

I met a man once who had driven his entire family all the way across the country to attend a Bible conference. Amazed, I asked him, "Why did you come so far?" "Because I wanted to get under the Word of God," he said. On the face of it, that sounds wonderful. But it later hit me: Here was a man willing to drive twelve hundred miles to get under the Word of God, but was he just as willing to walk across his living room floor, pick up a Bible, and get into it for himself?
Howard G. Hendricks

The BOOK

THE FIRST TIME I READ THROUGH THE BIBLE I proceeded cover to cover: Genesis to Revelation. The second and third times I read through the Bible I used a packaged version that broke each day's reading into portions from the Old Testament, the New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs. The fourth and current time through the Bible I am reading it in chronological order.

The foregoing information is passed along not with pride over my accomplishment in reading through the Bible several times, but rather with shame that those times have been so few. At my age I should have already read through God's word, from beginning to end, at least twenty-five or thirty times.

Reading through the Bible in chronological order begins, not surprisingly, with Genesis 1:1

In the beginning...

But from Genesis 50 the reader moves to the sorrowful book of Job, before returning to the traditional sequence of the Pentateuch. Along the way, the various Psalms are inserted when they were written: Psalms 90 and 91 in Numbers, and most of the rest in First and Second Samuel, with the remainder tossed in with First

and Second Kings or the Chronicles. The words of the Prophets are read in the order in which they lived, and the Epistles are intermingled with the historical text of The Acts.

God's written word is a very *human* book. Through its Author, its Enabler, its scribes and its characters, we come to learn of holiness, righteousness, and evil; overwhelming obedience and faith, and cynical betrayal; honesty and deceit; purity and depravity. The Bible is a bottomless well of knowledge and insight into the truths of God. In it we learn of His personality and methods, His vocabulary and reason. We discover through both proclamation and narrative the qualities of God that make Him unique: His omnipotence, His omniscience, His Holiness and power.

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Romans 15:4

God's word was written to be read—not just listened to. It was meant to be consumed unfiltered. The teacher or commentator is an invaluable help, but nothing will replace the experience of the saint in solitary communion with God through the reading and studying of His word. There He speaks, while we reverently listen.

Aspects

Encouraging believers to know God and His ways, and to enjoy a more intimate communion with Him

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A God Built of Wishes and Dreams

It takes nothing away from the absolute holiness and grandeur of God the Father to learn, in His Word, that He is more than the sum of this world's vain suspicions regarding Him. If God—even as Spirit—is more human than this world gives Him credit, He loses none of His deity. If God is tougher, grittier than this world understands, He loses none of His purity. God the Father is all of this and more—and more than mortal man will ever comprehend. We need not waste time and energy recreating or adding to God from our temporal toolkit, for He is already more multidimensional and complete than we can ever imagine.

In spite of this, there are those intent on recreating God in their multicultural, “big tent,” all-inclusive image.

What chance has the old Christian God—a white male with a white beard—in a youth-oriented society? Why should prayer matter in a world that has found the power to clone sheep and build its own cyber-infinity on the Web? Young Europeans, in particular, are creating mix-and-match faiths, forging moralities where they can find them. Stalls in the Spanish pilgrimage town of Santiago de Compostela sell Rastafarian hats, Hindu incense and Kurt Cobain T shirts along with the crucifixes.

With the new range of spiritual choices, Christianity has become just another alternative lifestyle—as wacky as atheism or vegetarianism were to the grandparents of modern Europeans. “I only think of God when I’m in a beautiful church in Italy, or when I see the war in Kosovo on TV,” says Julia Flittner, a 22-year-old cafe waitress in Berlin, who says she doesn’t believe in a Christian God—and doesn’t know any of her friends who do either.

Fears of offending secularists mean that even in Catholic schools, religion classes tend to stress multiculturalism and ‘life skills’ instead of Bible stories. When Dubliner Phillip Kenny asked his 8-year-old daughter Grace who Moses was, she looked at him blankly. In France, a rigorously secular state

with a strong anticlerical tradition, the modern church isn’t even powerful enough to be despised. “Religion doesn’t interest me,” says Caroline, 17, a student at a Gay Pride parade in Paris. “It’s just fantasy.”

A recent survey asked Britons whether they believed in God. Most respondents said they did. The next question: “Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on Earth?” A popular response: “No, just the ordinary one.” (from an article by Carla Power in *Newsweek International*, July 12, 1999)

God doesn’t require our understanding—even recognition—to be who He is. But so that we can, if we care to, He’s given us His Book.

On Thin Ice

In a mild winter, one doesn’t walk across a frozen pond. In a normal winter one could drive a 4-wheel drive beast across the ice, but in a warm season, the tread of a solitary boot can shatter the deceptive surface.

