

# OpenTheo

## In Memory of J. I. Packer

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### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

Originally released on July 17th, 2020, in this special episode of 'Life and Books and Everything,' Kevin DeYoung, Collin Hansen, and Justin Taylor remember their friend J. I. Packer as they share about his influence broadly and personally.

### **Transcript**

Life and Books and Everything This is Life and Books and Everything hosted by Kevin DeYoung, Justin Taylor, and Collin Hansen. Greetings and salutations and welcome to Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung and I am here as usual with my good friends Collin Hansen and Justin Taylor.

And we thought it would be worthwhile to do an abbreviated episode for you and take a few minutes for the three of us to reflect a bit on the life and ministry of J. I. Packer. We've all benefited from his books and to one degree or another, even his personal influence. So I think safe to say Justin certainly has had the most interaction.

I've had very little other than through his writing. And so Justin, why don't we start with you. Walk us through a little bit of J. Packer's Life and Ministry.

Go ahead and we welcome a brief monologue to fill us in on some of the details and some of the history of this remarkable man and his remarkable life. Sure, he was born James Innell Packer 94 years ago, July of 1926 in England and his family. By his own admission was rather unremarkable.

They were a lower middle class Anglicans and church going, but didn't even really pray together at Meals, so they were a nominal Anglican family. The beginning of the Packer story is with his head injury. If you've ever heard him tell anything about his life, it always goes back to when he was seven years old.

In junior school and chased by a bully outside of school, goes into the street, it's hit by a bread van, kind of a headlong collision. And fortunately, there was a surgeon in the area who had trained in how to do this sort of brain surgery, but his cranium was depressed

and he had a chunk of skull missing. Fortunately, the surgery was successful.

He had damage to his frontal lobe, but obviously it didn't affect his speech or his intelligence. He had to wear this kind of aluminum plate over his head for several years, which made a young boy who was already a loner, even more ostracized from social things, but loved reading, loved writing. 11 year old boys in that time period in that country were kind of received bicycles on Christmas as sort of a coming of age present.

Sorry, not for Christmas, but for their 11th birthday and Packer can have dropped hints to his family that he would like one and he tells the story of kind of coming down on the morning of his birthday and finding an old typewriter under the table rather than the bicycle that he was expecting. He's crestfallen, but he said it was really a prophetic, beautiful, brilliant gift from his parents who could foresee that a boy like him would benefit more from a typewriter than from a bicycle. Did you say what city in England? I missed that.

It wasn't north of Gloucestershire. 20 minutes. 60 miles west of Oxford around that area.

It was a typewriter. My kids were not a response. It was not a typewriter.

It lasted six or seven years, but he really, until he was no longer able to physically type, he never transitioned to word processors. He always typed on a typewriter. He was confirmed in the Anglican Church, the local Anglican Church, St. Catherine's at the age of 14.

He said he was confirmed and had never even heard the word conversion and didn't know what it meant. Then age 18, he wins a scholarship to Oxford University. His dad was a clerk at the Great West Railroad Station.

He was a free ticket, arrives on campus, basically, once suitcase in hand. He says he was awkward, shy. He was an oddball.

He gets there, and three weeks later, to make a long story short, he was converted. He listens to an old Anglican clergy member given a evangelistic address, kind of unimpressed with it, but the guy started to talk about his own camp experience growing up and what Jesus meant to him. Packer is listening, thinking, "Do I really know Christ?" At the end of this address, they sing just as I am.

Packer gave his life to Christ. He said, "I came into the church, an unbeliever, and I walked out knowing Jesus Christ." That was a Christian. The next big thing that happens at Oxford is that another Anglican clergyman, it's interesting how these older Anglican men have an impact in Packer's story, and they know that Packer's this intellectual bookworm.

They say, "Hey, you want to go through all of that?" He goes through all of that and

helps us out. Packer does it, and his eyes come across the works of John Owen. The volumes were uncut, meaning nobody had ever actually opened them.

