

The People Who Know Their God

Daniel 11:32 and others

Series: Loving God and Loving Others (Summer 2020)

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Topic: Loving God and others with our minds

Worship: Knowing You

Key Sentence: What were we made for? To know God!

Outline:

The people who know their God

I. have great energy for God (Daniel 11:32, Daniel 9:1-4)

II. have great thoughts of God (Daniel 4:24-25)

III. have great boldness for God (Daniel 3:15-18)

IV. have great contentment in God (Daniel 6:19-22)

Daniel 11:32 He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.

Daniel 9:1-3 In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, by descent a Mede, who was made king over the realm of the Chaldeans—²in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. ³Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting and sackcloth and ashes.

Daniel 4:24-25 this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, ²⁵that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.

Daniel 3:15-18 Now if you are ready when you hear the sound of the horn, pipe, lyre, trigon, harp, bagpipe, and every kind of music, to fall down and worship the image that I have made, well and good. But if you do not worship, you shall immediately be cast into a burning fiery furnace. And who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?" ¹⁶Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸But if not,

be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Daniel 6:19-23 Then, at break of day, the king arose and went in haste to the den of lions. ²⁰As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. The king declared to Daniel, “O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?” ²¹Then Daniel said to the king, “O king, live forever! ²²My God sent his angel and shut the lions’ mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm.” ²³Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.

The People Who Know Their God Daniel 11:32 and others

God is a master of the creative coincidence. Several months ago the elders conceived our series, “Practicing Love for God and Others,” to encourage believers to love God and others with our heads, hearts and hands. One of our goals was to recommend some really good books on these subjects, and we’ve done so. But as I thought of really good books on loving God with our minds, the first to come to mind was *Knowing God* by J. I. Packer. A recent shuffle of this summer’s messages moved the one featuring that book to this week. And this week, last Monday, J. I. Packer died at the age of ninety-three. The memorials to his life and influence have been widespread and heartfelt, and I would include my own life among those his work deeply influenced.

So let me begin with my story. I believe I had just turned twenty the summer I served as a ministry intern at Tower Hill Presbyterian Church in Red Bank, NJ. I’d been a believer about seven years at the time, and had been in college two years at Steven Institute in Hoboken. There the Lord had gotten hold of my life. He’d pulled me out of sin and depression, mostly through the ministry of the campus Christian group, the Stevens Christian Fellowship. I was housing with believers and involved daily in Bible Study, prayer and fellowship.

The summer before my junior year I applied to be a youth ministry intern at Tower Hill church. The job was pretty consuming. I believe I was paid \$200 for the summer and worked about 800 hours doing everything from youth group meetings to retreats to a youth-led Sunday morning service. But youth events don’t happen in the morning, and I was already a morning person.

One of my tasks for that summer was to prepare a talk for an early fall meeting of the Stevens Christian Fellowship back on campus. I had been tasked with describing the nature and attributes of God in thirty minutes. So I spent a lot of time in my mornings at home, reading and studying. I have a clear memory of myself as a long haired scraggly bearded kid, sitting on the floor in my parents’ living room, legs stretched out under the coffee table as I studied a new book someone had recommended, a book called *Knowing God*. Sitting on that floor whole new vistas and landscapes of truth and beauty opened before me, and I was mesmerized with awe and wonder before a holy God, my thoughts uplifted and formed by the clear deep writing of J. I. Packer, who is now with the Lord he already knew so well. In the twists and turns and butterfly effects of a lifetime, I truly doubt I would be standing here today as your pastor if it hadn’t been for those crucial mornings in the summer of 1976.

This morning I want to highlight the Scriptures from one chapter of Packer's book. My goal is not only to whet your appetite for the book and writings, but to show, from the Scriptures, how those who know God live. Knowing God is what we were made for. Knowing God is the key to the good life, to the kind of human flourishing we all desire. I'll begin, and close, with one of the great quotes from the book, one which is key to J. I. Packer's life and thought. At the beginning of chapter 3 he says "What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the "eternal life" that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."

