

KNOWING & DOING

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Time with God: An Interview with J.I. Packer

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On September 26, 2008, J.I. Packer took time to sit down and answer questions from C.S. Lewis Fellows and pastors in the Washington, D.C., area. The following is an excerpt from that session. Audio of the full interview can be found on our website at www.cslewisinstitute.org.

Which writers have influenced you the most, and which writers would you recommend?

Well, you ask which writers in my understanding of myself have had most influence on me—that's a different question from which writers would I recommend. I'm going to answer the autobiographical question first, and then I will decide whether I'm going to say anything more. John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Bunyan (17th-century Puritan), John Owen, Richard Baxter (two more 17th-century Puritans), Abraham Kuyper (a Dutchman), C.S. Lewis, and C.S. Lewis's buddy Charles Williams. Little is known about Williams, but he has had a tremendous influence on me, not so much in forming my doctrinal understanding, as in giving me imaginative projections which give color to the doctrinal understanding. In other words, it's Williams's fiction first, and then his bits of biography and theology afterward, that have made the difference. And people ordinarily have their own favorites among the Inklings. Well, Williams is my favorite, although he's the most uneven of them. Lewis, however, is the one who I think has given me most, but I love them both.

Is there anyone else? ... Yes, the first Bishop of Liverpool, John Charles Ryle, who was an evangelical, popular writer, extremely strong devotionally, his roots well down in the Puritan and Reformed perspective, a wonderful communicator in my judgment. And his judgment on just about everything seems to me to have been as sound as a bell. He has given me a great deal. That's the personal answer.

And then, whom do I recommend? I will make a recommendation: Get the C.S. Lewis corpus, that's the corpus of his theological writings, an exculpatory in apologetics. Get that under your belt. Read John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, both parts, once a year. I do that; I don't see why you shouldn't. Dip into Luther and Calvin and see whether you like them. Liking does actually play a big part, I think, in the appreciation of both. Some find both of them difficult, and some find both of them enormously congenial. Try yourself out by dipping into both of them.

Beyond that ... I'm going to be very bold and lapse into bad manners and recommend two of my own books—apologies in advance—but I think that you'll benefit from my book *Knowing God*, which has had a very wide ministry over the nearly forty years that it's been going. I also think you will get benefit from my book *Concise Theology*,



published by Tyndale House, which is meant to be a popular survey of the whole of Christian doctrine. I think that it's more likely than not that you will get help from my attempt briefly to survey the whole range of Christian theology in a Bible-based way and, as far as possible, to make it sing in the course of the exposition of it. Well, that's enough of that, you will agree.

Would you be willing to share about your own time alone with God and the materials you use devotionally?

I don't think I've got anything out of the ordinary to share. Like other Christians, I try to get up in the morning early enough to start the day with God and the Bible, shall I say with God through the Bible. I've been telling people for years that every Christian worth his salt ought to read the Bible from cover to cover every year. And I do that myself by using the One-Year Bible that Tyndale House publishes. I don't know whether you know it; it gives you every day a hunk of the Old Testament, a passage from the New Testament, a psalm or part of a psalm, and something from the Proverbs. And you do get through the whole Bible, and the Psalter twice, in the course of a year.

You'll find that there are any number of remarkable aptnesses in the way that the Old Testament, New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs passages fit together. It's a lovely tool for devotional use.

I read the Bible, and as I read it, I ask questions in order to get my thoughts into shape. I think when one reads the Bible one ought always to be asking questions, and my questions are basically three: (1) What does this show me about God? (2) What does this teach me about life? (3) What direction does this give me for my life today?

And you'll need to go through questions 1 and 2 before you're qualified really to answer question 3. Otherwise, you'll answer question 3 on the basis of impressionism, and you will in the outcome miss a great deal of what each passage has to say to you.

I expect you've proved this in experience. What does it tell you about God and what does it tell you about life and its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows, with its temptations and its battles, with its responsibilities, and so on and so forth? There's a lot of thinking to do, but it's fruitful thinking. Whether I do it well, of course, is another question, but this is what I try to do.

Then, it comes around in due course that it's breakfast time and on with the day's work. I try during the day to remember whom I belong to and whom I'm serving. I do try to cultivate, to practice what they call "arrow prayers," when you're constantly making remarks or offering questions or reactions or praises to God as you go along. It's called in some circles "the practice of the presence of God." I'm not very good at it, but I try to do it, and it does become more and more of a habit the more you try. So that I'm attempting, you see, to live consciously in God's presence as the day goes on.

In relationships I try to remember that I must behave godly, and I try to control my tongue and my temper and sometimes my impatience. And certainly when I'm in any sort of relation to another human being, I try to focus my interest on that human being and ask myself, do I have any ministry to this human being? The answer may be yes, the answer may be no, but at least one tries to act friendly and respectful and affirmative and warm in all these relationships.

I have to fight my natural tendencies to shy withdrawal; that's the error in my make-up, and I have to counter it; well, I try to counter it. None of us ought to allow ourselves to fall victims to our own temperaments, so it's rather important that at some stage we should do an inventory of our temperament and discover what our natural inclinations are and discern where there are weaknesses and where there are changes that could be made with advantage.

And then eventually comes bedtime, but by bedtime, I am personally bushed! So I don't attempt to do any serious praying at night. I wish God good-night, and off to sleep.

What counsel would you give to those involved in church planting and disciple making?