Packer notices the volume on sin and on temptation, cuts them open, starts to read, and basically is never the same again. He had been caught up in a higher life theology, a deficient view of sanctification, struggling with his own sin and dwelling sin. It just feels like that.

That ended up changing his life. It changed the direction of his theology, of his spirituality. He went on to do a doctorate at Oxford on Richard Baxter, who was a contemporary of Owen.

He really thought of himself as a latter day Puritan, like a man born out of place. If you have read his writings, if you've ever seen him speak, it is like a man coming out of another century. He ended up writing his first book at the age of 31, "Fundamentalism and the Word of God that Erbmans published on the authority of the Lord." It was a piece for its attract, for its times, and yet you can still read it quite profitably.

You can't say that a lot of books written in the 1950s were seeking to be contemporary. Packer is always trying to speak to the modern issues, but drawing from the wisdom of the past, which I think gives his books a real timeless quality to them. Married, Kit Mullitz, who is a Welsh woman, adopted three children together.

Interesting story about knowing God, which of course is his most famous book. A woman asked him in the 1960s if he would do a series of articles for this bi-monthly evangelical magazine. That was the name of the evangelical magazine just on the Christian life and what it means to know God.

He took that assignment and wrote what would become a chapter as just an article at a time. Then he approached IVP over in the UK and said, "May, would you be interested in doing this as a book?" It took him like five years to write it because he was just doing a chapter every other month. They said that they really wanted a book on the charismatic issue in Great Britain.

They wanted him to do that first and wouldn't accept a book on any other topic. He said, "I'm okay," and went over to Hotter and Stotten and they published it. IVP, UK, I'm sure, rose that decision to the day.

Our university press in Downers Grove ended up picking up in 1973. The US version that we've all read and benefited from comes from that time period back in the early 70s. Was that keeping in step with the spirit then that he did write then in the charismatic? That ended up being his contribution later.

Little-known fact that when I was at East Lansing, and it's not that little-known, but Kirk Cousins for a time went to our church and there's some connections with football people.

I met with him for a year or two and we read some books together. He read through knowing God with Kirk Cousins.

He's a ranch salesman. Kirk Cousins. I remember reading through that book with him.

Actually, it wasn't at the Pizza Ranch. It was at the Pizza House and East Lansing. To tell you about the NCAA, he was very particular.

He said, "I'm taking out a college student, so I'm going to pay for him." He said, "No, you just probably shouldn't do that. I don't even know if you should be able to give me a book. I mean, it's just weird, but just Packer would have never known where that book would have gone." Justin, give us a hand.

It would have been a better story if Kirk had been suspended for the entire season because you bought him cactus bread. He had to sit out a season for reading knowing God gifted him by a pastor. When did he come to, I was going to say the States, but he came to Canada? Yeah, he was most popular in the United States, but he never dwelt in the US.

He came to North America, of course, 1979. In the '50s and the 1970s, he had been serving at Tindale House and Cambridge and Trinity College and Bristol and Lattimer House and Oxford. He never had these big prominent academic appointments, but 1979 James Houston, who was an old friend of his, going back to their undergrad days at Oxford, asked him if he would consider coming over and joining the faculty at Regent College in Vancouver.

So there was not an easy decision to make, but he made that decision and never went back to live full time in England and basically made the journey. Was that decision Justin made easier by the divisions within the Evangelical Church in the UK at the time? I think so. I think he was ready for a change, but I think he also, you know, there's back story to all these things and probably things we don't even know, but I think that there was attention and riffs and, you know, perhaps he wasn't getting fully the recognition that he thought he deserved or maybe he just wanted a fresh start, but I think Regent looked like an attractive option for him to be able to teach, to be able to write, to be able to travel.

So there's a story, there in a back story that I don't know all of the ins and outs of it. And when did he leave the Anglican Church? The Anglican, I think it was in '19, I think it was in 2008 that he was actually suspended from the Canadian Anglican Church. I should have said the Anglican Church altogether.

