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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

**January 30, 2022**

**Knowing God**

**1 John - Part 8**

**Prayer:** *Father God, we just again, we thank you for your grace, we thank you for your goodness. We thank you for giving us the freedom to still gather together as we have corporately to worship you, to sing praises, to pray and to open up your book, Lord, and to have an understanding of what you have here for us. And so we pray for the presence of your Holy Spirit, Lord, we pray that you would guide us, that you would direct us and that you would give us the ability to make this of permanent value. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well if you could offer somebody either of two things, number one, you could have your sins present, past and future all forgiven or you could win a \$10 million lottery, if you gave that choice to most people, what do you think the average person would select? Would they select something that would only last the remainder of your lifetime or something that would increase in value eternally, forever? Well, no doubt most people would pick the lottery.

John opens our text this morning proclaiming a gift that most can't see the value of. This is *1 John 2:12*. John says: *I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.* John opens verse 12 by stating that he's writing to little children and it's generally assumed that this is kind of a term of endearment that he uses to refer to virtually everyone in the church, not just the little ones. He's sort of saying "my precious little ones." And the first thing that John wants these dear ones to know fully and to understand is that in the name of Christ, their sins are forgiven. And John is proclaiming the greatest gift a human being could ever receive and yet it is a gift that people often treat with contempt since forgiving is a blessing that will not reach its full value until this life is over and the next one begins and we humans are short-sighted. We're not nearly as interested in pie in the sky, by and by as opposed to something tangible, something that we can use right here and right now. And this is not a new phenomenon. This is the way people have been from the very start. This is what Jesus dealt with when he proclaimed the good news of the gospel, I mean, people were far more interested in free food and miracles than they were interested in their sins being forgiven. We don't have to guess how people would react because we have an actual incident that demonstrated the value that people put on the immediate versus the future. Matthew's gospel tells us a story about Jesus and it gives us all

we need to know about that.

This is *Matthew 9*. It says: *And getting into a boat he -- that's Jesus -- crossed over and came to his own city. And behold, some people brought to him a paralytic, lying on a bed. And when Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."* Well now if we stop the tape right then and there, I want you to be honest with yourself and I want you to ask yourself, okay, what would be my reaction? My first reaction would be, Lord, your forgiveness is certainly wonderful but this guy's paralyzed. I mean, he's lying on a bed so he probably can't even move. What makes you think, Lord, that his first concern is his sin? Well, there's lots of speculation among Bible commentators as to what the paralytic's reaction might be to Jesus telling him that his sins are forgiven, but as we read on we find there's another hint in the text as to why Jesus would make such a statement too. This is verse 3. It says: *And behold, some of the scribes said to themselves, "This man is blaspheming." But Jesus, knowing their thoughts said, "Why do you think evil in your hearts?"* See, God is incarnate. God knows our thoughts before we think them. He clearly knew the thoughts of the paralytic. Perhaps his paralysis was the direct result of sin, perhaps the Holy Spirit was convicting him, but either way Jesus saw his first and primary need as the forgiveness of his sin, and he told him he

would meet that need. The scribes saw Jesus either as a huxter, you know, knowing that he could never physically prove whether or not his sins had been forgiven or simply a blasphemer who genuinely believed he was God. And so Jesus, having addressed the greater spiritual need now addresses the lesser physical need by saying in verse 5: *For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- he then said to the paralytic -- "Rise, pick up your bed and go home."* And he rose and went home. *When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men.*

Jesus heals this man's physical brokenness as a means of demonstrating that if he could do that, he could certainly also heal his broken spirit. And his question, *"Which is easier,"* it certainly implies that the healing of sin is a far greater task than the healing of a broken body. I mean one simply requires power; the other one requires a blood sacrifice. And Jesus' answer to the scribes is the very same answer we give to those today who claim as many do that God is, after all, omnipotent, he should be able to simply forgive us on the basis of his power alone. And this idea of making his Son go through the horror of the cross, that's not a sign of the Father's love but instead it's a sign of a vindictive God, someone who can't control his anger unless it's

assuaged by a blood sacrifice. If God could wipe the slate clean simply by announcing it was so, then clearly it is considerably easier to say "*your sins are forgiven*" than it is to say "*rise and walk.*" But that's the exact opposite of what Jesus is illustrating when he heals this man. I mean physically healing him was a cake-walk for Jesus, I mean, he didn't even break a sweat. And forgiving the man's sins cost Jesus his pride, his glory, and his life, all of which he willingly sacrificed in order to exchange his perfect righteousness for our sins on the cross. Penal substitution is this doctrine that insists that Jesus actively substituted himself for us on the cross in order to bear the penalty of the just wrath that our sins created and the need for that wrath to be dealt with by a holy God.

