

## Time with God

### *An Interview with J.I. Packer*

On Sept 26, 2008, J.I. Packer took time to sit down and answer questions from C.S. Lewis Fellows and from 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 web site at [www.cslewisinstitute.org](http://www.cslewisinstitute.org).

**Q**uestion: Would you be willing to share about your own time alone with God and the materials that you use devotionally?

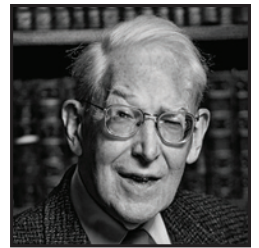
I don't think I've got anything out of the ordinary to share. Like other Christians, I try to get up in the morning early enough to start the day with God and the Bible—shall I say, with God through the Bible. I've been telling people for years that every Christian worth his salt ought to read the Bible 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.

The version that is used is the one that Tyndale House markets, The New Living Bible. Now it's a scholarly update, in that sense, a revised version of The Living Bible that Kenneth Taylor produced a generation back. Kenneth Taylor paraphrased—I think it was the NIV—for his children. He wasn't a scholar, he was a communicator, and that's where the text of the Living Bible came from—very vivid, very lively, but sometimes inaccurate. And what you have in the New Living is the language of the Living Bible retained with all its vividness, indeed with increased vividness in many

places. It's still a paraphrase—but it's a scholarly paraphrase. It's not a word-for-word translation, but semantically it is very accurate. That is, sentence by sentence and paragraph by paragraph, the New Living Translation captures the range of meaning that's being expressed. So that if you ask the question, "Is this paraphrase expressing as much as the writer was expressing?" The answer is again and again, yes. If you ask, "Is it expressing less than the writer was expressing or was concerned to express or more than he was concerned to express," the answer in each case is no, it is semantically accurate—the range of meaning is well covered.

Now I'm not a salesman for the New Living translation, because I was the general editor for a quite different translation that is an update of the Revised Standard Version, published now under the title, The English Standard Version—published also in Wheaton but by a different firm, Crossway. Incidentally, next month, a study Bible using the ESV as text is going to be published, and I've had a hand in that also. I will express the view that it sets a new standard in study Bibles altogether. If I had to recommend a Bible for academic use, I would say the English Standard Version, which has all the strengths of the old RSV and a lot of the wording of the old RSV, but it has none of the weaknesses and limitations which the old RSV had—at least not so in my estimate. That's the one to go for.

But nonetheless, I can appreciate a semantically skillful paraphrase version. I can enjoy its vividness. I can be stimulated by that vividness and in my daily reading of scripture; I use the One-Year Bible and am so stimulated. You'll find that there are any number



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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.

Well, 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 need to go through questions one and two before you're qualified really to answer question three. Otherwise you'll answer three 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, what does it tell you about life and its ups and downs, its joys and sorrows, with its temptations and its baffles and its responsibilities, and so on and so forth. There is 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 round 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," where 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 discern 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 goodnight and off to sleep. Well that's me; I have to do all my serious praying in the morning. There are evening people, of course, same as there are morning people. Usually there's one of each in every marriage relationship—one is an owl the other is a lark—you've heard all that and you've observed that it is true. It's not surprising, it should be true—opposites attract, didn't you know that? Oh, yes—but that's not what I'm being asked about, so I won't say anymore about it.

But seriously, find out when you are "firing on all cylinders" mentally, and give God that good time rather than waiting until you're half-asleep already before you start trying to talk to him seriously about anything.

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*J.I. Packer was for many years Professor of Historic and Systematic Theology at Regent College in Vancouver, British Columbia. He is a senior editor of Christianity Today and author of numerous books including Knowing God, Rediscovering Holiness, Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God, and Quest for Godliness. He is an ordained Anglican minister and holds the D.Phil. from Oxford University.*

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