But the chapter I want to look is chapter 2, "The People who Know Their God." Packer starts chapter 2 by making the distinction between knowing a lot about God – mere intellectual or even Biblical knowledge – and knowing God, which is much more relational. He'll later making this distinction again, saying that "'knowing' God is of necessity a more complex business than 'knowing' another person, just as 'knowing' my neighbor is a more complex business than 'knowing' a house, or a book, or a language." He makes this point concrete using a brilliant observation of the heroes of the book of Daniel. Now I'm normally opposed to making anyone in Scripture except Jesus a hero. In the end he's the hero of every story. There are no others. And the book of Daniel is God-centered, a unique combination of personal stories and highly symbolic and detailed prophecies which outline God's future plans.

But Packer analyzes the accounts of the book's heroes, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel in such God-centered terms that I have no inclination to push back. He asks what "effects does knowledge of God have on a person? Various sections of Scripture answer this question from different points of view, but perhaps the most clear and striking answer of all is provided by the book of Daniel, We may summarize its witness in four propositions." These are then the four points of my outline. The people who know their God have great energy for God, have great thoughts of God, have great boldness for God, and have great contentment in God. And all this shows that we were made to know God, that this is the human flourishing we really desire.

First then, those who know God have great energy for God. In Daniel 11:32, one of the prophetic chapters of Daniel we read, *He shall seduce with flattery those who violate the covenant, but the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action.* The King James Version says "the people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits" Chapter 11 of Daniel is a detailed prophetic summary of the late Old Testament period when the heirs of Alexander the Great ruled the Mediterranean world.

But the people of Israel would defy them. The Maccabees on the political side and the Hasidim on the religious side stood up for the purity of God's place, the temple, and of God's law. It is of them that Daniel prophetically wrote "the people who know their God shall stand firm and take action." These people are a model for us. Packer says "the action taken by those who know God is their reaction to the anti-God trends which they see operating around them. While their God is being defied or disregarded, they cannot rest; they feel they must do something; the dishonor done to God's name goads them into action."

Daniel and his three friends model this for us. "These were four men who knew God, and who in consequence felt compelled from time to time actively to stand out against the conventions and dictates of irreligion and false religion." In Daniel chapter 1, rather than risk possible ritual defilement through eating palace food, Daniel insisted on a vegetarian diet, to the consternation of the officials. Later, when Darius suspended the practice of prayer for a month, on pain of death, Daniel not only went on praying three times a day, but did so in front of an open window, so that everyone might see what he was doing. That's Daniel 6. Packer says "those who know their God are sensitive to situations in which God's truth and honor are being directly or tacitly jeopardized, and rather than let the matter go will force attention to the issue and seek thereby to compel a change of heart about it, even at personal risk."

But, Packer says, great energy for God doesn't end with public display. Indeed it doesn't start there. "People who know their God are before anything else people who pray, and the first point where zeal and energy for God's glory comes to expression is in their prayers." In Daniel 9 we read that *In the first year of King Darius, "I, Daniel, perceived in the books the number of years that, according to the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet, must pass before the end of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. ³Then I turned my face to the Lord God, seeking him by prayer and pleas for mercy with fasting, sackcloth and ashes.*

People who know God and therefore have great energy for God express that energy in prayer, And, I would add, in study of Scripture. Daniel was having his quiet time in Jeremiah. It was this truth that sparked his prayer. Packer says "the invariable fruit of true knowledge of God is energy to pray for God's cause, energy, indeed, which can only find an outlet and a relief of inner tension when channeled into such prayer, and the more knowledge, the more energy!" This is why the men's prayer meeting is my favorite Zoom meeting of the week, why we've started Tuesday evening prayer, because in the present circumstances we must pray.

