yet his tender care as a shepherd for his sheep, for his people.

He's not a God who grows weary, but he's a God who gives strength to those who do grow weary. So wait on him, O Israel. He will renew your strength. And so it's, behold your God.

Know God if you would be encouraged. And so in our trials, we need to know God. Jerry Bridges wrote an excellent book called Trusting God When Life Hurts.

And in our trials, what do we need? And his book is just setting before us attribute after attribute. God's love, his sovereignty, his power, his faithfulness. Behold your God.

That's our great need. And it's not just the poorly taught portion of the church at large that needs to know God better. It's not just these poor people who don't know that Matthew was an apostle or who think reincarnation is a possible end of life story for the Christian or that Jesus had sinned like the rest of us.

[26 : 23] It's not just them that need to know God better. There's Moses. And if ever a man knew God, it was surely him. Scriptures say that God knew him face to face.

Talked to him as a friend. Talks to his friend. You remember, he spoke with Moses at the burning bush in the wilderness. Later he brings him up on top of Mount Sinai for 40 days.

He talks with him. Friend to friend. Later he will meet with him in the meeting place, the tent of meeting.

Such a kind of glory will be on his face that he must cover it as he, God talks with him. And yet, in Exodus 33, we find Moses crying out, show me your glory.

There's more to you than what I have yet seen. I need to know you. There's the apostle Paul. Now this is a man who has been used to write scripture.

[27 : 27] Most of the New Testament epistles are written by Paul. And he enjoyed a personal meeting with the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus.

Met him face to face. Heard words from his mouth. And as soon as he was converted, God whisked him away into the desert where for three years God taught him the truth.

special revelation lifted up in spirit to the third heaven. He's no babe in Christ.

He's no untaught disciple, church member. He's now known the Lord for 30 years and he's just a few years away from dying a martyr's death and going to be with the Lord.

And yet here from a Roman prison, we hear him say in Philippians 3 and verse 10, I want to know Christ. Paul, don't you know him?

[28:40] Oh, I don't know far more than what I do know. There's still more to know of Christ. And that's his passion. And that's his longing. And that's the passion we need to have relit in our hearts as we're coming to this subject of knowing God.

Do we want to know God? Oh, we do know you, Lord, but show us your glory. We want to know you better. This is to be our great ambition and goal in life.

A limited, but perhaps helpful, illustration is this, that knowing God is like climbing a mountain. The more you know, the more you see how much more there is to know.

It's like a boy who was born at the base of a huge mountain and all of his life he lived under the shadow of that huge mountain. And he'd go for day trips up and down the edges of the foothills of that mountain.

And one day when he turns 18, he decides, I'm going to climb to the top. And so up the mountain he goes and he's appreciating in a way he's never known before just how tall and grand and majestic that mountain is.

[29:50] Step by step, what a mountain. But it's only as he reaches the summit of the mountain that he realizes how much more there is to see than he ever realized.

For as he comes up over the crest of the top, he sees that there's a whole mountain range stretching out behind this mountain with peaks that are higher than this one that he never could see from the base of the mountain.

And so it is, brothers and sisters, as we grow in our knowledge of God, we get to see more and more not only of him, but we're made to be aware that there is so much more about him that we don't yet know.

So much more to see and to know and experience of our God. So the more we know, the more we know how little we know.

For God is an infinite God. That means everything about him is infinite. He has infinite holiness without any boundaries, any limits. His holiness, his love, his righteousness, his wrath, his grace.

[31:01] Infinite. In other words, there's never reaching the end and saying, now I know the love of God. I know everything about the love of God that there is to know. You never get to the end of it.

Rather, the deeper you go into the love of Christ, the more you find out that it's a love that surpasses knowledge. Ephesians 3, 19. The little measuring stick of our mental powers cannot reach the depths of Christ's bottomless ocean of love.

And so, Paul prays for the Ephesians that they might have power together with all the saints. That's all of us power to grasp just how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.

No wonder A.W. Pink says, the better part of wisdom is the consciousness of ignorance. So, you know God. Then you are very aware of just how ignorant you are of God and just how much more there is of him to know.

150 years ago, Charles Spurgeon emphasized the importance of the study of God. And he says, there's no higher exercise for the human mind than to be thinking about God.

[32:24] And he talks how it's a humbling exercise to think about God because as we contemplate him, we see just how foolish we are, how little we know. It's not only a humbling thing.

It's an exalting, expanding exercise to the mind because it's in contemplation of God that we don't come to a place where we say, oh, I now understand all about that. But we rather have our mind expanded to see things and to be aware that there's far more to know.

And so our mind is expanded in the exercise and then our mind is consoled in this exercise. I love how he puts it.

