

— MEET —
J. I. PACKER

— *A Sampler of* —
Three Classic Works



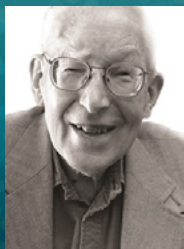
Excerpts from *Knowing God*,
Knowing Christianity, and *Truth & Power*

 | InterVarsity Press

This sampler is an invitation to encounter one of the most influential Christian writers of the twentieth century, **J. I. Packer**, a theologian whose work has guided millions of Christians into a deeper, more joyful understanding of God and his Word. Inside, you'll find excerpts from three of his classic works: *Knowing God*, *Knowing Christianity*, and *Truth & Power*.

Packer had the ability to take the great doctrines of the Christian faith and render them intellectually accessible and as truths to be lived. Whether you're new to theology or simply new to Packer and his writings, we invite you to explore these excerpts and get to know him.

ABOUT J. I. PACKER



J. I. PACKER (1926–2020) was one of the most beloved and widely read Christian theologians of the twentieth century, once named to Time magazine's list of the 25 Most Influential Evangelicals in America. During his time at Oxford University, he attended lectures by C. S. Lewis, whose thought became an influential part of Packer's life and work. While at Oxford he also committed his life to Christ

at an evangelistic service sponsored by the campus InterVarsity chapter. Following the completion of his doctorate in philosophy, Packer went on to teach at Oak Hill Theological College in London before attending Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, where he underwent theological training for ordination into the Church of England. In 1954 Packer married Kit Mullet and they had three children: Ruth, Naomi, and Martin. During his time in England, Packer served as principal of Latimer House, Oxford, then as principal of Tyndale Hall, Bristol, and also as associate principal of Trinity College, Bristol. In 1979, he began teaching at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia, where he served in many roles and remained Board of Governors' Professor of Theology until his death.

J. I. PACKER

A Century of Enduring Truth *In His Own Words*

J. I. Packer, or James Innell Packer (1926–2020) is regarded as one of the most well-known theologians of our time. In honor of Packer’s 100th birthday, IVP has gathered highlights from some of J. I. Packer’s greatest works in the form of a written interview.

WHY KNOWING PACKER MATTERS

“Packer liked to describe himself as, above all else, a catechist: someone who instructs others in the Christian faith and life. A catechist need not be an academic. By definition, however, a catechist must be an ecclesial theologian, someone whose teaching builds up the church, one disciple at a time.

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

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

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

“To know Packer, finally, is to meet a ‘theologizer’: someone who set out and communicated in crisp, concise speech what there is to be known of the reality of God on the basis of the Scriptures.”

—**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, from the foreword of the
fiftieth anniversary edition of *Knowing God*

WHO NEEDS THEOLOGY?

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

of God will be impractical and irrelevant for life. In fact, however, it is the most practical project anyone can engage in. Knowing about God is crucially important for the living of our lives. As it would be cruel to an Amazonian tribesman to fly him to London, put him down without explanation in Trafalgar Square and leave him, as one who knew nothing of English or England, to fend for himself, so we are cruel to ourselves if we try to live in this world without knowing about the God whose world it is and who runs it. The world becomes a strange, mad, painful place, and life in it a disappointing and unpleasant business, for those who do not know about God. Disregard the study of God, and you sentence yourself to stumble and blunder through life blindfolded, as it were, with no sense of direction and no understanding of what surrounds you. This way you can waste your life and lose your soul.”

—from *Knowing God*

WHAT REALLY IS CHRISTIANITY?

Packer: “The essence of Christianity is neither beliefs nor behavior patterns. It is the reality of communion here and now with Christianity’s living founder, the Mediator, Jesus Christ.

“Being a Christian, therefore, is a matter of constantly reaching out to the invisibly present Savior by words and actions that express three things: The first is faith in him as the one who secured, and now bestows, forgiveness of our sins, so setting us right with the God who is his Father by essence and becomes ours by adoption. The second is love for him as the One who loved us enough to endure an unimaginably dreadful death in order to save us. The final thing expressed is hope in him as the sovereign Lord through whose grace our life here, with all its pains, is experienced as infinitely rich and our life hereafter will be experienced as infinitely richer.

“It thus appears that Christianity is Christ relationally. Being a Christian is knowing Christ, which is more than just knowing about him. Real faith involves real fellowship. ‘Our fellowship,’ explained the apostle John, ‘is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ’ (1 Jn 1:3). Credence without this communion is only halfway to Christianity. Personal homage, trust and obedience are what finally count.”

—from *Knowing Christianity*

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWING GOD AND KNOWING ABOUT GOD?

Packer: “We are, perhaps, orthodox evangelicals. We can state the gospel clearly; we can smell unsound doctrine a mile away. If asked how one may know God, we can at once produce the right formula: that we come to know God through Jesus Christ the Lord, in virtue of his cross and mediation, on the basis of his word of promise, by the power of the Holy Spirit, via a personal exercise of faith. Yet the gaiety, goodness, and unfetteredness of spirit which are the marks of those who have known God are rare among us—rarer, perhaps, than they are in some other Christian circles where, by comparison, evangelical truth is less clearly and fully known. Here, too, it would seem that

the last may prove to be first, and the first last. A little knowledge of God is worth more than a great deal of knowledge about him.

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

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

“All very fine—yet interest in theology, and knowledge about God, and the capacity to think clearly and talk well on Christian themes, is not at all the same thing as knowing him.

2. One can know a great deal about godliness without much knowledge of God.

“It depends on the sermons one hears, the books one reads, and the company one keeps. In this analytical and technological age there is no shortage of books on the church book tables, or sermons from the pulpits, on how to pray, how to witness, how to read our Bibles, how to tithe our money, how to be a young Christian, how to be an old Christian, how to be a happy Christian, how to get consecrated, how to lead people to Christ, and generally how to go through all the various motions which the teachers in question associate with being a Christian. Nor is there any shortage of biographies delineating the experiences of Christians in past days for our interested perusal.

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

—from *Knowing God*

HOW SHOULD WE THINK ABOUT SPIRITUAL GROWTH?

Packer: “Mistake number one is to suppose that growth in grace is measurable in the way that physical growth is measurable.

“Mistake number two is to suppose that growth in grace is a uniform process.

“Mistake number three is to suppose that growth in grace is automatic, something you need not bother about because it will look after itself or something that is guaranteed if you are a professional minister, missionary or church officer.

