

In a world where the only absolute is that there are no absolutes, there is little room left for the authoritative Word of God...

Many of us want a word from God, but we don't want the Word of God. We know enough to own a Bible but not enough for the Bible to own us.

Howard G. Hendricks

THE BIBLE ON MY DESK, the one propped up next to the keyboard, pencil holder and coffee cup, is one of those fat, two-handed jobs—you know, the size that really “spiritual” people lug under their arm to church. Along with the Scriptural text, it also contains, in the back, the gospels paralleled; teachings, discourses, parables and miracles of the Lord; chronological charts; lists of prophecies; notes on how to study the Bible; an encyclopedia, concordance, and the usual collection of maps.

Like most people, I was raised in Sunday School with the rule that when one opens to the center of the Bible, it will open to the book of Psalms. But in the center of my desk copy resides, instead, the book of Romans. It's a really thick Bible, you see, which is why—when thumbing through a more normal Bible that contains only the text—I'm always taken aback by the comparatively few pages in the New Testament. Paging through, it always arrives later than expected.

But by God's timetable it arrives at precisely the correct moment.

But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.

Galatians 4:4-5 kjv

Aspects

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

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The BOOK

From His genealogy in Matthew 1, all the way through to the final accounting and benediction at the end of the Revelation, the second part of God's Word is filled with Jesus Christ, the “only begotten” (or, unique) Son of God, “full of grace and truth,” the “true light.”

He is there, throughout: The Gospels tell of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection; Acts is the history of the beginning of His church; the epistles from Romans to Jude counsel the new “Christians”—as well as us today—how to live in a way pleasing to Him; and the last book, The Revelation, is, as the first verse explains, “the Revelation of Jesus Christ...to His bond-servant John.”

The entirety of God's word, but the New Testament especially, is the story of God's salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ. While it is, in a very real sense, a *library* of books penned by different authors, it is, even more, a cohesive whole—a seamless narrative written by only one: the Holy Spirit. And there is no better way to understand that lyrical thread of Deity condescended toward humanity than to begin on page 1 and continue at a steady, regular pace until the last word on page 1,309. Then, do it again—and again.

No one can hope to know God unless he has read what He has written. And no one can hope to know Jesus Christ, His Son, without reading what He said—and what the Spirit has to say about Him.

During the summer of 1998 we engaged a local man to paint the exterior of our house. Over a period of four weeks I was regularly subjected to the conversations between him and his small crew—some of whom claimed to be Christians. More than once I listened in stunned disbelief as they exchanged vast quantities of misinformation regarding God, Jesus, the Bible and the Christian life. If they were, indeed, believers—if the Spirit had taken up residence and begun the process of maturing—they were nonetheless wallowing in a sea of gross inaccuracies regarding Spiritual things. From their conversation I took it that not one of them attended church and, more telling, none had read God's Book.

Intolerance

SEVENTY-NINE TIMES in the *New International Version* of the gospels Jesus says, "I tell you the truth..." For example, when the people were bringing their children to Jesus for His blessing, but his disciples tried to turn them away, he used the moment for an object lesson about the kingdom.

But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." Luke 18:16-17

In the gospel of John He declares

"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." John 14:6

There is study, and there is reading. Study is important, indeed vital. God's Word is a limitless treasure house that yields up wealth to the individual committed to the deep examination of its riches. But study does not replace *reading*; they are two separate pathways—both leading to the mind and heart of God.

When we *study* God's Book, we stop on every word, walk around it, turn it over to see what lies beneath, find out where it came from, and how it fits perfectly into its context. We dig deep into each sentence, its structure and rhythm, even to its punctuation. In study we excavate down to the hard bedrock, gleaning every last morsel of truth from a passage. We pause, we linger, we meditate, we argue and consult with others, we agonize over uncomfortable concepts. Study is a full-contact activity.

Reading, by contrast, is just that: reading God's Word much as one would a good novel, or favorite biography. It is digesting the whole of it *as a whole*. In reading we may pass over history or ideas we don't understand, pausing only long enough to jot down the reference. Reading the Bible is like viewing a forest through a wide-angled lens, rather than crouching to examine one leaf under a microscope.

