



# 18 Words







# 18 Words

*The most important words  
you will ever know*



J. I. PACKER

CHRISTIAN  
**FOCUS**



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For  
Ruth, Naomi and Martin  
with their father's prayers  
that they will make their own  
all that I have written about here





## FOREWORD

Much of the following material first appeared in the now-defunct magazine *Inter-Varsity*. It comes from an era in which biblical word study was in its heyday of popularity as a way into theological and spiritual understanding. Today such study is somewhat out of fashion, its reputation tarnished by mistakes of method which some of its pioneer practitioners are seen to have made. Yet its value remains great if it is properly done. Preparing this material for its reappearance, I felt the need to write an introduction setting out what seem to me to be proper principles for biblical word study, and marking off some of the pitfalls. But because I fear it is harder reading than the rest of the book, I invite readers who would rather skip it to do just that. And because its opening section touches on some semantic technicalities, it is printed in smaller type to show that it is more skippable than the rest.

Biblical references in the studies themselves are not, however, skippable; they are part of the argument, and are meant to be looked up.

I love pregnant brevity, and some of my material is, I know, packed tight (Packer by name, packer by nature). I ask my readers' pardon if they find obscurity due to my over-indulging this love of mine.



J. I. Packer





INTRODUCTION:  
OF BIBLICAL WORDS AND THEMES

Keys open doors; keywords open minds, and through minds hearts. This book takes keywords from the Bible – terms, we may truly say, from God’s own vocabulary – and spells out in a particular way some of the main thoughts linked with them. The goal is understanding, faith and wisdom. Since the words themselves are our starting point, I begin by asking you to brood with me for a moment on word study.



‘What do you read, my lord?’ asked Polonius, that classic compound of senile sententiousness and servile stupidity. Hamlet’s reply – ‘Words, words, words’ – was meant as an insulting non-answer, a put-down and brush-off for a prize specimen of the *genus*, tedious old fools. Of course we read words! – but we do so for the sake of their subject-matter, and may never notice how the words are used to convey it. Yet in fact the reading of words as words, the particular words which this or that writer chose in preference to any others in order to express his meaning, can be both fascinating and enriching. Some who travel by train are interested only in reaching their destination; some, however, like the present writer, are interested in trains too, and so get more knowledge about their journeys, and more pleasure from them, than do others. In the same way, some read literature just to get the message or story, while others savour the style and vocabulary as well, and the latter are likely to end up understanding what has been said more adequately than the former (hence the teaching of literary appreciation in schools and colleges). Nowhere is this truer than in the case of Holy Scripture.

PITFALLS WITH WORDS

Granted, there are pitfalls. To start with, we must not let words mesmerize us, even if they are words in the Bible. ‘Words,’ said



Hobbes, 'are the counters of wise men; they do reckon by them; but they are the coinage of fools.' To assume that a thing can be said only in the words in which we first learnt it and would ourselves express it, or in words in which the Bible says it, is a foolish though frequent mistake. Words are not magic. They are the raw material of language. God-given tools for conceptualizing and communicating. They convey meaning, reveal minds, evoke moods and stir thoughts. Their importance lies in the freight they carry and the jobs they do. To be sure, hearing, reading and speaking familiar words has a comforting and supportive effect, as all familiar things have; coming home to the familiar is like a return to the womb. But to be so tied to particular words as to think that no other words could possibly express the same meaning is superstition. Focusing on words must not be allowed to bog us down in that.

Then, second, we need to be clear on how to see what words mean. Words signify what they are used to signify in the particular linguistic circles (nations, tribes, families, gangs, interest groups) that use them. Thus they gain recognized public meaning, which dictionaries record. To use words in private senses without saying so would be perverse, because communication would then break down. Lewis Carroll makes Humpty Dumpty sneer at Alice for her protest at finding that by 'glory' he meant 'a nice knockdown argument'. 'When I use a word,' said he scornfully, 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.' We laugh, because this is outrageous; but we would not laugh if our friends acted that way, nor would they laugh if we did. Linguistic good manners require the listener to expect words to be used in the accepted way, and the speaker so to use them.