“Real growth in grace through the Spirit will bring us consciously closer to Jesus Christ day by day, and that indeed will be one of the signs that God really is at work in our lives. As we ‘see him more clearly, love him more dearly, and follow him more nearly,’ we will grow in the knowledge of Jesus our Savior, sin-bearer, example, master and friend, who is himself the source of all the strength and power we need to follow in his steps. Such growth will honor God and be a supreme blessing to our souls.”

—from *Knowing Christianity*

WHY SHOULD WE CARE ABOUT BIBLICAL INERRANCY?

Packer: “The importance of recognizing biblical inerrancy as a fact of faith is that, on the one hand, it reminds us that all Scripture is instruction in one way or another from the God of truth. On the other hand, it commits us to consistency in believing, receiving and obeying everything that it proves to say. The more completely heart and mind are controlled by Scripture, the fuller our freedom and the greater our joy. God’s free servants know God and know about God. They observe God-taught standards and restraints in living and in relationships. They trust God’s promises and in the power of Bible certainties live out their days in peace and hope.

“Modern people need to hear more of this message of freedom. The church needs to learn again how basic to that message is the truth of the inerrancy of Scripture, on which the fullness of biblical authority depends.”

—from *Truth and Power*

WHY IS IT NECESSARY TO PERSEVERE IN PRAYER?

Packer: “While prayer is unquestionably natural, necessary and normal for Christian people, it constantly proves in practice to be the very opposite of plain sailing. Commands and encouragements to pray, with narratives of people doing it right and models for us to imitate and use, abound in the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, and the New Testament specifically is full of them.

“Yet we end up struggling, and not just over making time for prayer or finding a place for it. Thoughts wander, hearts that ardently longed to be praying freeze once we start, and we dry up. We thought we knew what we had to say to God, but our minds lose focus as soon as we start to say it, our muddle reduces us to stumbling, using words that do not express our meaning, and finally our muddle descends into silence. If we try to use that silence as a time for listening to God, we find ourselves randomly dreaming. And if we recite set prayers or psalms at such a time, our words feel hollow and unreal; our heart does not seem to be in any of the things we are saying.

“Why these bewilderments, which we all know so well? To be told that they have something to do with sin, the anti-God allergy in our spiritual systems, that operates as a disruptive force in all of our communion with God is absolutely right, but this in sight does not get us very far. What we want is help to pray properly, with reality and integrity and reverent concentration, here and now. Is such help available? That is the question to which we now address our selves. “Good praying is at once both duty and delight, but often we must begin where prayer is primarily duty. As we grow in the knowledge of prayer and in the practice of praying, however, God will sanctify our efforts and delight will come upon us.”

—from *Praying*

ON WHAT MATTERS MOST:

Packer: “What matters supremely is not the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in knowing me. I know him because he first knew me, and continues to know me. He knows me as a friend, one who loves me; and there is no moment when his eye is off me, or his attention distracted from me, and no moment, therefore, when his care falters.”

—from *Knowing God*



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J. I. PACKER

KNOWING
GOD

*Fiftieth
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to yourself, make yourself look up from your problems to the God of the gospel; let *evangelical* thinking correct *emotional* thinking. By this means (so Paul believes) the indwelling Holy Spirit, whose ministry it is to assure us that we are God's beloved children and heirs (vv. 15-16), will lead us to the point where Paul's last triumphant inference—"I am convinced that neither death nor life . . . nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 38-39)—will evoke from us the response: "And so am I! Hallelujah!" For in this response, as Paul knows, lies the secret of the "more-than-conquerors" experience, which is the victory that overcomes the world and the Christian's heaven on earth.

"What then shall we say to these things?" Paul's model answer consists of four thoughts, each focused in a further question. (Questions, after all, make people think!) "If God is for us, who is against us? . . . Will he not also give us all things with him [Christ]? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? . . . Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (vv. 31-35 RSV). The recurring key word of the first three thoughts is *for* (Greek, *hyper*, "on behalf of"): God is *for* us . . . he delivered up his Son *for* us all . . . Christ intercedes *for* us. The fourth thought is a conclusion from the first three together: Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God which comes to us in Christ Jesus our Lord. We shall look at these thoughts in order.

IF GOD IS FOR US

First: "If God is for us, who is against us?"

The thought here is that *no opposition can finally crush us*. To convey this thought, Paul sets before us the adequacy of God as our *sovereign protector*, and the decisiveness of his *covenant commitment* to us.

"If *God* is for us . . ." Who is God? Paul speaks of the God of the Bible and of the gospel, the Lord Jehovah, "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness" (Ex 34:6), the God whom "the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father . . . hath declared" (Jn 1:18 KJV). This is the God who has spoken to announce his sovereignty: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Is 46:9-10).

This is the God who showed his sovereignty by bringing Abraham out of Ur, Israel out of captivity in Egypt and later in Babylon, and Jesus out of

the grave; and who shows the same sovereignty still every time he raises a sinner to spiritual life out of spiritual death. This is the God of Romans, the God whose wrath “is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men” (1:18), yet who “demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (5:8).

This is the God who calls, justifies and glorifies those whom from eternity he “predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son” (8:29). This is the God of the first Anglican article, the “one living and true God, everlasting . . . of infinite power, wisdom and goodness; the Maker and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible.” This is (be it added) the God whose ways we have been studying in this book.

“If God”—this God—is “*for us*”—what does that mean? The words *for us* declare God’s *covenant commitment*. The goal of grace, as we have seen, is to create a love relationship between God and us who believe, the kind of relationship for which we were first made. And the bond of fellowship by which God binds himself to us is his covenant. He imposes it unilaterally, by promise and command. We see him doing this in his words to Abraham in Genesis 17: “I am God Almighty; . . . I will establish my covenant . . . between me and you . . . to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. . . . I will be their God. . . . You must keep my covenant” (vv. 1, 7-9).

Galatians 3 and 4 show that all who put faith in Christ, Gentile no less than Jew, are incorporated through Christ into the seed of Abraham, which is the covenant company. Once established, the covenant abides, for God keeps it in being. As Father, Husband and King (these are the human models in terms of which his covenant relationship is presented), God is faithful to his promise and purpose. And the promise itself—the promise to be “your God” is a comprehensive promise which, when unpacked, proves to contain within itself all the “exceeding great and precious promises” in which God has pledged himself to meet our needs. This covenant relationship is the basis of all biblical religion: when worshipers say “*my God*,” and God says “*my people*,” covenant language is being talked.