That's the first point. Knowing God energizes us to be strong and take action as God's people, beginning with the action of prayer, but not limited to that. Thus knowledge of God is not an intellectual exercise that takes us far from the concerns and needs of the world. We are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength in this broken world. But you can't love someone you don't know. When I teach marriage skills to engaged couples one of the things I say is that each of them needs to become the world's foremost authority in the other. If we apply that to our relationship with God we know that he's already the world's foremost authority in us. We'll never become the world's leading expert in him, but our goal should be that we know him well enough that we know what drives his heart, and put our energy to those things.

Which leads directly to the second point, the people who know their God have great thoughts of God. Packer says "There is not space enough here to gather up all that the book of Daniel tells us about the wisdom, might, and truth of the great God who rules history and shows his sovereignty in acts of judgment and mercy toward individuals and nations according to his own good pleasure. Suffice it to say that there is, perhaps, no more vivid or sustained presentation of the many-sided reality of God's sovereignty in the whole Bible." We see this in Daniel 4, where Daniel interprets Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Daniel 4:24-25 *This is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king, ²⁵that you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. You shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and you shall be wet with the dew of heaven, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.* The NIV says "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes."

This section of the book of Daniel is not written in Hebrew but in Aramaic, the common language of the Mediterranean world prior to Alexander the Great and the spreading of Greek culture. So Daniel is talking to the Babylonian king, the greatest ruler of his day, and he says to him "You're being taught here that God is the true king, God is the sovereign, God rules over all." Packer gets rolling on this. "The central truth which Daniel taught Nebuchadnezzar in chapters 2 and 4, and of which he reminded Belshazzar in chapter 5, and which Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged in chapter 4, and which Darius confessed, in chapter 6, and which was the basis of Daniel's prayers in chapters 2 and 9, and of his confidence in defying authority in chapters 1 and 6, and of his friends' confidence in defying authority in chapter 3, and which formed the staple substance of all the disclosures which God made to Daniel in chapters 2, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11 and 12, is the truth that "the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men."

Packer again points to the prayers in the book of Daniel as evidence. Listen to how Daniel prayed when God revealed to him the first of Nebuchadnezzar's dreams. Daniel 2:20 *Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. ²¹He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. ²²He reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.*” These are great thoughts of God, recognizing that with him is wisdom, with him is power, with him is sovereignty. “He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them.” God is in control.

So, the second thing that characterizes people who know God is that they have great thoughts of God. This means that you and I can learn who God is and what God is like from God's word and from those who have studied it. I think it was that same summer of 1976 sitting on the floor of my living room that I memorized question 4 of the Westminster Catechism. “What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” Those are great truths about God.

Having these great thoughts, those who know God show great boldness for God. To put it in Jesus' terms, those who know God do not hide their light under a bushel. Packer says “Daniel and his friends were men who stuck their necks out. This was not foolhardiness. . . . They had counted the cost. They had measured the risk. They were well aware what the outcome of their actions would be unless God miraculously intervened.” This is in Oswald Chambers' words, a willingness to “smilingly wash their hands of the consequences.”

Probably the great text for this is the response of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to King Nebuchadnezzar's decree that they worship his image of gold. He threatens them with the fiery furnace and says “What God can save you from my hand.” Daniel 3:16 *Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. ¹⁷If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. ¹⁸But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”* That's boldness.

Now in our culture and in our Christian sub-culture there are many bold people, people who will shout at the tops of their lungs that some one thing is right and anyone who disagrees is wrong and “you can't make me stop saying it.” But few of those people would step boldly into a fiery furnace to defend those things. Many have calculated their boldness to a fine line which insures their own followers are fired up while their opponents don't even notice their rants.

Yet there are times when we need to take a position that may be to our harm. The famous Colorado baker, Jack Phillips has been in court multiple times over multiple years for his unwillingness to bake cakes for those who support an unbiblical sexual ethic. More recently allegiance to Jesus Christ over racial extremism has become an issue. We may agree that there is and has been racial oppression and white privilege in our culture. But to say that Jesus must go because he represents white supremacy is ludicrous. Jesus, himself a dark skinned Jew, is the one who offers grace and rescue to those from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. He is the source of racial compassion, and I cannot go along with anyone who would make him its enemy.