I would say, understand that making disciples means making *learners*. A friend of mine, recently deceased, published a book on this subject with this arresting title, *Go Make Learners*. That was his way of paraphrasing "Go and make disciples." Disciples are learners. That's what the word means, and of course there won't be learning unless there's teaching.

When I was a theological student at a liberal college learning—oh yes, I did learn some things there—but I learned by reaction; that is, I learned by asking myself after each lecture, why did I disagree with so much of that?, and making myself answer the question thoroughly. Well, there came a moment of joy from the elaborate acri-

age of rather dreary liberal instruction in this seminary, when a visiting lecturer said that in the pastoral ministry there are three priorities: the first is teach, and the second is teach, and the third is teach; and I thought that was a wonderful way of expressing a wonderful truth. It seemed obvious to me before ever I got into pastoral ministry that that has to be the case. Since I got into ministry, and my ministry has had a pastoral dimension over the years, I've had occasion to prove that yes, indeed, that's the way it must be.

There are existing patterns of ministry that are intended to inspire and encourage and—how can I say?—warm the heart, and all that kind of thing, but without teaching, patterns where the truths that are handled are simple truths that everybody knows already, and they are just there in the sermon as a launch pad for the application. Well, I have in my hand the Bible. This is God's lesson or series of lessons, if you like. I want to teach the truth that's in the Bible. I want to teach the range of the books and the contents of the books that make up the Bible. I want people to thoroughly understand what the various writers of the Bible were concerned to convey, and I try to ensure that in every bit of ministry I do, whatever else the ministry is intended to accomplish, that there is real serious teaching at the heart of what I say. Teach, teach, teach. If you ask whether Packer supposes himself at this very moment to be teaching, the answer is, yes, he does. It becomes a mind-set and, seems to me, is the way of wisdom in church planting. You gather a little group of people, maybe, but people who are willing to be taught, and you work with them. You don't have to set yourself up on a pedestal, indeed, you're not likely to get very far if you do. You generate, rather, a sense of fellowship between you and them and them and each other, of course, and all together, you are moving forward into becoming a church. But *your* particular job as the church-planting agent is teach, teach, teach. Keep the people who are going to become the congregation learning, keep them aware that the Christian life really is meant to be a matter of learning, from the moment it starts to the grave, and ask for what in effect is a moral contract: I'm going to teach; I want you to agree that you'll come along with me and labor to learn.

Christianity needs to be *learned!* It isn't the religion that is instinctive to all good men, which is what liberals of the old generation used to think. It is a faith that has to be *taught!* Jesus knew what He was talking about when He said, "Go make *learners*." So this is the really big thing that I would say, which I don't find said in all the texts that I see—of course I don't see them all, but I do see some—texts about church planting and wisdom for doing it, texts about this, that, and the other, and that's my burden.

What's your perspective on how the culture in the United States affects Christians?

I would answer that off the top of my head by saying, everything, it seems to me, in U.S. culture conspires to make us worldly; worldly minded, preoccupied with the things—perfectly lawful things most of the time—that are involved in keeping going in this life. But these things *pre*-occupy us so that spiritual concerns just *don't* preoccupy us. And I think we've got to watch against the pressure of the world to make us worldly—we who live in North America.

I don't live in the United States, but I live in southern British Columbia; the United States is only half an hour's drive away, so I think I know pretty much what it's like living here. Let me elaborate a little. Material values are insidious. The bank balance, a nice home, getting on in terms of place and position in the firm or getting on with the business that you've started yourself, getting ahead—it's the preoccupation that will most certainly get hold of you if you don't deliberately set yourself to counter it. And you counter it by saying, "Now wait a minute. I am in this world to love and serve the God who saved me. I am in this world to help people any way that I can. These are my priorities. On the Lord's Day, for instance, I put fellowship with His people in church before the allurements of the countryside and the golf course and all that sort of thing. I try to get my priorities clear and stick to them in that way." That's the way, I think, that we learn to counter the pressure to be worldly, that is, simply living in terms of the set of values that unbelievers around us live by, and we just have to be disciplined about it because the pressure is constantly on.

What is your perspective on how spiritual darkness operates in the West?

My perspective can be stated quite briefly. I do believe that the world is full of hostile spiritual powers, just as the sixth chapter of Ephesians indicated when Paul wrote it nearly two thousand years ago. I don't think anything has changed there. I do believe, however, that Satan and his cohorts these days in North America

intend to keep out of sight. They don't always do that. There are cultural situations in Africa and in some equatorial and near-equatorial parts of the world where Satan and his hosts gain more by frightening people and having them running scared from morning to night, scared of evil spirits, than he would gain by keeping out of sight. So he has people running scared and scores that way.

But for us in the sophisticated West, he achieves far more by concealing himself and his spirits achieve far more by concealing themselves than by coming out into the open. So your textbook, to psyche you up and arm you for the real spiritual warfare, will be C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*. An all-time classic on the limited—but, within its limits, often effective—wisdom of Satan on how to achieve corrupting effects while keeping out of sight. The focus of spiritual warfare must be there whether we succeed in walking with God in a disciplined, consistent, holy way, despite all that the world throws at us and all the influences that might divert us from that, or whether Satan gets us down in relation to what we know we should be and had hoped to be. The purpose of Satan and his cohorts is to allure us into sin and unbelief. And the battle for us is to keep clear of both and continue believing and rejoicing and obeying and praying and living a holy life. ■■

What matters supremely, therefore, is not, in the last analysis, the fact that I know God, but the larger fact which underlies it—the fact that *He knows me*.

J. I. Packer



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