And the words “God is for us” are also covenant language; what is being proclaimed here is God’s undertaking to uphold and protect us when people and circumstances are threatening, to provide for us as long as our earthly pilgrimage lasts, and to lead us finally into the full enjoyment of himself, however many obstacles may seem at present to stand in the way

of our getting there. The simple statement “God is for us” is in truth one of the richest and weightiest utterances that the Bible contains.

What does it mean when I am able to say “God is for me”? The answer is seen in Psalm 56, where the declaration “God is for me” (v. 9) is the hinge on which everything turns. The psalmist has his back to the wall (“my enemies trample upon me all day long, for many fight against me proudly” [v. 2 RSV; compare vv. 5-6]). But the knowledge that God is on his side brings a note of triumph into his prayer. First, it assures him that God has not forgotten or overlooked his need. “Thou hast kept count of my tossings; put thou my tears in thy bottle [for preservation]! Are they not in thy book [permanently recorded]?” (v. 8 RSV). Second, it gives him confidence that “when I cry unto thee, then shall mine enemies turn back” (v. 9 KJV). Third, it gives a basis for the trust that quells panic. “When I am afraid, I put my trust in thee. . . . In God I trust without a fear. What can flesh do to me?” (vv. 3-4 RSV). Whatever “flesh”—or “man,” as it is put in verse 11—may do to the psalmist from the outside, so to speak, in the deepest sense nothing can touch him, for his real life is the inward life of fellowship with a loving God, and the God who loves him will preserve that life whatever happens.

Incidentally, Psalm 56 also helps answer the question, Who are the “us” whom God is “for”? The psalmist displays three qualities which together mark out the true believer. First, he *praises*, and what he praises is God’s *word* (vv. 4, 10)—that is, he attends to God’s revelation and venerates God in it and according to it, rather than indulging his own unchecked theological fancies. Second, he *prays*, and the desire that prompts his prayer is for communion with God as life’s goal and end—“that I may walk before God” (v. 13). Third, he *pays*—pays his vows, that is, of faithfulness and thanksgiving (vv. 12-13). The praising, praying, thankful, faithful person has on him the marks of being a child of God.

What, now, was Paul’s purpose in asking his question? He was (and is) countering *fear*—the timid Christian’s fear of the forces which he feels are massed against him, the forces, we might say of *him*, or *her*, or *them*. Paul knows that there is always some person, or group of persons, whose ridicule, displeasure or hostile reaction the Christian feels unable to face. Paul knows that sooner or later this becomes a problem for every Christian, including those who before conversion did not care what anyone said or thought about them, and he knows how inhibiting and desolating such fear can be. But he knows too how to answer it.

Think! says Paul in effect. God is for you; you see what that means; now reckon up who is against you, and ask yourself how the two sides compare. (Note, the translation “who *can be* against us” is wrong, and misses Paul’s point: what he asks for is a realistic review of the opposition, human and demonic, not a romantic pretense that it does not exist. Opposition is a fact: the Christian who is not conscious of being opposed had better watch himself, for he is in danger. Such unrealism is no requirement of Christian discipleship, but is rather a mark of failure in it.)

Are you afraid of “them”? Paul asks. You need not be, any more than Moses needed to be afraid of Pharaoh after God had said to him, “I will be with you” (Ex 3:12). Paul is calling on his readers to make the kind of calculation that Hezekiah made: “Do not be afraid or discouraged because of the king of Assyria and the vast army with him, for there is a greater power with us than with him. . . . With us is the LORD our God to help us and to fight our battles” (2 Chron 32:7-8). Toplady, who is the poet of Christian assurance in the same sense as Watts is the poet of God’s sovereignty and Charles Wesley the poet of the new creation, voices the realization to which Paul’s question seeks to lead us:

*A sovereign protector I have,
Unseen, yet for ever at hand;
Unchangeably faithful to save,
Almighty to rule and command.
He smiles, and my comforts abound;
His grace as the dew shall descend,
And walls of salvation surround
The soul He delights to defend.*

Grasp this, says Paul; hold on to it; let this certainty make its impact on you in relation to what you are up against at this very moment; and you will find in thus knowing God as your sovereign protector, irrevocably committed to you in the covenant of grace, both freedom from fear and new strength for the fight.

NO GOOD THING WITHHELD

Second: “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”



The thought expressed by Paul's second question is that *no good thing will finally be withheld from us*. He conveys this thought by pointing to the adequacy of God as our *sovereign benefactor* and to the decisiveness of his *redeeming work* for us.

Three comments will bring out the force of Paul's argument.

Note, first, what Paul implies about the *costliness* of our redemption. "He did not spare his own Son." In saving us, God went to the limit. What more could he have given for us? What more had he to give? We cannot know what Calvary cost the Father, any more than we can know what Jesus felt as he tasted the penalty due to our sins. "We may not know, we cannot tell what pains he had to bear." Yet we can say this: that if the measure of love is what it gives, then there never was such love as God showed to sinners at Calvary, nor will any subsequent love-gift to us cost God so much. So if God has already commended his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us (5:8), it is believable, to say the least, that he will go on to give us "all things" besides. Most Christians know the fearful feeling that God may not have anything more for them beyond what they have already received; a thoughtful look at Calvary should banish this mood.

But this is not all. Note, second, what Paul implies about the *effectiveness* of our redemption. "God," he says, "gave him up *for us all*"—and this fact is itself the guarantee that "all things" will be given us, because they all come to us as the direct fruit of Christ's death. We have just said that the greatness of God's giving on the cross makes his further giving (if the words may be allowed) natural and likely, but what we must note now is that the unity of God's saving purpose makes such further giving necessary, and therefore certain.

At this point the New Testament view of the cross involves more than is sometimes realized. That the apostolic writers present the death of Christ as the ground and warrant of God's offer of forgiveness, and that we enter into forgiveness through repentance and faith in Christ, will not be disputed. But does this mean that, as a loaded gun is only potentially explosive, and an act of pulling the trigger is needed to make it go off, so Christ's death achieved only a possibility of salvation, needing an exercise of faith on our part to trigger it off and make it actual?

