THE
J. I. PACKER
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Daily Readings for Your Spiritual Journey

J. I. Packer

Compiled by Thomas Womack

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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 / 14 13 12 11 10
We can begin each day with the deeply encouraging realization, I’m accepted by God, not on the basis of my personal performance, but on the basis of the infinitely perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

—John Owen
FOREWORD
by Mark Dever

Just when you think a book’s life is over, God calls it forward to perform yet another service.

In the 1940s, a retired minister’s library is disposed of in Oxford, England. Among the volumes is a nineteenth-century reprint of a seventeenth-century work on sin, written by the great Puritan John Owen. It finds its way into the hands of a young undergraduate student named Jim Packer. Among Jim’s friends is his fellow undergraduate Elizabeth Lloyd-Jones. Elizabeth introduces Jim to her father, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, minister at Westminster Chapel, London. God used this series of providential coincidences to bring Bible truth to Christians today, many years later, through the pen of J. I. Packer.

By God’s grace, some of the main influences shaping Christians today have been the books of J. I. Packer. Though Professor Packer and I are from different denominations, I appreciate how, again and again in his writings, one finds what the Puritans would call “plain” or “mere” Christianity, the kind of Christian life and doctrine that John Bunyan wrote about in Pilgrim’s Progress. Again and again in Packer’s writings, the sharp brain of a theologian and the warm heart of a Puritan preacher produce writings that inform and edify Christians.

Back in 1973, there appeared a book that had an unusually large immediate effect, and an even larger long-term effect. Some older readers may remember how the 1970s and 1980s saw a number of books titled [gerund] God—like Chuck Colson’s Loving God, John Piper’s Desiring God, Jerry Bridges’ Trusting God. Where did that trend come from?

It came from J. I. Packer’s book Knowing God. Published in 1973, it has continued to sell, year after year, to seminarians, small-group leaders, Christian study groups. It has been read by hundreds of thousands of Christians. Packer has written many other things that have made him the current grandfather of evangelical Christianity. There is no denying that from his introduction to Owen’s The Death of Death in the Death of Christ to Packer’s own book Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God to his many published articles on theology and history, Packer has been
one of the best and clearest and most popular theological tutors of those
Christians who’ve grown up in the evangelicalism of the 1980s and 1990s.

In this volume, many of Packer’s classic writings are called to new service. Here selected passages are laid out in an easy-to-use daily arrangement. These readings are meant to help us in our study of God’s Word, and in our devotion to God himself.

“Packer’s my name and Packer’s my game.” I’ve heard Packer say something like that a number of times. He means that he tries to pack sentences and paragraphs full of meaning. And he does! And yet those packed paragraphs are like Jim is himself in person—precise, clear, and kind. In these pages you’ll find that same kind of precision, clarity, and kindness. Here you’ll find truth for your mind, warmth for your heart, light for your eyes, wisdom for your life, and meat for your soul.

As you read this book, pray that God would use it to guide you to his Word and, through his Word, to himself.

MARK DEVER
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THE WITNESS WITHIN

Why do Christians believe the Bible is the Word of God, in which God reveals to us the reality of redemption through Jesus Christ the Savior? The answer is that God himself has confirmed this through what is called the inward witness of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit’s witness to Scripture is like his witness to Jesus, which we find spoken of in John 15:26 and 1 John 5:7-8. It is a matter not of imparting new information but of enlightening previously darkened minds to discern divinity through sensing its unique impact — the impact in the one case of the Jesus of the gospel, and in the other case of the words of Holy Scripture. The Spirit shines in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God not only in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4:6) but also in the teaching of Holy Scripture. The result of this witness is a state of mind in which both the Savior and the Scriptures have evidenced themselves to us as divine — Jesus, a divine person; Scripture, a divine product — in a way as direct, immediate, and arresting as that in which tastes and colors evidence themselves by forcing themselves on our senses. In consequence, we no longer find it possible to doubt the divinity of either Christ or the Bible.

Thus God authenticates Holy Scripture to us as his Word — not by some mystical experience or secret information privately whispered into some inner ear, not by human argument alone (strong as this may be), nor by the church’s testimony alone (impressive as this is when one looks back over two thousand years). God does it, rather, by means of the searching light and transforming power whereby Scripture evidences itself to be divine.

Concise Theology
Week 1 / Tuesday

REBUILT ROAD, REOPENED WELLS

Build up, build up the highway; clear it of stones.
Isaiah 62:10

There was a time when all Christians laid great emphasis on the reality of God’s call to holiness. Evangelical Protestants, in particular, offered endless variations on the themes of what God’s holiness requires of us, what our holiness involves for us, by what means and through what disciplines the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, and the ways in which holiness increases our assurance and joy and usefulness to God.