This leads to a further point. We must realize how perverse it is when construing others' words to take derivation rather than use as the clue to their meaning. Just as knowing that 'dandelion' was originally *dent de lion* ('lion's tooth' in French) does not prepare you to recognize the yellow flower that goes by that name, so knowing that *ekklesia*, the New Testament Greek word for 'church', has an etymological form that suggests *calling out of* somewhere (*ek-klesis*, from *ek-kaleo*) is no preparation for understanding what it means in use, which is just a gathering, assembly or congregation. In the Bible, as in ordinary life, words mean what they are used to mean – neither more nor less; and to import from etymology extra



notions which the writer did not demonstrably have in mind is to mislead oneself by finding in his statement what isn't there. Much word study, both secular and sacred, has erred here, assuming that a word's history must be part of the user's meaning every time. But ask yourself how you use words like 'dandelion', 'church', 'prevent' (which etymologically means 'precede', from the Latin *prae-venio*, and is used in that sense in the King James Version and the 1662 Prayer Book), and you will see that, as the song says, it ain't necessarily so.

Thirdly, we have to remember that words (apart from publicly defined technical terms) are regularly flexible, and gain their precise meaning each time they appear only as part of larger units of sense – sentences, paragraphs, lines of argument, chapters, books. Most words carry a cluster of possible meanings and nuances (see the dictionaries), so that you have to check the context each time to see which precisely is meant. To treat as technical terms, having a single standard significance, everyday words which convey different shades of meaning and may indeed be systematically ambiguous (like 'bat', which means both a hitting tool in cricket and a small twittering winged mammal that comes out at night; or 'pig', which some use to mean not the source of pork and bacon, but a policeman viewed as an old meanie) is a major mistake. Technical terms (e.g. computer, subjunctive, diminuendo, wok, tort, mulch) have universally accepted meanings within single frames of reference, so that their presence has a defining effect on the meaning of other words linked with them. The precise sense of such other words – ordinary everyday words, as we would call them – is fixed by the verbal flow of which they are part. Their range of possible meaning may be known to us from the start, but their specific significance each time they are used will only be discerned accurately through understanding the sentence and line of thought to which they belong. (For an example of what I mean, look at the ambiguous words 'range', 'sentence' and 'line' in that last sentence.) Many books on words, both secular and sacred, have been flawed by failure to observe how close particular words come to being used technically, or how far from that they are (how in Paul, for instance, 'justify' is more like a technical term than 'lead', 'holy' than 'good', and so on).

We need not dwell on the mistakes that Bible students have made through overlooking the fact that words in the Bible work



the same way as they do outside it. Suffice it to note that echoing biblical language is no index of spiritual depth and that statements explaining the meaning of biblical words from their derivation, along with statements beginning 'in scripture this word always means ...' are more likely to be wrong than right. You have been warned!

#### LIGHT FROM WORDS

But having said that, we may well extol word study – study, that is, of usage and meanings – as an avenue of insight into men's minds; which in the case of the forty-odd biblical writers means insight into the mind of God who spoke to and through them. Some keywords in the Bible – cultic terms, for instance – seem to have been at least semi-technical from the start (e.g. covenant, holy, sacrifice, worship, prayer, sin, wisdom, redeem); it is fascinating to watch their meaning broaden and deepen as God's historical self-disclosure by word and deed proceeds. Other keywords seem to have started with a 'this-worldly' reference and to have acquired theological meaning through being taken up by one and another as pictures, models and analogies of God's work and its fruits (e.g. light, life, word, power, death, faith, hope, blood, peace, kingdom, father, world, spirit, people, judge); it is fascinating to trace this process and reflect on why this or that word should have come to mean so much theologically and spiritually to this or that writer. While such study must always take its place as a handmaid to exegesis rather than a substitute for it, it has an interest all its own and sometimes, like an undulating footpath alongside a main road, it shows you views which those who stick to the exegetical highway never see.