If so, then it is not strictly Christ's death that saves us at all, any more than it is loading the gun that makes it fire: strictly speaking, we save ourselves by our faith, and for all we know, Christ's death might not have saved

anyone, since it might have been the case that nobody believed the gospel. But that is not how the New Testament sees it. The New Testament view is that the death of Christ has actually saved “us all”—all, that is to say, whom God foreknew, and has called and justified, and will in due course glorify. For our faith, which from the human point of view is the means of salvation, is from God’s point of view part of salvation, and is as directly and completely God’s gift to us as is the pardon and peace of which faith lays hold.

Psychologically, faith is our own act, but the theological truth about it is that it is God’s work in us: our faith, and our new relationship with God as believers, and all the divine gifts that are enjoyed within this relationship, were all alike secured for us by Jesus’ death on the cross. For the cross was not an isolated event; it was, rather, the focal point in God’s eternal plan to save his elect, and it ensured and guaranteed first the calling (the bringing to faith, through the gospel in the mind and the Holy Spirit in the heart), and then the justification, and finally the glorification, of all for whom, specifically and personally, Christ died.

Now we see why the Greek of this verse says literally (and so the KJV renders it), *how shall he not* with him also give us all things? It is simply impossible for him not to do this, for Christ and “all things” go together as ingredients in the single gift of eternal life and glory, and the giving of Christ for us, to remove the “sin barrier” by substitutionary atonement, has effectively opened the door to our being given all the rest. The saving purpose of God, from eternal election to final glory, is one, and it is vital for both our understanding and our assurance that we should not lose sight of the links that bind together its various stages and parts. Which leads to our next point.

Note, third, what Paul implies about the consequences of our redemption. God, he says, will with Christ give us “all things.” What does that cover? Calling, justification, glorification (which in v. 30 includes everything from the new birth to the resurrection of the body) have already been mentioned, and so throughout Romans 8 has the many-sided ministry of the Holy Spirit. Here is wealth indeed, and from other Scriptures we could add to it.

We could, for instance, dwell on our Lord’s assurance that when disciples seek first “the kingdom of God and his righteousness,” then “all these things” (their material necessities) will be providentially supplied (Mt 6:33)—a truth to which he pointed again, startlingly, when he said,



“There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions [!], and in the age to come eternal life” (Mk 10:29-30 RSV).

Or we could dwell on the thought that “all things” means all the good, not that we can think of, but that *God* can think of, as infinite wisdom and power guide his generosity.

But we shall come closest to Paul’s mind if we understand this phrase as prompted, like the “therefore” of verse 1, by Paul’s special brand of pastoral logic, which counters by anticipation wrong inferences that his readers might otherwise draw. The wrong inference which he was countering in verse 1 (and which we shall see him counter again in v. 33) was that the Christian’s sins of infirmity may endanger God’s continued acceptance of him; the wrong inference that he is countering here is that following Christ will mean the loss of things worth having, uncompensated by any corresponding gain—which, if true, would make Christian discipleship, like the Roundheads in *1066 and All That*, “right but repulsive.” Paul’s assurance that with Christ God will give us “all things” corrects this inference by anticipation, for it proclaims the adequacy of God as our sovereign benefactor, whose way with his servants leaves no ground for any sense or fear of real personal impoverishment at any stage. Let us work this out.

The Christian, like Israel at Sinai, faces the exclusive claim of the first commandment. God said to Israel: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. *You shall have no other gods before me*” (Ex 20:2-3; RV renders the last words “beside Me”).

This command, like all the Decalogue, was couched in negative form because it came as a summons to stop living in the old way and make a fresh start. Its background was the polytheism of Egypt, which the Israelites knew already, and that of Canaan, which was to confront them very shortly. Polytheism, the worship of many gods, was in fact universal throughout the ancient Near East. The idea behind it was that every god’s power was limited by the power of his fellows. The corn god, or the fertility god, for instance, could never exercise the functions of the storm god or the god of the seas. A god who made his home in one particular shrine or sacred grove or tree could only act to help men on his own home ground; elsewhere, other gods were supreme.

Therefore, it was not enough to worship one god only; one needed, so far as possible, to get on good terms with them all, or else one would constantly be exposed to the ill will of gods whom one had neglected, with consequent loss of the good things that it was the special prerogative of those neglected deities to bestow. It was the pressure of these ideas that in later years made the temptation to the Israelites to worship “other gods” so strong. No doubt in Egypt they had come to take the polytheistic outlook for granted, however much or little they may have joined in worshipping the gods of the Egyptians. But the first commandment clamped down absolutely upon this way of thinking and behaving. “Thou shalt have no other gods beside Me.”

Note, now, how God deals with this question of dividing allegiance between himself and “other gods.” He puts it to Israel as an issue not of theology but of loyalty; a matter not of the mind simply, but of the heart. Elsewhere in Scripture, notably in the Psalms and Isaiah, we find him telling his people explicitly that to worship pagan gods is madness, because they are in fact no gods; but he is not making that point here. For the moment he leaves open the question whether other gods have any existence or not. He frames the first commandment not to settle that issue but to settle the question of loyalty. God does not say, “There are no other gods beside me for you to have”; he simply says, “You shall have no other gods but me.” And he grounds his claim on the fact that he is their God who brought them out of Egypt. It is as if he said, “By saving you from Pharaoh and his hosts by my mighty hand and stretched-out arm, by signs and wonders, by the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, I gave you a sample of what I can do for you, and showed you clearly enough that anywhere, at any time, against any foe, under any privation whatsoever, I can protect you, provide for you, and give you all that makes up true life. You need no god but me; therefore you are not to be betrayed into looking for any god but me; you are to serve me, and me alone.”

In other words, in the first commandment God told Israel to serve him exclusively, not only because they owed it to him, but also because he was worthy of their entire and exclusive trust. They were to bow to his absolute authority over them on the basis of confidence in his complete adequacy for them. And, clearly, these two things needed to go together; for they could hardly have been wholehearted in serving him to the exclusion of other gods if they had doubted his all-sufficiency to provide whatever they might need.

Now, if you are a Christian, you know that you, too, are being claimed in the same way. God did not spare his Son, but delivered him up for you; Christ loved you, and gave himself for you, to save you out of the spiritual Egypt of bondage to sin and Satan. The first commandment, in its positive form, is put to you by Christ himself: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment” (Mt 22:37-38). The claim rests on the right of both creation and redemption, and it cannot be evaded.