Reading the Bible is like listening to an entire symphony from beginning to end, rather than just one 8-bar refrain lifted from out of the whole.

There's a great line in the movie *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. In this raucous comedy of errors, a wife-abused husband suddenly discovers that a beautiful young maiden believes him to be her new master. She comes to him in innocent subjection and offers her body to him. Befuddled yet eagerly pleased over this turn of events, the man looks skyward, addressing the pantheon of gods, and says, "A thousand thanks, whichever one of you did this."

Jesus lived in a Roman world, one in which the truth was as cheaply purchased as it is today. And, just like today, there was universal tolerance for any variant brand of truth—except, that is, the real one.

The child too had his *genius* or *Juno*, as both his guardian angel and his soul—a godly kernel in the mortal husk... Other spirits came to his aid as he grew up: Cuba watched over his sleep, Abeona guided his first steps, Fabulina taught him to speak. When he left the house he found himself again and everywhere in the presence of gods. The earth itself was a deity: sometimes Tellus, or Terra Mater—Mother Earth; sometimes Mars as the very soil he trod, and its divine fertil-

ity; sometimes Bona Dea, the Good Goddess who gave rich wombs to women and fields. On the farm there was a helping god for every task or spot: Pomona for orchards, Faunus for cattle, Pales for pasturage, Sterculus for manure heaps, Saturn for sowing, Ceres for crops, Fornax for baking corn in the oven, Vulcan for making the fire. Over the boundaries presided the great god Terminus, imaged and worshiped in the stones or trees that marked the limits of the farm. Will Durant

Early on, Christianity was simply another religion added to the long menu of “truths” to which the populace could turn whenever something beyond themselves was needed. Rome was already in the habit of accepting foreign gods into its pantheon—especially those of the Greeks.

The Roman populace welcomed them, built temples for them, and willingly learned their ritual. The official priesthood, glad to enlist these new policemen in the service of order and content, adopted the Greek gods into the divine family of Rome... Durant

But, to the Roman, there was something disturbingly different about Christianity—as there had been something different about Christ. He was not offering just one more truth to be added to the rest, but claimed to know *the* truth—indeed, *was* the Truth! This wouldn’t do. And, just as today, His was the one truth rejected by a “tolerant” society.

THOSE WHO ARE IN OPPOSITION to the things of Christ like to display their ignorance of His Book by periodically announcing that Jesus—while possibly a good teacher, and all-around nice guy—was certainly not deity because not once, in all the New Testament, did He declare Himself to be the Son of God. I shrugged off this specious scholarship for years until, one day, I decided to see for myself if they were right.

My habit, when faced with the “wisdom” of this world, is to check it against the more reliable wisdom from above. What does God have to say about it? So applying the same method to this quandary I began by asking, *Did God say Jesus was His Son?*

The Necessary Element

The reader must come to the New Testament not with tolerance, but with *faith*. One may read of the Old Testament battles, the succession of kings, the poetry, the dust-laden prophecies with a measure of detachment. Faith is a necessary component to its ultimate apprehension, to be sure, but it can also be read with at least some profit by the alien.

To the one without faith the New Testament, however, is simply gibberish.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”
Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar?
Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?
For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.
1 Corinthians 1:18-21

One may come to the New Testament either seeking truth, or believing it already, but to the heart of the scoffer, its pages are laughable nonsense.

Father and Son

“This is My Son!”

Before Jesus began His ministry He thought it necessary to be baptized—to, among other things, demonstrate publicly His willingness to take upon Himself the role of a servant for the redemption of man. So He came to the Jordan, where His cousin John was baptizing those who were repenting of their sins. At first John, knowing that

Jesus had no need to repent, demurred. But when Jesus insisted, John baptized Him, as he had the others, and then

As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:10-11

No matter what Jesus did or didn't say during His subsequent ministry, it began with the strong pronouncement from God the Father that Jesus was, indeed, His Son. Later on in Jesus' earthly ministry there was another supernatural occurrence atop a high mountain in which God reiterated His familial relationship.

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters—one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." While he was still speaking, a bright cloud enveloped them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Matthew 17:2-5

The Son of _____

But what *did* Jesus say?

In His prayer, just before His arrest and crucifixion, Jesus was pretty clear about the relationship that existed between Him and God the Father.