In our time Christian teachers have been vividly aware of this and much good word study has been done, on a scale ranging from Kittel's mammoth *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (9 volumes, over 8,000 pages) and Colin Brown's *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (3 volumes, over 3,000 pages) to Julian Charley's slim volume *50 Key Words: The Bible* (69 pages). This book, however, does not strictly belong in that league, for though it starts with words it is both less and more than a wordbook. It is as untechnical as possible; it focuses not

on words as such, but on the realities to which they point; and though it is a biblical word which announces the theme of each chapter, the treatment of material is integrative and theological rather than analytical and 'biblicist'. My selection of themes reflects a purpose of spelling out the gospel which is the Bible's central message; therefore my style is expository and applicatory rather than exegetical and historical. Yet this book builds on the technical work of others, without which it could hardly have been written.

#### BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL WORDS

It is worth stopping here to note that our present-day Christian vocabulary contains two classes of words: those found in Scripture, and those coined or borrowed since New Testament times. Class two words – trinity, incarnation, person, nature, satisfaction, aseity, hierarchy, transcendence, omniscience, for example – should be seen as technical terms, introduced as vocal shorthand to express particular biblical thoughts and therefore defined with precision at the outset. Some of them have lost their precision in our theologically wayward age, but they all had it once, and it is a good rule to use them only in their classical sense and to espouse them only if you can show that their classical meaning is just crystallized biblical thinking. Today, traditional theological language is slippery and different people bend it different ways; one should not risk adding to the confusion.

Would it not then help us to think more biblically if we ditched all class two words and used biblical words only? Alas, the suggestion is specious and the objections to it seem unanswerable.

First, the proposal is *stultifying*. It would rob us of clarity. No science – that is, no department of tested and digested knowledge – can do without technical terms; they are needed for precision of thought and speech. Without appropriate technical terms communication would become unmanageably clumsy and progress in crystallizing truth would hardly be possible. This is as true in theology as in, say, astrophysics or ophthalmology.

Second, the proposal is *impoverishing*. It would rob us of truth. Technical terms that have been well defined and tested embody and transmit in capsule form much accurate knowledge and many correct decisions about matters that were once in debate. Thus

they act as a bulwark against error. The stage of church history is littered with the corpses of those who, having given up the technical terms *trinity* and *incarnation*, promptly fell into the errors that those words were defined to exclude.

In any case, we cannot today use biblical words with just the meaning they had for biblical writers, neither more nor less. Why not? Because they come to us loaded with associations and feeling-tones which they have picked up during the Christian centuries and which cling to them like coats of paint that cannot be burned off. Thus, when we use biblical words like predestinate, election, justification, perfect, sin, world, faith, grace, authority, devil, church, the associations in our minds which shape our interest and determine our questions are drawn from the world of post-biblical controversy – the world in which Augustine fought Pelagius and the Reformers fought Rome and the Calvinists fought the Arminians and the conservatives fought the liberals, each debating what the Bible as a whole really tells us about this or that. And in fact, the only worthwhile way for us to explore the themes which words like these designate is in explicit relation to our latter-day questions and interests, asking how biblical thought and teaching touches them, and how in general it engages with the lives of twentieth-century men and women. Anything less would be mere biblical antiquarianism, a solemn but ultimately trivial game. Our goal must be to think biblically, not just about Bible writers' problems, but about our own.

In the chapters which follow, biblical words announce the themes and biblical material builds them up, but technical terms are freely used and the angle of approach is contemporary. I try to think through the material in the light of today's perplexities, and to show how what biblical writers said in response to questions of their day can speak to questions of ours. Readers will form their own opinions as to how far I succeed.

#### THE SPIRIT AND THE SCRIPTURES

My hope is that the effect of this set of studies will correspond to what I take to be the Holy Spirit's dual purpose in relation to the Bible. In form, as I think we all know, Scripture is historical witness to God's work of redemption which climaxed initially in the incarnation,



immolation, resurrection and exaltation of the Son of God who is Jesus, and which will climax finally in the eucatastrophe (to borrow Tolkien's recondite but happy word) of Jesus' return in shattering glory to make all things perfectly new. Viewed from this standpoint (as view it we must, else we shall misunderstand it) Scripture is often written off as odd and remote, because its message does not square with what modern man thinks he knows. But in its essential nature, which unhappily not all seem to appreciate, Scripture is quite simply God communicating, God talking, God teaching, God preaching: God telling you – yes, you, with me and all other Bible-readers and Bible-hearers everywhere – things about Himself which call here and now for faith, worship and obedience; prayer, praise and practice; devoting, denying and disciplining ourselves in order to serve God; in short, our complete conversion and our total commitment.