You know what kind of life it is that Christ calls you, as his disciple, to live. His own example and teaching in the Gospels (to look no further in the book of God than that) make it abundantly clear. You are called to go through this world as a pilgrim, a mere temporary resident, traveling light, and willing, as Christ directs, to do what the rich young ruler refused to do: give up material wealth and the security it provides and live in a way that involves you in poverty and loss of possessions. Having your treasure in heaven, you are not to budget for treasure on earth, nor for a high standard of living—you may well be required to forego both. You are called to follow Christ, carrying your cross.

What does that mean? Well, the only persons in the ancient world who carried a cross were condemned criminals going out to execution; each, like our Lord himself, was made to carry the cross on which he was to be crucified. So, what Christ means is that you must accept for yourself the position of such a person, in the sense that you renounce all future expectations from society and learn to take it as a matter of course if the people around you give you the cold shoulder and view you with contempt and disgust, as an alien sort of being. You may often find yourself treated in this fashion if you are loyal to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Again: you are called to be a meek person, not always standing up for your rights, nor concerned to get your own back, nor troubled in your heart by ill treatment and personal slights (though, if you are normally sensitive, these things are bound to hurt you at the top level of consciousness); but you are simply to commit your cause to God and leave it to him to vindicate you if and when he sees fit. Your attitude to other people, good and bad, nice and nasty, both Christians and unbelievers, is to be that of the good Samaritan toward the Jew in the gutter—that is to say, your eyes must be open to see others’ needs, both spiritual and material; your heart must be ready to care for needy souls when you find them; your mind must be

alert to plan out the best way to help them; and your will must be set against the trick that we are all so good at—"passing the buck," going by on the other side and contracting out of situations of need where sacrificial help is called for.

None of this, of course, is strange to any of us. We know what kind of life Christ calls us to; we often preach and talk to each other about it. But do we live it? Well, look at the churches. Observe the shortage of ministers and missionaries, especially men; the luxury goods in Christian homes; the fund-raising problems of Christian societies; the readiness of Christians in all walks of life to grumble about their salaries; the lack of concern for the old and lonely and for anyone outside the circle of "sound believers."

We are unlike the Christians of New Testament times. Our approach to life is conventional and static; theirs was not. The thought of "safety first" was not a drag on their enterprise as it is on ours. By being exuberant, unconventional and uninhibited in living by the gospel they turned their world upside down, but you could not accuse us twentieth-century Christians of doing anything like that. Why are we so different? Why, compared with them, do we appear as no more than halfway Christians? Whence comes the nervous, dithery, take-no-risks mood that mars so much of our discipleship? Why are we not free enough from fear and anxiety to allow ourselves to go full stretch in following Christ?

One reason, it seems, is that in our heart of hearts we are afraid of the consequences of going the whole way into the Christian life. We shrink from accepting burdens of responsibility for others because we fear we should not have strength to bear them. We shrink from accepting a way of life in which we forfeit material security because we are afraid of being left stranded. We shrink from being meek because we are afraid that if we do not stand up for ourselves we shall be trodden down and victimized, and end up among life's casualties and failures. We shrink from breaking with social conventions in order to serve Christ because we fear that if we did, the established structure of our life would collapse all around us, leaving us without a footing anywhere.

It is these half-conscious fears, this dread of insecurity, rather than any deliberate refusal to face the cost of following Christ, which make us hold back. We feel that the risks of out-and-out discipleship are too great for us to take. In other words, we are not persuaded of the adequacy of God to provide for all the needs of those who launch out wholeheartedly on the

deep sea of unconventional living in obedience to the call of Christ. Therefore, we feel obliged to break the first commandment just a little, by withdrawing a certain amount of our time and energy from serving God in order to serve mammon. This, at bottom, seems to be what is wrong with us. We are afraid to go all the way in accepting the *authority* of God, because of our secret *uncertainty* as to his adequacy to look after us if we do.

Now let us call a spade a spade. The name of the game we are playing is *unbelief*, and Paul's "he will give us *all things*" stands as an everlasting rebuke to us. Paul is telling us that there is no ultimate loss or irreparable impoverishment to be feared; if God denies us something, it is only in order to make room for one or other of the things he has in mind. Are we, perhaps, still assuming that a person's life consists, partly at any rate, in the things he possesses?

But that is to budget for discontent, and to block the blessing—for Paul's "all things" is not a plethora of material possessions, and the passion for possessions has to be cast out of us in order to let the "all things" in. For this phrase has to do with knowing and enjoying God, and not with anything else. The meaning of "he will give us all things" can be put thus: one day we shall see that nothing—literally nothing—which could have increased our eternal happiness has been denied us, and that nothing—literally nothing—that could have reduced that happiness has been left with us. What higher assurance do we want than that?

Yet when it comes to cheerful self-abandonment in Christ's service we dither. Why? Out of unbelief, pure and simple.

Do we fear that God lacks *strength* or *wisdom* for fulfilling his declared purpose? But it is he who made the worlds, and rules them, and ordains all that takes place, from the careers of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar to the fall of a sparrow.

Or do we fear that he is *infirm of purpose*, and that as good folks with good intentions sometimes let down their friends, so our God may fail to carry out his good intentions toward us? But Paul states it as a fact that (following the RSV of Rom 8:28) "in *everything* God works for good with those who love him." And who are you to suppose that you will be the first exception, the first person to find God wavering and failing to keep his word? Do you not see how you dishonor God by such fears?

Or do we doubt his *constancy*, suspecting that he has "emerged" or "developed" or "died" in the interim between Bible times and our own (all these

ideas have been explored in modern times), and that now he is no longer quite the God with whom the saints of Scripture had to do? But “I the LORD do not change” (Mal 3:6), and “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb 13:8).

Have you been holding back from a risky, costly course to which you know in your heart God has called you? Hold back no longer. Your God is faithful to you, and he is adequate for you. You will never need more than he can supply, and what he supplies, both materially and spiritually, will always be enough for the present. “No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Ps 84:11 RSV). “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor 10:13 RSV). “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor 12:9). Think on these things!—and let your thoughts drive out your inhibitions about serving your Master.