At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Matthew 11:25-27

The skeptic would demand that we make it more fair by taking away the editor's capitalization. Even so, Jesus states the case with clarity:

Who is "Father"?

"Lord of heaven and earth." (Given this, it's doubtful that Jesus was praying to Joseph.)

What relationship does Jesus have with the Lord of heaven and earth?

"All things have been committed to me..." (emphasis added)

By whom?

"My Father." (emphasis added)

And if that isn't sufficiently clear, He goes on to explicitly define the relationship He (Jesus) has with the Lord of heaven and earth: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

I never wonder, when persons once doubt the deity of Christ, if they go to great lengths in slandering His character. I heard the other day something said with regard to our Savior's birth which it is not right for any man to repeat. Yet I said when I heard it, "Yes, and it must be so if He was not really God."

Charles Haddon Spurgeon

Some unbelievers have said that Jesus refers to Himself as "Son of Man," but never as "Son of God." But in at least one exchange with His disciples, He associates Himself with both.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. Matthew 16:13-17

Finally, for those who are still unconvinced, there is the following brief exchange between Jesus and the high priest, Caiaphas.

Then the high priest stood up before them and asked Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent and gave no answer. Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and

coming on the clouds of heaven.”
Mark 14:60-62

Did Caiaphas believe Jesus was claiming to be the Son of God?

The high priest tore his clothes. “Why do we need any more witnesses?” he asked. “You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” They all condemned him as worthy of death. Mark 14:63-64

At another time during that same fateful night, someone else quizzed Jesus even more directly.

At daybreak the council of the elders of the people, both the chief priests and teachers of the law, met together, and Jesus was led before them. “If you are the Christ,” they said, “tell us.” Jesus answered, “If I tell you, you will not believe me, and if I asked you, you would not answer. But from now on, the Son of Man

will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God.” They all asked, “Are you then the Son of God?” He replied, “You are right in saying I am.” Luke 22:66-70

You may ask me where I live. I might answer, “Look at the address on my electricity bill. Where, then, do I live?” Looking at the envelope, you would answer, “Winterset, Iowa.” And I would reply, “You are correct.” You might then turn to your companion and say, “Aha! He never said the words, ‘I live in Winterset, Iowa.’ Therefore, he must live somewhere else!”

And you would be a fool.

I can find no passage in the Bible where Jesus stands before a group of people and declares, in these exact words, “I am the Son of God.” But what I find instead are gospel accounts where Jesus repeatedly confirms that conclusion of others. Everyone from His disciples and followers, the chief priest Caiaphas, members of the Sanhedrin—even the demons Jesus removed from the possessed—they all either knew He was claiming to be the Son of God, or knew that He really was.

GOD’S WORD IS MADE MORE REAL by its cast of very real people. It is populated by characters just like us: people both remarkable and common, brilliant and stupid, poor and wealthy; those blithely innocent, as well as those wily and clever. In its pages people are born, they live imperfect lives, and then they die. Righteous people do wrong and sinful people do right. Innocent people are betrayed and evil people get away with murder.

In the pages of the Bible there is unabashed joy, anger, cruelty, lust, holiness, depravity, incest, goodness, greed, treachery, and sacrificial love. These are people cut from the same cloth as we, and their unvarnished, believable lives bring to God’s Book an authenticity that, along with the translation of the Spirit, stamps indelibly into the reader’s mind the truth of Scripture. And the imperfections endear their owners to the reader’s conscience.

Surprising Things

As Bad as They Come

It is easy for the casual Christian to set the apostle Paul—evangelist to the Gentiles, and writer of most of the doctrinal epistles in the New Testament—on a high pedestal. Some are tempted to add him to the throne room of God, setting him across from Jesus, to the Father’s left. But God always drew imperfect souls to Himself, and Paul was, before his conversion, about as bad as they come.

For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it. I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison... Galatians 1:13; Acts 22:4

Saul of Tarsus (Paul's name until sometime early in his ministry) had as his occupation the elimination of this new sect that threatened the traditions and foundation of Judaism. The early portions of the book of The Acts contain a catalogue of his vehement hatred for anyone associated with Jesus Christ.