Daniel Hames writing in a Gospel Coalition article entitled "Three Reasons I Changed My Mind About Penal Substitution" spoke about he was at one time lured into rejecting penal substitution by thinking that his upbringing in a traditional evangelical church, well, that's naive, that's simplistic and that God under those circumstances is in fact guilty of child abuse by demanding this penalty for sin. It's only when he thoroughly examined the scriptures and the trinity and church history that he realized the scripture points in no other direction but that Jesus was actively involved in being both the sacrificer as our high priest and the

sacrifice as the Lamb of God. This is what Hames said. He said: "It's no use pitting 'vindictive God' against 'innocent Jesus,' for the one nailed to the tree is himself the sin-hating, sinner-saving God. The Son's complicity in his own condemnation as our substitute is one of the gospel's most glorious truths. Being clear about this truth doesn't just safeguard our faithfulness; it displays Christ's beauty and love."

See Jesus alone, he knew the full implications of what he was claiming when he said, *"Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?"* He knew what that meant. Jesus knew that the cross would be the culmination of his emptying himself of a glory we can't even imagine to walk this earth for thirty-three years, living out a human existence unique in that it was flawlessly perfect, only to die a death more shameful and painful than any other form of execution ever invented or ever even imagined. Even today crucifixion is still considered by experts today to be the most dreadful form of execution there is. The very word "excruciating" is Latin, it means "from the cross." And yet Jesus is content to say: *For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'?*

And so when John says: *"I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake,"* what he's

actually doing is he's giving God's short answer to the problem of evil. I think the greatest hindrance to sharing the gospel today is the problem of evil. There's just so much of it. Folks look around and they can readily see the devastating effects of evil all around them, and they wonder if there's a God and he's supposedly all powerful, why in the world would he allow so much pain and so much misery and so much evil to proliferate all throughout his creation? Well, our response to that question first and foremost has got to be, well, he's God and we're not, and his ways are not our ways, and they're certainly mysterious and they're certainly beyond us but one thing is absolutely certain is that is the God of the gospel does not stay removed from this evil. He didn't stay up in high heaven where he could look down on us just kind of languishing in our pain. The God that we worship has become one of us and lived among us not like some king or potentate would live but like a lowly peasant would, with no form or loveliness personally and no political power whatsoever. And in that sense, in that sense Jesus is absolutely unique. And virtually every other religion in the world describes man's attempt to work his way upward into the divine, and Christianity alone represents the Divine coming down to earth, taking on flesh and dealing with the worst that this life has to offer.

See, the problem of evil is, it's a problem for everybody, whether

you're a Buddhist, a Muslim, an animist or an atheist, you still have to deal with the abundance of evil we see. We Christians can at least claim that our God joined us in the midst of this evil world and he lived in it perfectly in the flesh and then went to the cross to address it. The cross is Jesus's bona fide. Bona fide, that's a fancy Latin term for what the dictionary describes as -- quote -- "documentary evidence showing a person's legitimacy." The cross is all the proof that Jesus needs of God's love for the world and scripture proclaims it, everybody knows it, it's *John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*

And so the cross is the way that we address the problem of evil. It certainly doesn't answer all of our questions but it absolutely gives the lie to this claim that God doesn't care. Jesus insists that his willingness to leave heaven itself and walk this planet perfectly and then allowing himself to be stripped naked and nailed to a cross is all the proof we should ever need that our God is for us. And that in spite of the mystery of evil, this is a God actively involved in overthrowing it, not simply by declaring that our sins are forgiven but by actively absorbing the evil of those sins in his very being. *2 Corinthians 5:21 says: For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become*