But how different it is today! To listen to our sermons and to read the books we write for each other and then to watch the zany, worldly, quarrelsome way we behave as Christian people, you would never imagine that once the highway of holiness was clearly marked out for Bible believers. Now we have to rebuild and reopen the road, starting really from scratch.

In the Old Testament we read how “Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up” (Genesis 26:18, niv). He knew he would find water in them, once he had cleared them of the earth and debris that malevolent Philistines had piled on top of them.

Isaac’s action reflects two simple spiritual principles that apply here in a very direct way:

1. The recovering of old truth, truth that has been a means of blessing in the past, can under God become the means of blessing again in the present, while the quest for newer alternatives may well prove barren.

2. No one should be daunted from attempting such recovery by any prejudice, ill will, or unsympathetic attitudes that may have built up against the old truth during the time of its eclipse.

Drawing on wisdom from yesterday can help us see how the relevant biblical instruction applies to us today.

Rediscovering Holiness
Week 1 / Wednesday

FACING REALITY IN OUR PRAYING

Be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.
Romans 12:11-12

Most Christians pray differently during different life stages. As young Christians, enthusiastic about our newfound faith, we burble before the Lord about our lives in the way in which young children burble to their parents. Later we become less certain that such burbling alone is the essence of prayer. We reach out for a more mature and reverent prayer style, and we become less and less happy about the way we actually pray. We feel we are trudging along in a marsh, getting muddy and messed-up while going nowhere. We make requests to God, then wonder whether they made any difference. Is God answering my prayers? If not, why not? If he is, how is he doing it? Because what’s happening isn’t quite what I asked for. Did I ask wrongly?

There are, of course, many who say, “I can teach you a technique that works.” They tell us about such things as listening prayer, centering prayer, labyrinth prayer, prayer in tongues, the prayer of silence, mental prayer, the prayer of union, and how to get through the dark night of the soul. These phases all have meaning, and they do in fact encourage fresh effort in praying. People sit gratefully through talks on these various techniques of prayer, and experiment with them, but they are soon found casting around for further help because their prayer difficulties have not yet been solved. Changed technique, alone, is not the remedy for their problems.

Let us be realistic about where we are and where we are not in this matter of praying. Deep down all of us have found that prayer isn’t as easy as some people make it sound, or as easy as we ourselves had hoped it would be once our technique was straightened out.
Guard Us, Guide Us

The doctrine of guidance appears as one of the principles of what Isaac Watts termed God’s guardian grace, and what I refer to as God’s covenant care.

“He leads me.” Lead is the verb that in Psalm 23 carries the promise that our God will bestow the discernment of decision and direction we need in order to keep moving with him along the path of life. Our certainty, as believers, of God’s guardian grace and covenant care should always undergird our quest for guidance.

The ethic of guidance appears in the parameters that qualify the promise. God leads “in paths of righteousness” (verse 3), nowhere else. God’s guidance never violates the principles of uprightness and integrity, nor will he ever prompt us to irresponsible decisions and actions. He guides us, rather, to obey his Word and to choose between options by the exercise of the Christlike, God-honoring, farseeing wisdom that is modeled for us in the Bible, the wisdom that always aims at what will please God best.

The spirituality of guidance appears as a purpose and policy, not simply of keeping in touch with our Shepherd incidentally as we review the range of possible decisions, but of pursuing our personal relationship with him just as closely as we can when we have decisions to make. The Shepherd “leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (verse 3, emphasis added)—that is, to show his faithfulness and to be honored for it by our thanks and praise. Praising and thanking God in advance because he has promised so to lead us is often a means of coming to a clear discernment of what is the scope of his leading into present decision and action.

Guard Us, Guide Us
LOVE NEEDS LAW

If you love me,
you will keep my commandments.
John 14:15

The Ten Commandments’ stock is low today. Why? Partly because they are law, naming particular things that should and should not be done. People dislike law (that is one sign of our sinfulness), and the idea is widespread that Christians should not be led by law, only by love.

But the love-or-law antithesis is false. Law needs love as its drive, and love needs law as its eyes, for love is blind. To want to love someone Christianly does not of itself tell you how to do it. Only as we observe the limits set by God’s law can we really do people good.

If anyone was qualified to detect shortcomings in the Ten Commandments and lead us beyond them to something better, it was Jesus. But what did he do? He affirmed them as having authority forever (Matthew 5:18-20) and as central to true religion (19:17-19). He expounded them, and he made a point of insisting that he kept them (Luke 6:6-10). When John says, “This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (1 John 5:3), his words remind us that Jesus defined love and discipleship to himself in terms of keeping his own commands (John 14:15,21-24; Matthew 28:19-20). Commandment-keeping is the only true way to love the Father and the Son.