Yeah, so he was part of an Anglican diocese in Vancouver that in 2008 suspended him and the Church for the gay issue, the gay way as he called it. So that was, I think, a painful part of his life. We tend to think of him as an Evangelical, and of course he was,

and he talked about Anglicanism as being himself an Evangelical Anglican, and really stressed the Evangelical part of it, but all through his story from when he was being raised to his education, to his associations all the way along, it's really an important part of his story that he is an Anglican Churchman.

So the fact that the Anglican Church of Canada basically gave him and his church, the boot because of their biblical fidelity, is a sad part of his story, sad for him. I think the Lord continued to bless him and his faithfulness there, but that's something that Evangelicals can kind of skim over that. Oh yeah, that was kind of a technical thing, but I think for him it was a very personal and difficult thing.

And he continued to write then for many years. Yeah, he never produced his systematic theology, which he really had a heart and a dream to do a lay-level systematic theology for God's people. I think the closest he came to that is the concise theology, which was published, Crosshoo is going to actually do a hardcover version of that, where it's Packer at his most brilliant because he's basically doing a doctrine and just a page or two.

In some ways I think it's easier to write a 50 page chapter on doctrine than it is to write a one or two page, but he continued to write on Ryle, he especially focused in his later years on Catechism, he kind of called it Packer's Last Crusade, really wanting the church to Catechize the next generation, and not just in terms of question and answer format, but discipling teaching the church's sound doctrine and spirituality. He thought of the evangelical, sorry, the English standard version as his greatest contribution to the kingdom, which for us at Crosshoo is really a humbling thing to hear, but he thought that that was perhaps the most significant kingdom labor that he accomplished in all of his decades of life. You could certainly make a good case for that.

We talked about knowing God, of course, his most well-known book, but I'm curious for each of you, what's after that, what's been the most influential book of Packer's in your life, and I'll jump in because I don't want you to take mine. I've read, not all of them, but a good deal of them, and certainly after knowing God, or maybe even above that for me is a quest for godliness, the Puritan vision of the Christian life, which is a series of articles and essays he wrote that then put together a cross-way book, right Justin? Yeah, the US version. And it's just, I mean, it's, again, it's Packer at his best, maybe a bit more academic than some of his other works, but really well done, well researched, of course, always well written, and without doing, descending into hagiography on the Puritans, that they got everything right, and they were the Golden Age.

Just a wonderful job in that book of detailing different aspects, not only their theology, but life and marriage, and how they thought of Christian discipleship and doing it in a way that brings to bear the best of the Puritans in our lives, and is intellectually responsible and yet inspiring for the Christian, and that's what I think Packer did so well. I mean, I read that years ago, maybe early in ministry, and have gone back to it often.

Colin, what would you say is top on your Packer book list? I'm holding up evangelism in the sovereignty of God, a remarkably clear, compelling book that I've found not only helpful in my own life and my writing and teaching on Reformed theology, but I came out of a background that, within crew, always had a lot of evangelistic fervor, and I came up through an environment that also emphasized Reformed theology.

And so I've never really had attention, or I've never seen attention, also when you study Whitfield, you study Edwards, and you study all these folks. You don't know that there's attention, but I've found that Packer's book is the most helpful place for other people to be able to pick up some of the basics. I just remember a couple things from it, especially his teaching on prayer, that when it comes to prayer and evangelism, everybody's Reformed.

We all pray that God would open the eyes of our loved ones and our neighbors to believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And I love the way this is typical Packer, the way he closes evangelism in the sovereignty of God. He says, "We would not wish to say that man cannot evangelize at all without coming to terms with this doctrine, but we ventured to think that other things be equal.

He will be able to evangelize better for believing it. Convicted as a Reformed evangelical Anglican, but not somebody who was adamant about dividing the church." I think some people would criticize him for that when it comes to evangelicals and Catholics together. Again, that was Packer, who was always true to sort of a little bit more of an Anglican ecumenical vision than some Reformed people would like.