But how do we make these choices and decide what hills to die on. Packer says there is only one way: knowing God. Getting to know God so well that we know his heart, we know his word, and we can clearly and unambiguously state an overarching Biblical principle on which to take a stand. Even among churches like ours there has been debate over this whole idea of masking to slow the community spread of COVID-19. But the elders have seen neighbor love by looking out for the interests of others as a key Biblical principle, reflecting the character and compassion of Jesus. That's why we're leaning into masking and social distancing, because there is no equivalent Biblical principle that says "don't wear a mask." Packer says "This was precisely the spirit of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. It is the spirit of all who know God. They may find the determination of the right course to take agonizingly difficult, but once they are clear they embrace it boldly, without hesitation."

Finally, the people who know their God have great contentment in God. This is a crucial outcome of God knowledge. Packer says "There is no peace like the peace of those whose minds are possessed with full assurance that they have known God, and God has known them, and that this relationship guarantees God's favor to them in life, through death and on forever. This is the peace of which Paul speaks in Romans 5:1, "since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Again, we can look to Daniel for this peace and contentment. When Darius passes the law that says no one can pray to anyone but him for 30 days, Daniel calmly waits until the decree has been signed and then, "he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously." Daniel was not flustered by this decree. Darius was. When his officials bring Daniel up on the charge, Darius is forced to put him in the lions den. He spends a sleepless night in fear and anxiety over Daniel's fate.

The next morning, Daniel 6:20 *As he came near to the den where Daniel was, he cried out in a tone of anguish. "O Daniel, servant of the living God, has your God, whom you serve continually, been able to deliver you from the lions?"* Daniel's reply is full of peace and confidence. Verse 21 *Then Daniel said to the king, "O king, live forever! ² My God sent his angel and shut the lions' mouths, and they have not harmed me, because I was found blameless before him; and also before you, O king, I have done no harm. Then the king was exceedingly glad, and commanded that Daniel be taken up out of the den. So Daniel was taken up out of the den, and no kind of harm was found on him, because he had trusted in his God.*

That's contentment. The people who know their God trust their God. Does that mean all are miraculously saved? No. Read Hebrews 11. But they are women and men of faith. They know their God and are content in his promises. As Isaiah 26:3 says "You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you." As I think about the deaths of people like J. I. Packer and Ravi Zacharias, I'm encouraged because God kept them in peace as they trusted in Him. As I think about the time you and I are living in, I know we long for this peace, this contentment, this trust. I believe that it comes only as we immerse ourselves in knowing God and Jesus who saves us.

The book of Daniel shows us that those who know God have great energy for God; have great thoughts of God; have great boldness for God; have great contentment in God. But Packer ends the chapter by pointing out that to gain this knowledge, we seek Jesus. "When he was on earth, he invited ordinary people to company with him; thus they came to know him, and in knowing him to know his Father. The Old Testament records pre-incarnate manifestations of the Lord Jesus doing the same thing- accompanying with men and women, in character as the angel of the Lord, in order that they might know him. The book of Daniel tells us of what appear to be two such instances, for who was the fourth man, "like a son of the gods" who walked with Daniel's three friends in the furnace? And who was the angel whom God sent to shut the lions' mouths when Daniel was in their den? The Lord Jesus Christ is now absent from us in body, but spiritually it makes no difference; still we may find and know God through seeking and finding Jesus' company. It is those who have sought the Lord Jesus till they have found him, for the promise is that when we seek him with all our hearts, we shall surely find him, who can stand before the world to testify that they have known God.

And then he begins chapter 3 “What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the “eternal life” that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. ‘This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.’”

What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God. “This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me’”

What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives God most pleasure? Knowledge of himself. “I desired ... the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings,” says God

We were made to know God.