And it is the only true way to love one’s neighbor, too. When Paul says that “the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8), he explains himself by showing that love to neighbor embraces the specific prohibitions of adultery, murder, stealing, and envy. He does not say that love to neighbor cancels those prohibitions.

The Christian’s most loving service to his neighbor is to uphold the authority of God’s law as man’s one true guide to true life.
Week 1 / Weekend

LOVE CHRIST, LOVE HIS CHURCH

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.
Ephesians 3:21

He was an odd little man, lean, intense, and jerky, with a face that seemed to light up as he spoke. I was there out of loyalty to the college chapel, not expecting to be impressed; but he captured my attention by telling us how in his teens he had experienced a personal conversion to Jesus Christ, like that which I had just undergone myself. “And then,” he said, “I got excited about the church. You could say, I fell in love with it.”

Never had I heard anyone talk quite like that before, and his words stuck in my memory. Fifty years later, I can still hear him saying them. He then hammered home the point that all who love Jesus Christ the Lord ought to care deeply about the church, just because the church is the object of Jesus’ own love. Church-centeredness is thus one way in which Christ-centeredness ought to find expression.

Listen to Paul instructing the Ephesians:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:25-27)

The church that Christ loves and sustains is the key feature of God’s plan for both time and eternity, and care for the church’s welfare, which is what love for the church means, is an aspect of Christlikeness that Christians must ever seek to cultivate. We are right to take the church on our hearts; we should be wrong not to. For our Lord Jesus says to us all, “Love me, love my church.”

A Passion for Faithfulness
God on occasion in Bible times communicated with some people by supernaturally telling them what to do, and he has not said he will never do so again. Some at least of the glowing stories that are told about guidance of this kind can hardly be doubted. Some see reason to deny that God ever did, or will communicate this way now that the canon of Scripture is complete, but that view seems to us to go beyond what is written and to fly in the face of credible testimony. It is not for us to place restrictions on God that he has not placed on himself!

Certainly, no messages from God of this kind could be regarded as canonical in the sense of carrying authority for universal faith and life in the way that Scripture does. This, however, is not to deny that “private revelations,” as the Puritans used to call them, ever take place nowadays. On that question we keep an open mind. Though we know that self-deception here is very easy, we would not short-circuit claims to have received words from God; we would instead test them, as objectively and open-mindedly as we can, in light of the teaching of Scripture itself.

Scripture teaches that principle of testing in such passages as Deuteronomy 18:22 where God’s people are told to listen to supposed prophets with discernment: “When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.” Similarly Paul instructs the church at Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21, “Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good.”
A LONG LESSON IN FALSE HOPES

God our Father . . . loved us and gave us eternal comfort and good hope through grace.
2 Thessalonians 2:16

The twentieth century opened in optimism. The ruling assumption in the West was that we are all basically good and wise, and advancing Christian civilization would soon make the kingdom of God, understood as universal neighbor love, a global reality. A periodical called The Christian Century was founded to channel these hopes and chronicle their fulfillment; it still exists, but its title now seems woefully inept. The century witnessed global barbarism in two World Wars and in the careers of power-crazy, money-mad tribalists and the genocidal doings of dictators; we cringed to see profiteering of the world’s big businesses as they polluted and raped the environment; and we mourned the Western drift from Christian and moral moorings into relativism, pluralism, secularism, and hedonism. There were escalations of the armaments race and the ability to devastate the world with nuclear weapons.

These developments ensured that many thoughtful people entered the twenty-first century with fear rather than in hope, wondering how far the educated, affluent, and technologically equipped decadence of the West will go and what sort of a world awaits our grandchildren. It can be fairly said that Marxist utopianism, with its collectivist frame, has failed and is not likely to be tried anywhere again.

As the third millennium unfolds, any who expect that politicians’ and generals’ playing of the power game and business leaders’ playing of the profit game will generate global peace and prosperity have buried their heads very deep in the sands. No realistic hope of better things to come can be drawn from the ways of the modern world.

What follows? Is there nothing good to hope for at all? There is, but we must seek this good hope outside the socio-politico-economic process. And this, by the grace of God, we may do.
THE CHURCH AS CHRIST’S BODY

We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.
Ephesians 4:15

The New Testament idea of the church is that it is the company of those who share in the redemptive renewal of a sin-spoiled creation, which began when Christ rose from the dead. As the individual believer is a new creation in Christ, raised with him out of death into life, possessed of and led by the life-giving Holy Spirit, so also the church as a whole. Its life springs from its union with Christ, crucified and risen. Paul, in Ephesians, pictures the church successively as Christ’s building, now growing “into a holy temple in the Lord” (2:21); his body, now growing toward a state of full edification (4:1-16); and his bride (5:25), now being sanctified and cleansed in readiness for “the marriage supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9).