But again, also I think it shines through in a really positive way in his defense of Reformed theology and evangelism in this book. Right, he could sign ECT and the statement against ECT. That's just confusing.

Justin, what are one or two of your favorites? Did we steal them already? No, I actually have not read through evangelism with the sovereignty of God, though I've heard of it for many years. You're going to do that. It'll be quick.

It'll be great. Quest for godliness. I think it would be at the top of my list.

There's another one that was less known knowing Christianity, that was kind of three books in one, basically, on the Lord's Prayer that Apostles created the Ten Commandments. At Crossway, we published the North American version, and then we broke them up into three little books and their beautiful little books. But maybe I'll choose from my answer, besides concise theology.

I'll just start listing them all. The death of death of Christ. That wasn't a full-length book.

But when I was kind of learning about Reformed's eteriology in college and debating predestination, that is an introduction to John Owens' death of death and death of Christ,

which is more well known in Owen's book itself. Nobody actually goes on and reads Owen, but they read Packer. I think they know what Owen's life is.

But there's Packer in his kind of Reformed, soteriological glory with kindly willing to throw some punches and to define his terms and to say, "Arminianism is not biblical and does not glorify God and all the salvation is of the Lord." So reading that as a 20-something college student, that was influential and made an impact on me. I really liked a lesser-known one, *Rediscovering Holiness*. I'm not sure if probably the version I was reading 10 years ago was republished.

I'm not sure if it came out earlier than that. But when I was doing my inferior book on Holiness, I always tell people, "Rejays..." If you're going to read one, read "J.C. Ryle" on Holiness before you read Kevin Young. But reading through Packer, and of course, he did so much to take the best of J.C. Ryle and those insights.

They had some similar inclinations and so much of Ryle's book on Holiness was counteracting the beginning of the Kessick movement and Higher Life, which played an important part in Packer's biographies. You can see why they would resonate there. But that was a really good book.

You mentioned just later in life is emphasis on catechesis and going through and championing the best of, whether it's the Lord's Prayer or Apostles, teaching people and our children and new believers, the basics of our faith in a very simple yet thoughtful way is really the legacy of J.I. Packer and we've all benefited from it. I wonder, Colin, did you... We can come back to books. I probably... I know I've forgotten a bunch of them.

But Colin, I want to ask Justin this, but I know he's going to have more to say than the two of us. Did you meet J.I. Packer? Do you have any personal J.I. Packer stories? More than you realize, Kevin. Do you not remember how we would have intersected? Think about this.

Yeah, you're kind of thinks of Colin as a mentor. It's always really... No, Christianity today. Yeah, okay.

Right. So when I was... When I was before I went to work for Christianity today, it was... I mean, the masthead was Timothy George, J.I. Packer, Thomas Oden. And now serving on the advisory board for Beeson Divinity School and being next door and having an office there, of course, Timothy George has been a huge influence in my life.

But then, of course, it was J.I. Packer there. And so he would visit at least once, if not twice a year. He'd come down.

Justin, of course, these were tied with your guys' meetings at Crossway, usually. Because those are... I mean, the two office buildings are within a couple of miles of each other. And so he would come down.

And this was the key, Kevin. He was by himself staying in the holiday in Carroll stream, Illinois. In case you're wondering where it is, it's behind the White Castle.

So he was probably filling up one of those plastic cups of waffle batter. That's a fucking joke during the morning. Dumping him, taking care of his own waffles.

Yeah. To have some like this evangelical titan, and he's there, it's basically the only place you could stay that was near the office at Christian Eddy today. And so every night, though, he... I mean, you just have... He'd be there for a whole week for Christian Eddy reading through marking up articles, giving lectures.

And the whole week, it was like, "Well, as calendar is wide open for dinner, if anybody wants to take him out, you can take him out, and Christian today will pay for it." So I did this as many times as possible. And we'd go to the Indian place where it was never hot enough for J.I. Packer. I don't think he had taste buds anymore.

