



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 FIRST TIME I READ THROUGH THE BIBLE I PROCEEDED COVER TO COVER: Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21. 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. Since then I have favored reading through the Bible in chronological order.

The foregoing information is passed along not with pride over any great accomplishment in reading through the Bible several times, but rather with shame that those times have been so few. To date I have read through God's word, from beginning to end, perhaps ten or fifteen times; by now it should have been at least thirty-five or forty 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 within a reading of Numbers, and most of the rest in

First and Second Samuel, with the remainder added 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 whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance 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.

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 a 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."

(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

During a mild winter, one doesn't walk across a frozen pond. In a normal, bone-chilling winter one could drive a 4x4 beast across the ice, but in a warm season, the tread of a solitary boot can shatter the deceptive surface.

Most people's knowledge of God is as thin as the skiff of ice across a mild-winter pond. One step with the full weight of their misguided belief system 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 rudely 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 simplistic cubbyholes created by man for His dwelling.

IS HE A GOD OF LOVE? Yes, incredibly so, with a love so deep—so sacrificial—as to leave humankind speechless with gratitude.

As Jesus was about to go up to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and on the way He said to them, "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn Him to death, and will hand Him over to the Gentiles to mock and scourge and crucify Him, and on the third day He will be raised up."

Matthew 20:17-19

IS HE A GOD OF HOLY WRATH? Absolutely—enough to make a strong man lose control of His senses.

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, The whole earth is full of His glory." And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

Isaiah 6:1-5

IS HE A GOD WHO OVERLOOKS WRONG? Yes—for a while.

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up.

2 Peter 3:9-10

IS HE A GOD WHO PUNISHES WRONG? You'd better believe it.

Then the Lord passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations."

Exodus 34:6-7

IS HE A GOD WHO FORGIVES? Yes—more than we will ever know or deserve.

"Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses."

Acts 13:38-39

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