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at (Stephen), dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Acts 7:57-58; Acts 8:1-3

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. Acts 9:1-2

Even after his roadside conversion by the Lord, Paul was thoroughly human in his imperfections. He didn't always get along with people, and could be less than patient when confronted by the imperfections in others.

On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas had taken along with them a young man called John Mark—son of Mary, Barnabas' relation, who owned the house in Jerusalem where an early church met. For whatever reason Mark (later to write the gospel account that bears his name) left the two missionaries to return home. Paul considered Mark's leaving to be abandonment, so when preparations were being made for their

second journey, and Barnabas suggested taking John Mark again, Paul refused. This disagreement caused a rift between the two, and they went their separate ways.

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. Acts 15:37-40

For a long period I puzzled myself about the difficulties of Scripture, until at last I came to the resolution that reading the Bible was like eating fish. When I find a difficulty I lay it aside and call it a bone. Why should I choke on the bone when there is so much nutritious meat for me? Some day, perhaps, I may find that even the bone may afford me nourishment. Anonymous

The Council

With the rose-tinted vision of hindsight, it is also easy for today's believer to imagine the early church as a unified whole—a cohesive collection of wise, saintly souls who, because of their closer proximity to Christ and His disciples, were in possession of a profound faith of which we can only be envious. The truth, however, is a picture that bears a closer resemblance to our own ungainly congregations today.

The early church included debate over doctrine—especially whether believers in The Way should be required to follow, as well, the dictates of Jewish law.

Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses." The apostles and elders met to consider this question. Acts 15:5-6

In his response to this, Peter stood and delivered a most eloquent speech refuting the Pharisaic position, which concluded

"Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the

grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.” Acts 15:10-11

A Fragile Faith

The members of the early church didn't always demonstrate the sort of unfaltering faith we often ascribe to them. There is an almost comical account in The Acts that reveals a collection of believers with a faith as fragile as ours.

After arresting (Peter), (Herod Agrippa) put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. Acts 12:4-5

So far so good. Peter is arrested and the church prays for his deliverance. Sounds familiar—and entirely appropriate. There was little the small community of believers could do against the power of the king, so they gathered together in Mary's house for sustained, “earnest” prayer. Only their faith wasn't quite as earnest as their words.

God worked a miracle that night. He sent an angel to rouse the sleeping Peter and to cause his manacles to fall away. The angel told him to get dressed and follow him outside—right through the guards! My, how this must have strengthened Peter's faith; how it must have validated his belief that God would rescue him. Well, actually, his first thought was that he was dreaming.

Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. Acts 12:9

But Peter quickly came to his senses and realized his rescue was real. He went straight to Mary's house, where he knew the people would be waiting. He knocked at the front gate for entrance, and through the closed gate told the servant-girl who it was.

When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, “Peter is at the door!” “You're out of your mind,” they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, “It must be his angel.” But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Acts 12:14-16

No, the saints of old were no more pious, no more Spiritual than their modern brethren. They were just normal folk carrying around all the same doubts, questions and guilt common to us.

Reading God's Book we see all of them as they were: just like us. We draw strength and encouragement from the realization that God works His perfect plan through imperfect people. But then, in the same reading, we see the true nature of His perfect Son; here we learn of Him through the words of His only authorized biography.

The place for God's Word is not an outside place, but an inside place. It is infinitely better to have it hidden in your heart than it is to have many copies of it laid among the furniture of your house. Spurgeon

The Source

*Tell me the stories of Jesus
I love to hear;
Things I would ask Him to tell me
If He were here;
Scenes by the wayside,
Tales of the sea,
Stories of Jesus,
Tell them to me.*

*First let me hear how the children
Stood round His knee;
And I shall fancy His blessing
Resting on me:
Words full of kindness,
Deeds full of grace,
All in the lovelight
Of Jesus' face.*

*Into the city I'd follow
The children's band,
Waving a branch of the palm tree
High in my hand;
One of His heralds,
Yes, I would sing
Loudest hosannas!
Jesus is King!
William H. Parker*

Aspects

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To Contact Us

Phone: 515-462-1971.

Postal address: 2444 195th Trail, Winterset, IA 50273-8172.

Internet address: dlampel@aol.com

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