Oh, there is in contemplating Christ a balm for every wound. In musing on the Father, there is a quietus for every grief. And in the influence of the Holy Spirit, there is a balsam for every sore. Would you lose your sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go plunge yourself into the Godhead's deepest sea. Be lost in his immensity and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated.

[33 : 32] I know nothing which can so comfort the soul, so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief, so speak peace to the winds of trial as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.

Humbling, expanding, consoling. Now, some people think of the study of God as a very boring exercise.

And think of it only in theoretical terms. There's nothing really practical. Tell me how to live. Tell me how to raise my children, how to spend my money, how to work, how to get more.

But the truth is that there is nothing more practical than knowing God. Packer puts it this way, as it would be cruel to take an uncivilized tribesman from the Amazon.

So here's a man who's never seen civilization. We go over and we pick him up and we fly him over to O'Hare Airport and we put him in a taxi and we drive him right downtown Chicago and we open the door and we boot him out.

[34 : 42] And he knows nothing about our land, about our people, about our language, about our laws, and we just push him out the door and leave him to fend for himself in this new land.

Wouldn't that make a great reality TV show? Packer says it would be cruel to do that to a man. And then he draws the hook.

So we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it.

Little Lila Jazz has been deposited into this world and if she doesn't have the knowledge of the one whose world it is and who runs it and his laws and what he's like, it would be a cruel thing.

The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place and life in it is disappointing and unpleasant business for those who do not know about God.

[35 : 48] Disregard the study of God and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded as it were with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you.

This is the way to waste your life and to lose your soul. Well, the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

If you would have understanding on how to live, get the knowledge of the Holy One. You will be made wise, not only unto salvation but unto all ways of life and living under this God whose world we live in.

Well, Packer leaves us here at the end of this chapter with a warning. There are some wrong reasons to study about God and that's just to make the knowledge of God an end in itself. What happens when we do that?

Well, knowledge puffs up. Knowledge puffs up. The man who thinks he knows something does not yet know as he ought to know, 1 Corinthians 8. So be prayerfully aware of the danger of knowledge.

[36 : 57] As you begin this study with me, remind yourself that this knowledge of God may do you harm. It may do you harm as well as good depending on what you do with it and why you want it.

Why do I want to grow in my knowledge of God? Don't make it an end in itself so that you can boast and brag how you're not like the 33% or the 55%.

That'll harm you. Rather, strive for the knowledge of God as a means to an end. And what is the great end? It's that I might know God himself.

I might enter into deeper fellowship, communion, and really know him better. That should be our aim as we climb up this mountain.

I want to know you, Lord. I want to know you. How do we do this? How do we turn knowledge about God into knowledge of God?

[37 : 59] A simple yet demanding rule, Packer says, we must turn each truth that we learn about God into matter for meditation before God, leading to prayer and praise to God.

So whatever we learn about God, we don't just leave it there. It's not an end in itself. But we meditate on it and we think about it in the presence of God.

God, you are all-powerful. What does that mean for me? How should I live my life in light of the fact of what you are? And we meditate in his presence and we take what we're learning about him to him in prayer.

And so we make the knowledge about God an opportunity to commune with God. That's what we're after, to know him better. God's love.

And so if we will pursue God himself, then in the process of knowing him, I come to know myself and am myself changed by the experience.

[39 : 07] I first of all come to know myself as I get to know God. It was one of the claims of John Calvin in his institutes that no man can really know himself until he comes to know God.

He says man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he's first looked upon God's face and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinizing himself.

It's in his light that we see light. I mean, how do you answer the question, who am I? If you don't know God, you can't answer the most basic question about yourself.

I'm a creature of God. Of who? God. Well, I've got to know something about him in order to understand myself and understand that I'm now a fallen creature in Adam, a rebel against this God, and that there's only one way that he's given by which I can be made right with him, and it's through his son.

And here's his law and his holy requirements, and here's what he's done in Jesus Christ to forgive our sins and bring us back into fellowship. I can't begin to know myself until I have known God himself.

[40 : 18] And so in the study, we come to know ourselves and then we're changed in the process. He's so glorious a God that we cannot come to know him without becoming more like him, 2 Corinthians 3.18.

And so Paul says, I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that you may know him better.

Let's pray together and ask that of our God this morning. Oh, Father in heaven, what do we know about you that you have not given us?

We would be the most ignorant had you not opened your word and taught us and given us eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to bow and receive. So we lay all praise before you, but we confess we still know you too little.

Would you give us the Holy Spirit as a spirit of wisdom and revelation in this study, indeed in the hour to come and every time we open our Bibles that we might come to know you better and be led to live before you in the light of who you are, loving you, trusting you, worshiping you, serving you, obeying you, following you.

[41 : 37] We ask it for the praise of Christ and in his name, Amen.