Most people’s faith is as thin as the skiff of ice across a mild-winter pond. One step with the full weight of their beliefs and they go crashing through the film of misconceptions they hold about God. Thoroughly dunked, wet and humiliated, they haul themselves out of the cold bath of reality—only to turn their back on a God that would so deceive them. But the deception is of their own making.

Working through the Bible in its entirety brings the reader smack against the truth about God the Father—*His* truth; in His own words. The reader learns that His immensity will not fit into the one-dimensional cubby-holes created by man for His dwelling.

- Is He a God of love? Yes, incredibly so, with a love so deep and profound—so sacrificial—as to leave humankind speechless with gratitude.
- Is He a God of wrath? Absolutely—enough to make a strong man lose control of His senses.
- Is He a God who forgives? Yes—more than we will ever know or deserve.
- Is He a God of anger and retribution? You bet.
- Is He a God who overlooks wrong? Yes—for a while.
- Is He a God who punishes wrong? You’d better believe it.

Things They Never Taught Me in School

Learning about God through the words of someone else, while potentially worthwhile, is like getting to know Him through snapshots sent through the mail. Reading His Word through, however, from beginning to end, is like *living* with Him. You begin the journey at the point of His first moment with this world and man: the Creation. You end the journey at the moment at which this world, as we know it, ceases to exist, and a *new* relationship with God begins. Between these two epochal end caps lies a fascinating tapestry of deity creating, shaping, and mingling with the grind of life upon this earth.

A Bloodbath

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.
Leviticus 17:11

Those who have the habit of uttering the standard line after a natural disaster: "A loving God would never have done this."—or those who ascribe holy impotence to their God after a human disaster by proclaiming: "God is weeping."—should read through the Bible some time. His Book—especially, but not limited to what we refer to as the Old Testament—is literally *drenched* in blood and death.

God declared early on that the life force of a living thing was held in its blood. He also declared that blood would be a required stand-in for the sins committed by a people born into depravity. Blood would be required to atone for sin. God's specific, detailed instructions for sacrifice under the Mosaic covenant describe a system of consecration, atonement, and corporate purification that was a virtual bloodbath.

"Bring the bull to the front of the Tent of Meeting, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. Slaughter it in the

LORD'S presence at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. Take some of the bull's blood and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and pour out the rest of it at the base of the altar. Then take all the fat around the inner parts, the covering of the liver, and both kidneys with the fat on them, and burn them on the altar. But burn the bull's flesh and its hide and its offal outside the camp. It is a sin offering. Take one of the rams, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. Slaughter it and take the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides. Cut the ram into pieces and wash the inner parts and the legs, putting them with the head and the other pieces. Then burn the entire ram on the altar. It is a burnt offering to the LORD, a pleasing aroma, an offering made to the LORD by fire. Take the other ram, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. Slaughter it, take some of its blood and put it on the lobes of the right ears of Aaron and his sons, on the thumbs of their right hands, and on the big toes of their right feet. Then sprinkle blood against the altar on all sides. And take some of the blood on the altar and some of the anointing oil and sprinkle it on Aaron and his garments and on his sons and their garments. Then he and his sons and their garments will be consecrated." Exodus 29:10-21

For page after page in His Word, God tells Moses how the imperfection of human life is to be systematically reconciled before His presence.

"When a leader sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the commands of the LORD his God, he is guilty. When he is

made aware of the sin he committed, he must bring as his offering a male goat without defect. He is to lay his hand on the goat's head and slaughter it at the place where the burnt offering is slaughtered before the LORD. It is a sin offering. Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. He shall burn all the fat on the altar as he burned the fat of the fellowship offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for the man's sin, and he will be forgiven." Leviticus 4:22-26

The modern mind cringes at all the slaughter. It's hard to read of it and not wonder *why—why* would God require all this carnage? Why would He require individuals to bring a pure, spotless lamb or goat—an innocent one at that; the lamb had done nothing to deserve death—and sacrifice its life for *their* sin?

The first answer, made clear when reading through God's Word, is that God does as He pleases because *He is God*. Modern man doesn't like to be reminded that there is a supreme God who may do as He pleases, without answering to anyone. He is God; there is none other; He has no peer.

The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" John 1:29

The second answer—also a message for modern man—is found in the portion of the Bible we refer to as the New Testament. Jesus, the Son of God, came into this world as a *new* covenant—to replace, once and for all, every one of those innocent four-legged animals that had given their blood in place of man's.

First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Hebrews 10:8-10

God requires a sacrifice of blood for sin. He always has. Even so, with this requirement so unseemly and gross to our modern sensibilities, is He nonetheless a God of love and mercy?