It's never hot enough. I will jump in with one act of the last time I would jump here. That I saw him was in Vancouver.

And I don't want to derail you, Colin. So I can let you get back to your... No, go ahead. I know this story.

Go ahead. Your White Castle dates with the woodjack packer. I never took him to White Castle.

Do you feel clear? Go ahead. Hey, Christian, today's paying for it in the minus. We'll take him to a nice place.

Go get some sliders. So I traveled up to Vancouver to see if we could finally wrangle in this last book that he wanted to write, which is on the Anglican heritage, which I'm very pleased to say Crossway is going to be able to publish it. Lord willing, in 2021, his wife read aloud to him the final manuscript.

And he made verbal edits when his eyesight was unable to edit in person anymore. But I went up there and spent a whole day with him when we went to an Indian restaurant because I was told that that is his favorite food to eat. And when the waiter said, "Would you like it?" My elder medium or hot?" And he said, "I will take it as hot as your conscience allows." Somebody told me that when he's traveled in foreign countries, they are amazed at packers.

But they are. It has to be for spice. I can food like he likes his Calvinist's materiality.

It was, I mean, these, just remember, I'm basically 23 years old at the time, 24 years old, newly married. And I've got friends still in college or friends in ministry. So I invite them out and I'm like, "Hey, guess what? We're going to dinner with J.I. Packer." So one of our

friends, she's gone on, she's at a degree at Oxford in apologetics.

She's married to an Anglican pastor. Now in the UK, she came to one of them. Another one of my friends who went to be a pastor up in North Dakota, he came to one of those.

So it's just open time to ask any questions of Packer. And you can imagine what kind of like formative effect that would have had on me and my wife. But then also one other thing that I share about him is early on, my first job at Christianity Today was to help to write a book about Billy Graham.

And so we interviewed Packer on one of these visits and he was sitting in this little office that would later become my office at the time it was vacant. You're just sitting there and not again, the Christianity Today office is not behind the white castle, it's behind the Culver's. Now, so again, imagine, step up, step up for sure.

And he's just sitting there marking and we're interviewing him and it's like one o'clock. And he keeps falling, his head just keeps drooping and drooping and drooping. And I keep asking questions thinking, "What am I doing wrong here? This guy literally..." I mean, is there a time when J.I. Packer has not been old? You know, not looked old? I imagine when he was young, he looked old.

And he's just drooping there. And then finally I'm like, I look at my colleague who's interviewing and I say, "I think he just fell asleep on us." And then there Packer snaps up, "I'm listening." It's like, "Oh, no, sorry, never mind." And so just brilliant insights, but it was fun to be able to have known him on a personal level and to have and just to see these offbeat moments where he would dain to spend time with these young people who didn't know any better at random restaurants in the suburbs of Chicago. What a man.

I only met him one time and then we'll ask Justin to fill in much more. It was at the ill-fated Dallas Book Expo. Oh, no.

I remember where I was. Preserved like a hundred thousand seats. No.

I went to come in and there were, I mean, literally doing debates in symposium and cavernous halls that would seat 3,000. And then there were 20 people to listen to me and Mark Galli talk about the emergent church. In 10 years, Kevin, it will have been seats for 500,000 people.

Just think the number keeps growing. I think the 20 is exaggerated. Yes.

There weren't actually 20 people. There were-- That's exaggerated. Yes.

J.I. Packer was there, felt bad that he was there. We all felt bad that we were there. But I was doing stuff on the emergent church and someone from Moody said, "I really want you to meet J.I. or Dr. Packer."

I'm sure he's going to want to meet you, which I'm sure he didn't know who I was or wasn't that interested in meeting me." So I went up and said a few things and I wish I could do his British accent well. But they said, "Oh, this is Kevin Young. He's written this book on the emergent church." I'll never forget what he said.

He said, "Ah, yes. There are many ways in which one may deviate from the true path of Christian faith, and the emergent church has certainly found one of them." And that was about it. And I just thought if that could have been a blurb on the book, hopefully great.