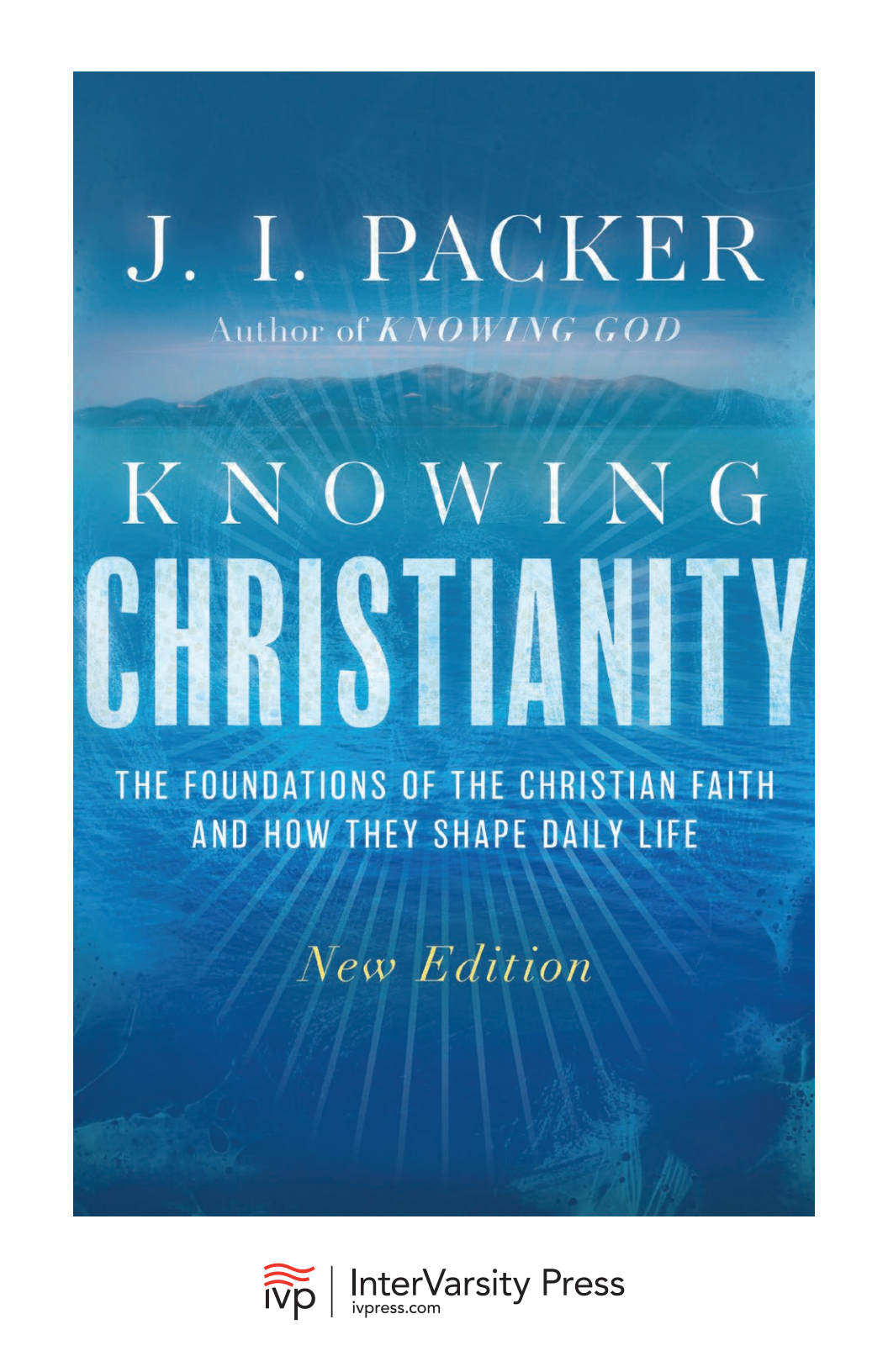
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Author of *KNOWING GOD*

KNOWING CHRISTIANITY

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH
AND HOW THEY SHAPE DAILY LIFE

New Edition



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HIS ASCENSION, OUR FUTURE HOPE

THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST today by Christian preachers and teachers tends to move straight from the historical fact of the resurrection to the contemporary encounter with the risen Lord. This sequence of themes is meant partly to challenge skeptics who deny miracles and partly to engage liberals, formalists, moralists, Jews, New Agers and adherents of other religions for whom the Jesus of history is a great teacher and a wonderful example but not a living Savior. Let us by all means go on telling people that Jesus' resurrection is one of the best-attested facts of history, for indeed it is. Let us also continue to tell them that Jesus is alive, well, accessible and present with every believer as guide and counselor, master and friend, for that is true too. But let us not lose sight of the fact that the resurrection was the prelude to the ascension. We should never forget that from the moment Jesus left the tomb, he was heading for the heavenly throne. The forty days on earth should be seen as a stopover en route.

RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

The Apostles' Creed ties Christ's resurrection directly to his ascension and heavenly reign. "The third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty." The resurrection began and the ascension completed his return to the glory he knew before.



Jesus' first conversation after being raised from death showed this clearly. Mary of Magdala, meeting him alive again, wanted to embrace him. Matthew 28:9 says that she and the other Mary did what one did in those days to show affection to a superior: they got down and grasped his feet. But Jesus said to them, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, 'I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God'" (Jn 20:17, NASB). Jesus' words were not a cold-hearted brushoff but a compassionate reeducation. The Marys, and the rest of his disciples with them, had to get used to practicing fellowship with a Savior whom they could not touch or even see, for he would shortly ascend to heaven and so withdraw from human sight till his second coming.

INCARNATION AND MYSTERY

The resurrection and ascension involve mystery—basically, the mystery of incarnation itself. What immediate changes in the human body of the Son of God did his resurrection bring? Continuity was evident: the risen Lord looked and sounded the same as before; he was solid flesh and bone, ate food (Lk 24:39-43), and could be touched and held (Mt 28:9; Jn 20:27). But change was evident too: he could vanish and appear as it were from nowhere, even passing through locked doors (Lk 24:31, 36; Jn 20:19, 26). Some guess that Jesus' body became immaterial and invisible at the moment of the resurrection but rematerialized in some way for each of his postresurrection encounters. That certainly goes beyond the biblical evidence and arguably raises more problems than it removes. It is soberer and probably sounder to think of the resurrection as the reanimating, with enhanced powers, of a visible, material, physical organism that was destined for further transformation when the Savior, whose body it was, ascended to his Father's throne.