*the righteousness of God. Folks, you can't be more possibly involved in the problem of evil than to be willing to become evil itself in order to redeem your sheep. John addresses all of Christ's sheep as he does all of his church as little children because at the throne of Christ we are all equally powerless, equally ignorant, and equally childlike, and yet all of us are equally forgiven for his name's sake.*

*I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. What does that mean? I mean what does it mean that we're forgiven for his name's sake? It means that every part of who God is and what God does is encapsulated and captured in what Christ did for us at the cross. The cross was the ultimate vindication of God's name and God insists that for all eternity that name will be honored and glorified because of the cross. *Philippians 2:5* says: *Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.**

And having established the most important point, that our sins are forgiven in the name of Christ, John then goes on to speak about three different levels of maturity that you find in Christ's church, from fathers to young men to children, and they all have to deal with levels of spiritual development. This is what he says in *1 John 2:13-14*. He says: *I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

Three different groups of people. Now fathers are those who have reached maturity in the faith. *I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.* Young men are those who have grown to a certain level. He says: *I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.* And children are more or less brand new believers: *I write to you, children, because you know the Father.*

Now the Greek word that he uses for little children in verse 12 is *teknion* which is that term of endearment I spoke of that John uses

frequently throughout the whole of his epistles. *I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.* But the word translated "children" in verse 13 is the Greek word "paidion," which means "someone still under the authority of his or her parents." So I want to start first with what God is saying here to children, God's word to children. And the best literal translation of John's word to children in verse 13 is by Wuest, which says this: "I write to you, little children under instruction, because you have come to know the Father experientially, with the present result that you are possessors of that knowledge." You see, this is the place where all of us, all of us start our journeys as believers in Christ. This is where we initially come to know Jesus as Lord and Savior. And it has nothing to do with chronology. There are brand new children of Christ in their thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, even eighties and nineties. And there's fathers of the faith in their knowledge of God in their twenties and thirties. So take the idea of chronology out of this. Children are simply folks who are brand new to this idea of knowing God.

Notice how John differentiates these children of God. He doesn't speak about baptism, he doesn't speak about confirmation or any other type of ritual or rite that we might think introduces folks to Christianity. I mean as good as those rituals might be, they're

merely a confirmation of something that's already taken place on a spiritual level. And it's only represented physically by rituals designed to demonstrate something that's already taken place in the spirit world. And the sad thing is there's lots of people who get baptized, they get confirmed, they think that this is what's going to introduce me into the faith when that has nothing to do with it. Well, it has something to do with it but it's symbolic, it's not the real thing.

Consider for a moment the great teacher of Israel, consider Nicodemus because this is someone who had an amazing introduction to the faith as a child. He knew there was something different about Jesus, and prompted by the Holy Spirit under the cloak of darkness, he determines to go see him and just find out who he is. And so he meets with Jesus and Jesus tells him in no uncertain terms not that he had to be baptized or that he had to be bar mitzvahed or confirmed or any other ritual to enter the kingdom. No, he tells him he has to do something far more mysterious. This is what he said in *John 3:1-8*. It says: *Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of*

*God." Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' 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."*

Nicodemus was an old man. He was an old man, he was an honored man, he was a deeply revered religious leader who had entered the kingdom the way every one of us enters the kingdom, that's being born again as a child, as a child produced miraculously by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is quite clear in telling Nicodemus that he had to not only be born of water but of the Spirit as well and then he told him that the Spirit is the wind and the wind blows wherever it wants. Jesus, of course, is referring to the Holy Spirit and he's telling Nicodemus not to expect that he'd ever be able to control where the Spirit comes from or where it goes, because the Holy Spirit is God himself and he chooses those to whom the words of the gospel make sense. I mean little did Nicodemus know that the winds of God's Holy Spirit had blown him out that night to meet with Jesus. And this is the very same Holy Spirit who blew you and me

into the kingdom as well. I mean have you ever asked yourself why does the gospel make sense to me? I mean are you more clever than your neighbor or the person down the road who thinks that what you believe is complete and utter nonsense? Why is it that you believe the gospel that he thinks is utter foolishness? The fact is the reason why the gospel makes sense to you is because God has done a work in you for reasons known to him and him alone. He has chosen you as one of his sheep. I mean Jesus is quite clear, if you are not one of his sheep, the gospel to you will remain unbelievable.