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 1 John 4:9-10

A Context of His Own

MOST PEOPLE'S FIRST MISTAKE is to cast God in their own image.

The flower child of the '60s, with dope in her lungs and the forbidden fruit of free love in her senses, will expect a God of sweet, absolving license, one who smiles a lot, surrounds Himself with naked little children with daisies in their hair, and who blushes even at the thought of jealous wrath.

By contrast, the European child of the '40s is rather *expecting* a God of wrath. He is all too familiar with the sound and fury of anger dropped from the sky, of the acrid stench of hell wafting across a scorched earth, bodies tortured and twisted in their dance of death. He

knows the hard sweetness of revenge and retribution that lies like a cold lump in his breast. He knows the full flowering of hate, and he knows the words of prayers that beseech God's wrath upon a hateful foe.

But then the American child of the '50s is more comfortable with a God of sterile order, one slightly distant and detached, but one who is logical, clean, well-spoken, and, above all, sensible. His God relies upon church tradition—well-established, orderly—to hold sanity against the rigors of madness flitting all about. Everything on the fringes may be slipping horribly into the abyss, but, for this one, there is the reassuring constant of a Sunday morning suit, Sunday morning

Sunday School, and a Sunday morning message followed by Sunday noon pot roast and baked potatoes. His God is in charge. He doesn't know much about Him, but he depends on Him, and sleeps well at night knowing He is there.

When asked to give His name, God told Moses, "I AM THAT I AM." Swimming freely through the full depth of that succinct description (for it *is* a description), is the tacit recommendation that we not try to change who God is. He is everywhere, He holds everything in His hand, and He does not depend on the fantastical imagination, or context, of His created ones for definition.

Those who care to read of Him can be surprised by some of the things God has said and done. For no matter what decade or century crafted one's image of the Almighty, He is at once none and all of the above. What we *do* know of Him is little more than a thimbleful in the ocean of His personality, and what we *don't* know of Him can be shocking—even scandalous to moderns.

A Plan of His Own

Most people on the planet are familiar with the Exodus story in which the Israelites, long in laborious bondage to the Egyptians, are at last set free by God through the leadership of Moses. Through the tales of Sunday School and C.B. DeMille, most of us know at least the high points of God's process to free His people and establish them in their Promised Land.

The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."
Exodus 3:7-8a

Most people also know about how the king of Egypt refused to let the Israelites leave—how he, in fact, made life even more miserable for them for a while, before releasing them only after a series of disgusting plagues were visited upon him and his nation—the last being the deaths of their own first-born.

What some people don't know, however, is that the pharaoh was only following orders. He had little choice in the matter, since it was God Himself that was causing the king to be so obstinate.

The LORD said to Moses, "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go." Exodus 4:21

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites."
Exodus 7:3-4

"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them." Exodus 14:4a

Some might ask today, "Why would a 'loving God' do this? Why would He compound misery when it would be so easy for Him to have simply let the people go in the beginning?" Then one might ask further, "Why did He even permit His chosen people to be placed into bondage in the first place?" The answer is given in the end of verse 4:

"But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." So the Israelites did this. Exodus 14:4

No human convention or tradition, no mortal discomfort will stand in the way of God receiving His due glory.

*I sing the mighty power of God,
That made the mountains rise;
That spread the flowing seas
abroad,
And built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained
The sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at
His command,
And all the stars obey.*

*I sing the goodness of the Lord,
That filled the earth with food;
He formed the creatures with
His word,
And then pronounced them good.
Lord, how Thy wonders are
displayed,
Where'er I turn my eye:
If I survey the ground I tread,
Or gaze upon the sky!*

*There's not a plant or flower below,
But makes Thy glories known;
And clouds arise,
and tempests blow,
By order from Thy throne;
While all that borrows life
from Thee
Is ever in Thy care,
And everywhere that man can be,
Thou, God, art present there.*

Isaac Watts

Surprising Things

WILLIAM COWPER'S VENERABLE HYMN begins, "Sometimes a light surprises / The Christian while he sings." And the same can be said for the Christian's experience in reading through God's word. Sometimes the page illumines the truth about God in ways both marvelous and disturbing.

One of the more remarkable discoveries made by reading through the Bible is how a perfect, holy God repeatedly uses rather ordinary, imperfect people to accomplish His plan for this earth. In fact, one may deduce from Scripture that it is God's chosen method to employ the most disreputable, conniving, contemptible characters He can find.

Few professions are as low as that of the prostitute, yet one of the surprises discovered in the Bible is that God chose to include one in the family line that would lead directly to a lowly stable in Bethlehem...