Viewed from this standpoint, Scripture is the most up-to-date and relevant reading that ever comes my way. Three hours ago, for instance, I was reading the letter to the Hebrews, and by it God was telling me all over again of the finality and sufficiency of Jesus Christ to keep me in a joyful relationship with Him, with men, with circumstances and with myself. And whenever I read Ecclesiastes (I am something of an Ecclesiastes man) God teaches me afresh that trustful acceptance of life as it comes, and keeping on doing what I should, are the two keys to happiness both here and hereafter – wisdom which, for me at least, is always in season. And so on, and so on. Such is the Bible, the timeliest book in the world for you or me or anyone; and the Holy Spirit, who inspired it and who gives us understanding of it, leads us two ways when we allow Him to open and apply it to us.

On the one hand, the God-given organism of Scripture (sixty-six books in all, thirty-nine making the Old Testament and twenty-seven the New) has a centre, what Calvin called a *scopus* – that is, a focal point set in view, a target aimed at and a reference point for everything. That *scopus* is the Lord Jesus Christ himself, whom the prophets proclaim as the Messiah who should come and the apostles as the Messiah who has come and is coming again. The Spirit leads us to focus on Him and on our need of Him. We find Scripture acting both as the mirror in which we see ourselves as guilty, vile and helpless sinners who need saving, and also as the searchlight which



shows us the living Saviour – the Christ who is *there*, and there for us; or, better, the Christ who is *here*, and here for me. The Spirit puts us out of doubt as to Jesus' reality and brings us to know and trust Him as our own Deliverer from sin, from self and from the dark and painful emptiness here and hereafter for which hell – Gehenna, the burning place – is the apt name. (Scripture calls this trustful knowledge *faith*.) Thus we prove for ourselves the truth of Paul's statement that 'the sacred writings ... are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus' (2 Tim. 3:15). This is the first thing that it means to be taught by God (*cf.* John 6:45); one learns to cry with Charles Wesley

Jesus! the name to sinners dear,  
The name to sinners given;  
It scatters all their guilty fear  
It turns their hell to heaven.

O that the world might taste and see  
The riches of his grace;  
The arms of love that compass me  
Would all mankind embrace.

His only righteousness I show,  
His saving grace proclaim;  
'Tis all my business here below  
To cry: Behold the Lamb!

Happy, if with my latest breath,  
I might but gasp his name;  
Preach him to all, and cry in death:  
Behold, behold the Lamb!

No Christian can aim higher, or desire better, than that; and to set and keep us aiming and desiring so is one side of the Spirit's constant ministry to us through the Scriptures.

But there is another side too. With Christ at its centre, the Bible is like a huge circle embracing the whole of every man's life. Those who, in C. S. Lewis's figure, look *along* the Bible, as along the ray of a flashlight in the attic, find that all they are is weighed and judged by the light of the teaching, narratives and states of

affairs that the Bible sets before us. The Spirit of God leads us to make the judgment on our lives that He Himself makes. He leads us to measure ourselves by what Scripture shows us of right and wrong ways of being a parent, a child, a politician or citizen, a spouse, a single or bereaved person, a homemaker, a manager, a workman or employee, a neighbour, a teacher or student, an invalid, a rich man or whatever, and also by what we learn from scriptural precepts and examples (Christ, Abraham, Paul, Elijah, all the heroes of faith) or what true godliness involves. Regularly, when we thus weigh ourselves, we find ourselves wanting; and then the Spirit leads us to change our ways in accordance with that self-measurement. (Scripture calls this clear-sighted change *repentance*.) Thus we prove for ourselves the truth of Paul's further statement that all Scripture, being God-breathed, is 'profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work' (2 Tim. 3:16f.) This is the second thing that it means to be taught by God.

I hope that the following sketches of biblical themes (they are no more) will subserve the Spirit's double purpose of constantly leading us to love and adore the Christ of the Scriptures, and to amend our lives by their light. I have no interest in any study of biblical material that does not seek these biblical ends.