What exactly happened to Jesus in the ascension? The disciples' perception of this was that after he commissioned and blessed them (Lk 24:50; Acts 1:8), a cloud came down (a sign of the Father being present to act, as at the transfiguration, Luke 9:34-36), and Jesus went up—up into the cloud, leaving them staring skyward (Acts 1:9-10). That upward movement signified not only that the Father was withdrawing the Son from this world order and taking him home but also that he was advancing the Son to new dignity (as when we speak of someone's "going up in the world"). So Christ's ascension implies Christ's ascendancy; it is as if, having traveled successfully in the firm's interest, the Son was now recalled to headquarters to become managing director.

Thus the risen Lamb returned to glory to be enthroned at the Father's right hand, in the Grand Vizier position at the ancient Persian court, the place of executive government in the monarch's name. And there he reigns today, as Lord of the entire universe. As Jesus said himself, the Father has committed all authority in heaven and on earth into his hand (Mt 28:18; Jn 5:20-23, 26-27). And "he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:25).

But what should we make of Jesus' bodily exit in the cloud? It was certainly miraculous, involving a unique exercise of divine power, just as his entry into the world by virgin birth had done, but what sort of miracle was it? We should not think of Jesus as the first space traveler, zooming instantaneously through light years of distance away from us. We should find our clue, rather, in the realization that after his resurrection the three dimensions of space that confine us confined him no more. C. S. Lewis spoke of the Son being withdrawn through a "fold" in space, like an actor who, having taken his bow, appears to vanish into a fold in the stage curtain (actually, of course, stepping into the gap between the two curtains). This image gives us perhaps the best idea we can form of the mystery involved here.



The fact to be grasped is that though Jesus' *personal* presence is now available through the Holy Spirit to all who call on him everywhere, his *bodily* presence is gone. Physically, Jesus has returned to heaven, there to serve as his Father's right-hand man (how apt that phrase!) until he reappears to bring judgment.

No doubt Jesus' body in heaven is now "glorious" (Phil 3:21), shining as it did at the transfiguration. Something more has happened to it through the ascension, though we will have to wait till we ourselves get to heaven to find out just what.

REIGN AND INTERCESSION

The key to understanding Jesus' present life in heaven, and with it his precious life on earth, is to grasp that he is there, as once he was here, to intercede for us. *Us* in this phrase, as always in the New Testament, means not the human race as such but past, present and future believers, all whom God has chosen to save. He intercedes in our interest in a way that guarantees our welfare by ensuring that what he died to secure for us actually becomes ours. The Son does not supplicate the Father on our behalf in uncertainty as to whether his requests will be granted. He speaks to the Father from the throne on which the Father has set him, fully aware that his will for our good is the Father's will also. Jesus' ongoing intercession for his people is therefore sovereignly efficacious.

What benefits does his intercession bring us? Quite simply, every benefit that relates to our relationship with our triune God, from every standpoint, at every level. On the one hand, Jesus' intercession maintains our justified status (Rom 8:34). On the other hand, Jesus' intercession ensures that when we approach his throne in our weakness and inadequacy, we find it to be a "throne of grace" where we "receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need" (Heb 4:16). No spiritual benefit of any kind comes to any



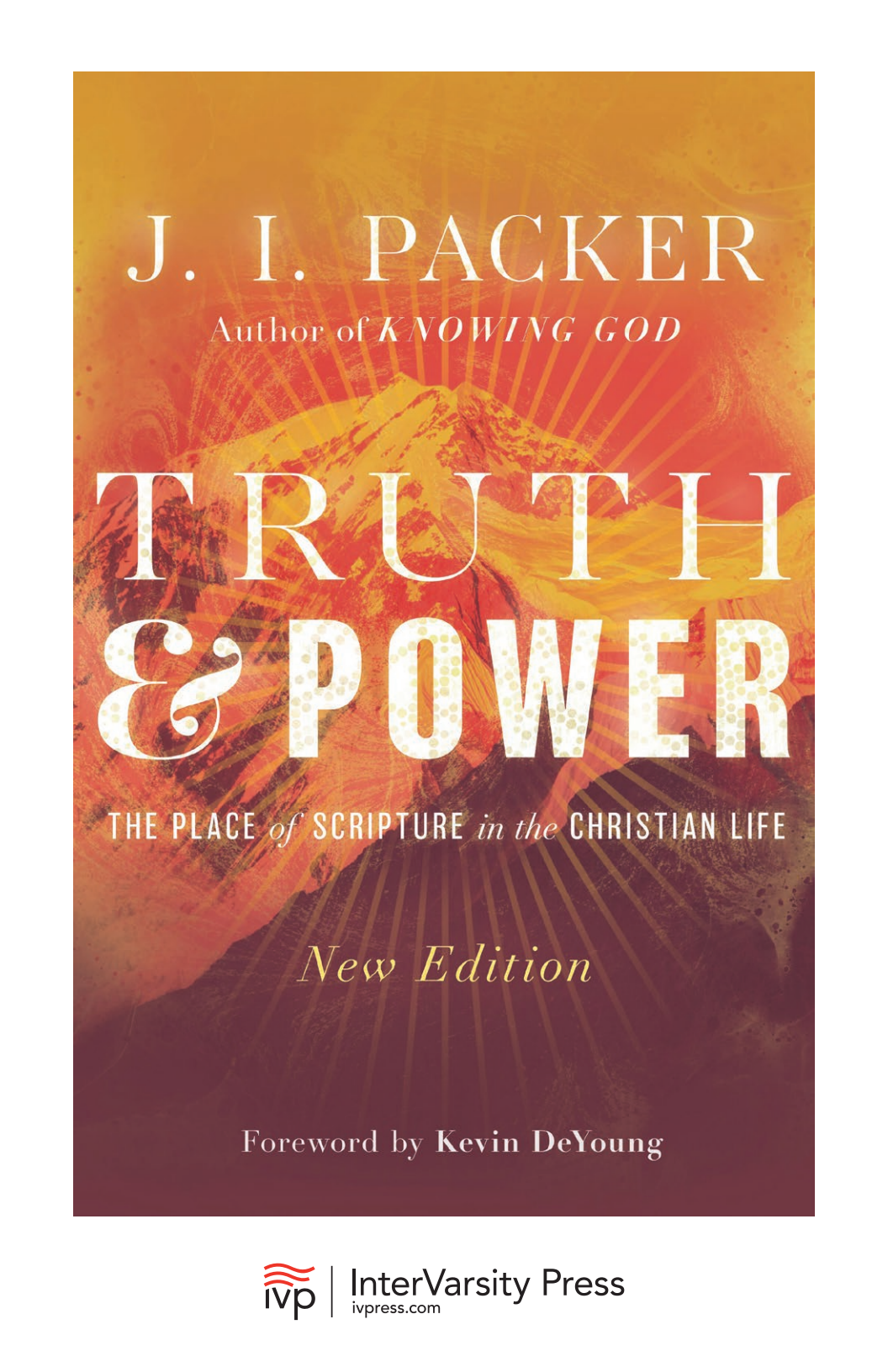
child of God apart from the mediatorial intercession of Jesus the Lord.