Listen to what he told the religious leaders. He told them exactly why they refused to believe in him, telling them in *John 10*: "*You do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.*"

I mean it's incredibly humbling and profoundly mysterious to realize that you've been given to Christ as a gift from his Father to his Son. That's exactly what Jesus is saying here. He says, "*My Father, who has given them to me.*" Folks, "them" is us, given by the Father to the Son so that no one can snatch them out of the Father or the Son's hands. Jesus told Nicodemus his Spirit blows where it wills. I mean it so happens if you love Jesus that the

Spirit chose you to be able to make sense of a cross that makes no sense to the rest of the world. That's why God says in *1 Corinthians 1: For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

And again he asks the question, why do you believe in the gospel? Why does the cross make sense to you? Trust me, it's not because of you, it's not because of your cleverness. It's because of God.

Jesus made it crystal clear that a miracle is necessary to enter the kingdom. He said, *"Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."* And that's where we all start. Every one of us starts with a miracle at our spiritual birth as children. And John defines that miracle at its most simple level. He says: *"I write to you, children, because you know the Father."* If you're a lover of Jesus Christ, you're the recipient of a miracle, the very first one in your life and it's the one that introduced you to God the Father. 500,000 years from now, 500,000 centuries from now you and I are going to be shaking our head at the wonder and the glory of the miracle that we've received. We get to actually know God. I mean at this stage of our existence only God knows how profoundly wonderful a gift we've been given. That's why Jeremiah says in *Jeremiah 9: Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this,*

*that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."*

So all of us start out at the most basic level by knowing God, and where we go from there is really a matter of our wills as much as any other factor. Unfortunately in times of peace and prosperity, we human beings have a tendency to forget all about God. We tend to think of good times as something normal and natural, something that belongs to us by virtue of our birth. God gave us this warning. He gave it to the Israelites in Deuteronomy. In *Deuteronomy 8*, he says: *"Take care lest you forget the LORD your God by not keeping his commandments and his rules and his statutes, which I command you today, lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them, and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."* So here we are in America with full bellies and good houses and herds and flocks multiplied, with silver and gold piled up. We're the most wealthy, prosperous nation in the history of mankind and I think it's safe to say by and large we've forgotten our God. And as things start to go south as God promised they would, it is only those who know God and are

actively seeking to increase their knowledge of God who have any handle whatsoever on what is taking place all around them.

J.I. Packer spoke well of how incredibly important it is to know God. This is how he put it. He said: "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 blindfold, 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."

Well, praise be to God, due to this miraculous new birth in Christ, John says: "*I write to you, children, because you know the Father.*" What a wonderful, miraculous place to start. What a woeful place to wind up in if you decided to permanently remain a child, if you decided that growth is too hard or scary or challenging. You see, growth in Christ involves your head, your

heart, your hands and your feet, and if you feed one at the expense of the others you're going to wind up stunted and deformed and there's no doubt the Christian church is filled with the stunted and deformed, with lots of folks who love the idea of remaining as milk-fed infants.

You know Paul had to address them twice. In *1 Corinthians 3*, he says: *But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready.* And in *Hebrews 5* he says: *About this we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*

I don't know how to put this without sounding angry or bitter or scolding, but I believe Paul is describing us. I mean if someone were to ask you is your church comprised mainly of children, young men or fathers, what would your answer be? I'd say we're primarily

children. I mean do I have a passion to learn more and more about the God who saved me? How would you answer that question? I mean as leaders we have spent many, many hours trying to figure out how to get us more and more interested in knowing about the God who saved us, but for some reason we just can't seem to generate that interest. I mean I used to do a Wednesday night Bible study, we'd routinely have a half a dozen to twenty people who would come out on Wednesday nights just to grow and just to learn, some of you remember that. For some reason folks just started to lose interest and eventually we stopped it because people stopped coming and I don't think it was because I suddenly started to stink at it, although that's a possibility. I mean our adult Sunday school class oftentimes has two or three people in it, and I know Dave does an astounding amount of work preparing for it. I know how difficult it is to put that work in and have so few people have an interest in it. I don't know if it's a sign of the times or a sign of our failure as leaders, but the desire to learn and grow in our knowledge of who God is just seems to be missing. What is our church made up of? I said our church is made up of folks who are loving and caring and kind and hard working and considerate but, sad to say, overwhelmingly content to be milk-fed, and I would love you to prove me otherwise.