Justin, did he read all the books that he blurb? Did you ever talk to him about his thinking in blurbing so many books? I mean, very generous. But did he have a vision? Yeah, I did ask him about that once. Apparently, he was a Reform Theological Seminary in Orlando at one time and some student walked up and said, "Dr.

Packard, do you actually read those books?" And just looked at him. Packard never responded anything like quickly. Everything was just this slow deliberate.

And so he said, "Young man, what are you saying about my integrity?" Sorry for asking that little question. So I think he said once that he would often read the first sentence of every paragraph in a book. So if you do that, you can get the main idea, you get the argument.

It's more than just reading the beginning and the end of a chapter. If you're going to work in through the whole book. I think that he saw as, I asked him once, actually about it, and I always should of course remember his exact answer.

But I said something like, "Was it an act in your mind of love, of generosity, for younger scholars and pastors, who didn't have your platform, but could rely upon it or something like that?" And he said, "No, that's not what I was doing." So he always gave like a 10 minute answer to any simple question. But I think he really saw as an act of love for the reader itself, and not as much as an encouragement for the author. But his whole life was about discipleship, about nurturing people in the faith and pointing them to good resources.

And I do think there were a number of books that I think I'm not sure that I think you're overly generous spirit. They have been a little overactive on that one, or perhaps the devil is in some of the middle sentences of the paragraphs. That's true.

That's too blurbed. But I think he saw it as a way to kind of love the church and point to good books. Justin, as we wrap this up, just your time over the years and certainly working on the ESV and other projects, I mean, what was J.I. Packer like the man, the Christian, the godly giant? We, like anyone, had clay feet and idiosyncrasies.

But as far as I can tell, those clay feet were of a very ordinary sort of variety and really was a man of some singular talents and worth imitating. What can you just tell us about

getting to know him as a man and a Christian over the years? Yeah, he really was, I think, a great man. And he did have his failings and things that we would disagree on him with.

But he was a beautiful soul. I don't mean that to sound cliché. I remember walking away from meeting with him and thinking, "Each time I'm with this man, I want to be more like Christ." And I don't think, "I want to be more like J.I. Packer." I'm in awe of this great theologian.

He was a humble man who had no false modesty about him. He was honest about the gifts that God had given him. But he genuinely loved Christ and loved the church.

And I'm not saying anything out of school or revealing any secrets, but he would frequently comment, if asked about his biography, that every single thing that Alistair McGrath wrote in the biography was 100% true. But I think he had some regret that people missed the human nature of him, his gleam in his eye, the laughter, his love for life and his love for people. I think one thing that struck me, such a giant of a man who kind of seems like he's transplanted out of the 1950s and plopped centuries later, has had such a tenderness and patience with the ordinary person.

So my job at one of the conferences was to kind of be his chauffeur and to get him from place to place. And some 20-year-old guy would walk up and say, "Hey, Dr. Packer, I wrote a book. I want to write a forward for it." And most of us, if we're not inclined to do so, would say, "Oh, yeah, I'd have to check my schedule." Or he would stop and say, "Well, let me tell you some of your..." I mean, here goes the 10-minute answer that it's just indicative, I think, of his kindness and his compassion, his gentlemanliness.

But at the root of it all, I think he was a man enamored by the beauty of Christ and never really got over the fact that he was a sinner saved by grace. So what a privilege to have... What a tribute. Yeah, and what a legacy to have your singular literary achievement.

There are many, but that will be remembered knowing God. Many will be remembered. But to have that as your legacy in writing, that you helped people know more about God.

His attributes, his character, the works of salvation, history of redemption is rich. And that book is... I mean, that's one of the few books of our lifetime. I guess that was right before we were born by a few years, but that I really think people will be reading 100 years from now.

It's that rich, biblical, simple, yet profound, and we give thanks to God for that, for his other works, and for the life and ministry of Dr. J. I. Packer.

[Music]

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[buzzing]