Because Jesus has ascended to heaven, we can be sure that we too have a hope of heaven. On this Jesus was explicit and the whole New Testament is emphatic. “Father,” prayed Jesus, “I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory” (Jn 17:24). “We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is,” declares John (1 Jn 3:2). For Christians the life to come will be the fullest enjoyment of the covenant-care relationship proclaimed in the precious words “The LORD is my shepherd” (Ps 23:1), for “the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev 7:17). This hope, which brings joy at all times and in all circumstances, allows us to approach our own mortality with a forthright boldness that is unique to Christian believers and stands in stark contrast to the common attitude in Western society.



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The background of the book cover is a vibrant, textured illustration. It features a mountain range in shades of orange, red, and yellow, with a bright sunburst or starburst pattern emanating from behind the peaks. The overall color palette is warm, ranging from deep reds and oranges to bright yellows and whites.

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Author of *KNOWING GOD*

TRUTH & POWER

THE PLACE *of* SCRIPTURE *in the* CHRISTIAN LIFE

New Edition

Foreword by Kevin DeYoung



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defending their views, and what in the way of constructive discussion may lie beyond this preliminary entrenchment does not yet appear.

Because evangelicals today have watched so many lapse from thoroughgoing biblical faith, and because they see how much depends on whether the Bible can be trusted or not, and because so many vested interests, denominational and institutional, are involved in the discussion, feelings and fears often run high, and this could be dangerous in several ways. I focus now on just one of the dangers, that of so concentrating on the tactics of the battle as to forget the strategy of the campaign and the kind of victory that is needed.

When a battle is on, those involved tend to think exclusively of winning and to lose sight of the cause for which the battle is being fought. I recall the days when the Second World War was drawing to its end and Allied leaders began to say that, having won the war, our next and harder task was to win the peace. But not enough thought was given to winning the peace, and the record of events during the past fifty years shows that it was not won. In retrospect it almost looks as if we forgot what we had been fighting for. I am afraid that something similar might happen in the battle for the Bible. So I will now do what I can to ward off this danger, by asking you to raise your eyes above the battlefield and think about a series of strategic questions that pinpoint the significance of the debate for the theological and spiritual health of churches and Christians.

My questions were suggested to me by the psalmist's prayer "Give me understanding, that I may keep thy law and observe it with my whole heart" (Ps 119:34 RSV). I should like to dwell on these words a moment before we go further.

WORD AND SPIRIT

How well do you know Psalm 119? Those who are wise come to know it very well, for they constantly seek to pray it. Why? Because it is a



model, giant-size (176 verses long, twice the length of any other psalm and ten to twenty times the length of most), of that on which the wise know their well-being depends—namely, attention to what God has said. The psalmist celebrates the gift of divine instruction as “a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (v. 105), without which he would be in the dark and unable to find his way. He hails God’s Word as the means whereby he comes to know, love and serve the God who gave it, and he admits that he would in every sense be lost without it. His prayer for understanding springs from this admission, for he recognizes that to understand God’s Word—which means to understand his own existence in the light of God’s Word—is to know the way of life. Lack of understanding of God’s Word is itself a state of death. The wise identify. They see that the fear of the Lord that is the beginning of wisdom starts with the understanding that God alone can give. So they follow the psalmist in cleaving to God’s Word and in asking its author to interpret it to them in its bearing on their lives.

As writing, the psalm dazzles. It divides into twenty-two sections, each marked by a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet and each consisting of eight verses starting with that letter. All but one of its 176 verses refer in some way to what the psalmist variously calls God’s “word,” “words,” “precepts,” “statutes,” “law,” “promise,” “testimonies” and “ordinances,” which spell out God’s “ways” and his “righteousness,” that is, his revealed will for people, and the fertility of thought with which changes are rung on the theme of response to what God has said is amazing. Psalm 119 is a very clever composition. Indeed, it is more than that. It is a transcript of 176 distinct moments of devotion to God, and as such it is awesomely poignant. One wonders how far this heroic combination of ardor and humility, resolution and dependence, trouble and triumph, distress at the ways of people and delight in the ways of God, was realized in the psalmist’s own life (for psalmists, like other poets, may perhaps verbalize beyond their experience). One



wonders if it has ever been fully realized except in the heart of our Lord Jesus Christ himself. Augustine's idea that the Psalms are essentially prayers of Jesus Christ is surely in place here. What this psalm shows us is the perfection of the perfect heart in its unwavering openness to all that God teaches in the Scriptures, and the Gospels show that our Master was mastered completely by what came to him from his Bible. So must we seek to be, for that is the way we are called to go. Jesus' disciples must be Scripture's pupils.

Psalm 119 is the Bible's own exposition, written in advance, of Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that all Scripture, being inspired by God, is profitable "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (RSV); and Paul's statement is the Bible's own summary of what this psalm is showing us.

"Give me understanding," prays the psalmist. Under many kinds of pressure and in a turmoil of emotions, he yet holds fast to the Word of the Lord and rests his hopes in the Lord of the Word. Distrusting himself and his own thoughts, however, he prays for understanding five times (vv. 34, 73, 125, 144, 169). He fears lest he should misconceive or misapply God's teaching, or narrow it unduly. He wants to comprehend its full range and thrust as it bears on his thoughts, purposes, attitudes, reactions, relationships, view of things and people, and he wants to comprehend it so that he may conform to it: "Give me understanding, *that I may keep thy law.*" Every day this should be your prayer, and mine too, for it is not enough for us to know the text of Scripture if we fail to understand it, so that we think we are living by it when we are not.

The New Testament identifies the ministry of interpretation and application for which the psalmist asks as the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is "the anointing which . . . teaches you about everything" (1 Jn 2:27 RSV), using as his means of instruction—his textbook, one might say—the contents of the Old and New Testaments.



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