Some modern writers treat Paul’s body metaphor as indicating that the church is “really” (in a sense in which it is not “really” anything else) an extension of the manhood and incarnate life of Christ. But according to Paul, the church’s union with Christ is symbolically exhibited in baptism; and what baptism symbolizes is not incorporation into Christ’s manhood simply, but sharing with him in his death to sin, with all its saving fruits, and in the power and life of his resurrection. When Paul says that the Spirit baptizes men into one body, he means that the Spirit makes us members of the body by bringing us into that union with Christ which baptism signifies (1 Corinthians 12:13). Scripture would lead us to call the church an extension of the resurrection rather than of the incarnation! In any case, Paul uses the body metaphor only to illustrate the authority of the Head, and his ministry to his members, and the various ministries that they must fulfill to each other.
POWER IN ACTION

The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.

John 3:8

Spirit, like all biblical terms that refer to God, is a picture word with a vivid, precise, and colorful meaning. It pictures breath breathed or panted out, as when you blow out the candles on your birthday cake or blow up balloons or puff and blow as you run. Spirit in this sense was what the big bad wolf threatened the little pigs with when he warned, “I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house down!” The picture is of air made to move vigorously, even violently, and the thought the picture expresses is of energy let loose, executive force invading, power in exercise, life demonstrated by activity.

Both the Hebrew and Greek words rendered spirit in our Bibles (ruach and pneuma) carry this basic thought, and both have the same range of association. They are used of (1) the divine Spirit, personal and purposeful, invisible and irresistible; (2) the individual human consciousness (in which sense spirit becomes synonymous with soul); and (3) the wind that when aroused whirls leaves, uproots trees, and blows buildings over. I wish our language had a word that would carry all these associations. Puff and blow are two English words that refer to both the outbreathing of air from human lungs and the stirring of the wind, but English has no term that also covers the intellectual, volitional, and emotional individuality of God and of his rational creatures. Spirit in English, by contrast, denotes conscious personhood in action and reaction, but cannot be used of either breath or wind. This is doubtless one reason it does not suggest power in action in the way that ruach and pneuma did to people in Bible times.

Power in action is in fact the basic biblical thought whenever God’s Spirit is mentioned.

Keep in Step with the Spirit
BUILDING LIVES

On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.
Matthew 16:18

When we speak of building a church, our minds are usually on the bricks and mortar out of which the new structure will be constructed. But when Jesus spoke of building his church, he was not thinking in those terms. He was thinking, rather, of the complex process whereby the truth about himself is received, the recipients respond to it (or, better, respond to him in terms of it), and the responders are conformed increasingly to him as they share in the things that the church does in obedience to Jesus’ word, under his leadership, and in dependence on his power. As the church consists of individuals who by coming to faith and associating as believers have become the Lord’s people (his vine, his flock, his temple, his nation), so Christ’s building of the church is a matter of his so changing people on the inside — in their hearts — that repentance, faith, and obedience become more and more the pattern of their lives. Thus increasingly they exhibit the humility, purity, love, and zeal for God that we see in Jesus, and fulfill Jesus’ call to worship, work, and witness in his name.

And this they do, not as isolated individuals (lone-rangerism!), but as fellow siblings in God’s family, helping and encouraging each other in the openness and mutual care that are the hallmarks of “brotherly love” (Hebrews 13:1). Hereby they enter increasingly into the life that constitutes authentic Christianity, the life of fellowship with their heavenly Father, their risen Savior, and each other; and in so doing they are “being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 2:5).
ONLY BY EXPERIENCE

Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

1 Timothy 6:11

Holiness, like prayer (which is indeed part of it), is something that, though Christians have an instinct for it through their new birth, they have to learn in and through experience. As Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8, niv) — learned what obedience requires, costs, and involves through the experience of actually doing his Father’s will up to and in his passion — so Christians must, and do, learn prayer from their struggles to pray, and learn holiness from their battles for purity of heart and righteousness of life.

Talented youngsters who go to tennis school in order to learn the game soon discover that the heart of the process is not talking about tactics but actually practicing serves and strokes, thus forming new habits and reflexes, so as to iron out weaknesses of style. The routine, which is grueling, is one of doing prescribed things over and over again on the court, against a real opponent, in order to get them really right.

Prayer and holiness are learned in a similar way as commitments are made, habits are formed, and battles are fought against a real opponent (Satan, in this case), who with great cunning plays constantly on our weak spots. (That these are often what the world sees as our strong points is an index of Satan’s resourcefulness: presumptuous self-reliance and proud overreaching on our part serve his turn just as well as do paralyzing timidity, habits of harshness and anger, lack of discipline whether inward or outward, evasion of responsibility, lack of reverence for God, and willful indulgence in what one knows to be wrong.) Satan is as good at judo throws as he is at frontal assaults, and we have to be on guard against him all the time.