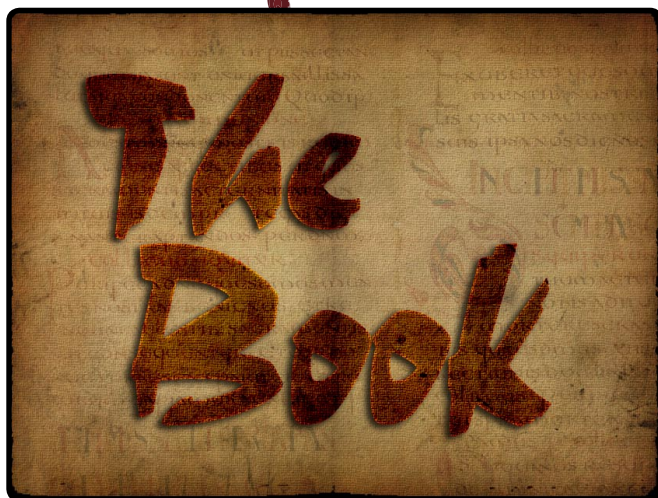


Taken as a Whole



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 believers, 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.

By God's timetable, however, it arrives at precisely the correct moment.

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

Galatians 4:4-5

From His genealogy in Matthew's first chapter, 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—in 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, not one of them had read God's Book.

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 deeply 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 might read 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.

THE NECESSARY ELEMENT

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 for them, saying, "Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all."

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 but through Me."

John 14:6

THE ONLY ONE

There is a great line in the 1966 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 fertility; 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...

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, He claimed to *be* the Truth! This wouldn't do. And, just as today, His was the one truth rejected by a "tolerant" society.

■ ■ ■

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, however, the New Testament is simply gibberish.

For the word 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,
And the cleverness of the clever I will set aside."
Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater 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 come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

1 Corinthians 1:18-21

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