Secondly John writes: *I write to you, young men, because you are*

*strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.* Understand what marks out the difference between children and young men who are strong is very simple. John says what? He says, "*the word of God abides in you.*" These are folks who have just pursued the knowledge of God. They've pursued growing and learning more and more about their God. And what else do you find when you pursue God that way? Guess what, you gain the attention of the evil one. People who are pursuing God by pursuing the knowledge of God become more and more a threat to the kingdom of darkness than they do simply as children. So John acknowledges that young men become strong through the word of God abiding in them and by overcoming the evil one. And I thank God for the young men that we have in this church. And again, we're not talking about chronology here. Don't look around and say, oh, where's the thirty-year-olds and the forty-year-olds. We're not talking about that at all. We're not just talking about people in their twenties, thirties and forties, we're talking about people that have outgrown their years as children in the Lord. And by studying, growing and learning more about God, they've entered into the stage where they are now young men with God abiding in them. And we're not just talking about men here. We're talking about men and women who are the future of this church. I'm 72, I'm a geezer. I'm an old guy. I'm not going to be around forever. And we've been thinking seriously about what kind of future this church is

going to have. I just found it astounding that God has kept us going for these thirty years and it's only by his grace and by his truth and that could end tomorrow. I would much rather see us fold up our tent than give up the truth as so many churches in Port Jervis have done. See, it's the young men and women that John is speaking about who will determine whether or not this church will go forward because they're the ones who are going to supply the energy or not.

And finally there's a third group of which I would number myself. It says: *I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.* And that word "to know" here is that Greek word "ginosko" which is a very important word, it means to know not simply in terms of acquiring knowledge, it means to know by experience. I've given this example before. You can study every single book that's ever been written about Greco-Roman wrestling, you can watch thousands of videos as to how to approach your opponent, how to take him down, how to achieve victory. You can talk to all kinds of champion wrestlers; but until you actually get into the ring and wrestle, you will never gain wrestling ginoko or knowledge by experience, and this is what mature fathers bring to the table. This is the knowledge of God that is not simply gleaned from books the Bible included, but it's also gleaned from experience. Fathers have been there and done that when it comes to

living your life as a believer in Christ. And by and large they've known heartache and triumph and failure and regret and repentance and victory and all of those things that contribute to our ability to know Christ better and better, not in some isolated seminary experience but in the crucible of life itself. John sees the church as the place where all three of these groups come together. He says: *I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I write to you, children, because you know the Father. I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.*

John wrote to the church and I'm speaking to her as well. Whether you're a child or a young man or a woman or a father or a mother in the faith, see all of us have a role to play in growing this, this local expression of the bride of Christ. This isn't my church. You know sometimes we sit around and pastors gather together and people say, oh, your church, your church. This is not my church, this is not your church. This is Christ's church. It belongs to him as his bride. And someday, I guarantee this, someday, perhaps long, long into the future, you will see this humble little group

of people who met at 25 Sullivan Avenue as far more precious to God than you ever imagined. *Ephesians 5* says: *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.* That's what we're a part of. And time spent growing protecting and serving this little body is something that has profound rewards, rewards not just in this life but in the life to come. So I urge you, if you are a child, whether you're six or sixty, seek to become a young man or woman by seeking to know God greater. If you're a young man or women, seek to grow in knowledge and experience to become a father or mother in the church so that you can pass that experience on to the young men and women of the church. And understand this one thing, it all starts with knowing God. As J. I. Packer concludes: "Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord." Let's pray.

*Father, again, I pray this church is filled with children, with young men and with fathers, with children, with young mothers, young women, Lord, I just again, each of us kind of has an inkling and an understanding of where we are. If we're children or young men, I pray that you would give us the drive to grow. If we're*

*fathers, I pray that you would give us the ability to share the experience of what it is like to live life for Christ and to see all of the ups and downs and the victories and the defeats and all of those things that can contribute to growing the younger ones in Christ. Father, I pray you would give each of us an understanding of how precious this group is to you, that we are a part of your living representation here on earth. Give us a heart for you and a heart for growing in our knowledge of you, I pray, in Jesus' name. Amen.*