Grace

The time was about 1406 BC. The Israelites were just wrapping up their forty-year period of desert exile. It was now time to cross the Jordan and move from the barrenness of Moab into the relative paradise of Canaan. There remained only one small detail. The already ancient city-state of Jericho sat on a plain near the western bank of the Jordan; its destruction would have to be the first real campaign of Joshua's push into the Promised Land.

Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. "Go, look over the land," he said, "especially Jericho." So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there. Joshua 2:1

In the fortified city was a prostitute and innkeeper who welcomed strangers of every ilk and nationality. Her house was conveniently situated against the inside of the

city wall: convenient for commerce—and convenient for the Israeli spies who would need a fast and private exit from their mission of reconnoitering Jericho for the advancing troops.

Almost immediately their presence in the city was discovered and reported to the king. He demanded that the prostitute Rahab give up her house guests at once, but she lied, saying that they had already departed the city. This was no harmless falsehood; if she had been found out, she certainly would have been punished under the ancient Code of Hammurabi, which stated "If felons are banded together in an ale-wife's [prostitute or innkeeper's] house and she has not haled [them] to the palace, that ale-wife shall be put to death."

This woman, however, was not only fearless but wise. She had been paying attention to all the news reports of what the Israelites had been accomplishing in the surrounding regions. She knew that their God—the one who carried them to repeated victories—was the one, true God of heaven and earth. She had made the conscious decision to turn her allegiance from the old ways of Canaan to the new ways of Israel. She knew who would win the coming battle.

Before the spies lay down for the night, she went up on the roof and said to them, "I know that the LORD has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you." Joshua 2:8-9

Rahab struck a bargain with the two Israelites, and, keeping their agreement with her, the spies subsequently returned and spirited Rahab and her family out of the city even while it was being burned to the ground. She was saved, and continued on with the Jews, eventually settling with them.

Joshua said to the two men who had spied out the land, "Go into the prostitute's house and bring her out and all who belong to her, in accordance with your oath to her." So the young men who had done the spying went in and brought out Rahab, her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. They brought out her entire family and put them in a place outside the camp of Israel. Then they burned the whole city and

everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD'S house. But Joshua spared Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, because she hid the men Joshua had sent as spies to Jericho—and she lives among the Israelites to this day. Joshua 6:22-25

Later Rahab, because she was living among the Jews, met a Jewish man and they were wed. This man's name was Salmon, of the house of Judah. One of their sons was Boaz, who lived in Bethlehem and became the grandfather of Jesse. Jesse had a young shepherd son named David who became King of Israel—and of his house would be born Joseph, who would take for his wife a young maiden by the name Mary.

*There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from
Immanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their
guilty stains:
Lose all their guilty stains, lose all their guilty stains;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their
guilty stains.*

*The dying thief rejoiced to see that fountain
in his day;
And there may I, though vile as he, wash all
my sins away:
Wash all my sins away, wash all my sins away;
And there may I, though vile as he, wash all my sins
away.*

IT ALWAYS SEEMS TO OFFEND when anyone forms an inaccurate opinion of me by inquiring with someone else. I feel like confronting them, grasping them by the collar, saying, “Here I am! Why don't you come directly to the source?”

The Lord God may not be so easily offended as I, but I wonder how He feels when the people of this earth—whether believers or no—try to learn of Him exclusively through second-hand sources. The faithful pastor will have valuable things to say about God—but he's not the source. The commentator or writer may contribute good insights to our understanding of God—but they're not the source. The teacher, evangelist, or friend may add special colors to our picture of how God works among us—but they're not the source.

Rahab passed from this life to the next not knowing the full extent of the Lord's grace. In this life she never knew—nor did she dare to dream—that she, a lowly woman of the street, would play a part in the very lineage of the long-awaited Messiah.

Salmon the father of Boaz, whose mother was Rahab,
Boaz the father of Obed, whose mother was Ruth,
Obed the father of Jesse,
and Jesse the father of King David...

...and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary,
of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ.
Matthew 1:5-6a, 16

*Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood shall never lose
its power,
Till all the ransomed church of God be saved, to sin
no more:
Be saved, to sin no more, be saved, to sin no more;
Till all the ransomed church of God be saved, to sin
no more.*

*When this poor lisping, stammering tongue lies silent
in the grave,
Then in a nobler, sweeter song, I'll sing Thy power
to save:
I'll sing Thy power to save, I'll sing Thy power to save;
Then in a nobler, sweeter song, I'll sing Thy power
to save.*

William Cowper

The Source

God has said in His Word, “Here I am! Come directly to the source!”

Though all three members of the Godhead inhabit the entirety of the Bible, the Old Testament is mostly concerned with God the Father, while the New Testament is mostly about His Son: Jesus Christ—which will be our subject next month, in the March issue of *Aspects*.

Aspects

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