

Meet God Again for the First Time (2003)
By Jon Paulien

Introduction

Jesus Is the Answer?

One day I was driving down an Interstate highway minding my own business when a strategically placed billboard interrupted my random thoughts. “JESUS IS THE ANSWER,” it proclaimed loudly in giant letters. Nothing more. No explanation. Not even a hint as to what the question might be.

No doubt the one who commissioned the billboard would tell you that both the answer and the question are explained in the Bible. Does that make you feel any better? Or does it make you want to run for cover? After all, didn't many of the Nazis read their Bibles (Germany was considered a “Christian” nation at the time)? Didn't many South Africans think the Bible supported apartheid? Wasn't David Koresh studying his Bible right up to the day the Waco compound burned down? Can't you find anything you want to find in the Bible? All these things are true, up to a point. Let me illustrate.

A young man was trying to get some help from the Bible one day. He hadn't spent much

time studying his Bible over the years, but now he needed some answers. So he tried an interesting method (he wasn't the first). After praying that God would guide him, he picked up a Bible and dropped it on a table, allowing it to fall open without looking. He then placed his finger on the open pages and looked to see what God might be saying to him. He read, "Judas went out and hanged himself." The answer was not only depressing, it didn't seem to have a lot to do with his question! So he decided to try the method again. This time the text he pointed to said, "Go and do likewise." Now the message was getting clearer, but he wasn't too thrilled with the direction things were going! So he thought he would try the method one more time to see if he could get it right. Again, he dropped his Bible and put his finger on a text. This time he read, "What you are doing, do quickly." What this outrageous story demonstrates is that you can put Bible texts together to prove anything you want to prove.

What Do You Mean, "I Don't Get It?"

Is that all then? Is there no point in even trying to understand what the Bible is all about? Interestingly, the Bible itself offers some serious cautions about the limits of human research. In Jeremiah 17:9 it says, *"The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?"* This text ought to be very disturbing to anyone who thinks they understand the Bible. It suggests that there are self-deceptive mechanisms inside every one of us that blind us to the way things really are. They work in service of an internal "spin doctor" (the heart) that protects our psyche from stuff we don't really want to know. Psychologists call these self-deceptive techniques defense mechanisms. We have a natural bent to distort reality and to

avoid the truth about ourselves.

Let me illustrate how defense mechanisms work. Suppose I was teaching in a large classroom when Randy Johnson walks in with a baseball in his hand. For those who never heard of him, six-foot-ten Randy Johnson makes a good living throwing baseballs 101 miles per hour! He's somewhat scary looking too. Suppose he took exception to something I told the class and launched his 101 mile-per-hour fastball right toward my nose? Would I stop teaching and ponder my response? "Well, let's see, Randy Johnson just launched a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball toward my nose. I suppose I should start thinking about getting out of the way!" I don't think so! Much faster than you can say "Randy Johnson" I would have my hands up in front of my face to block this attack on my life! I wouldn't need to think about it. I wouldn't even be conscious I had done it until after I felt the sting of the baseball on my wrists. The reaction would be automatic.

Just as there are natural defense mechanisms at the physical level, so there are natural defense mechanisms at the emotional and psychological level. If someone says something hurtful about us, we may react defensively without even being aware that we have done so. We quickly defend our honor and reputation even when we argue loud and long that we are not acting defensive!

At a basic level, then, these mechanisms of defense are self-deceptions. When things go wrong, when we fail at something important, or when we are under verbal or emotional attack, we move quickly to our own defense, whether we intend to or not. Defense mechanisms help us avoid feeling bad about ourselves. And if knowing the truth is going to make us feel bad

about ourselves, most of us would prefer not to know the truth.

The greater the perceived threat, the more rapid and thorough the response. So we shouldn't be surprised that when we open the Bible, faced with the ultimate threat (God), our defense mechanisms go into warp drive. People distort the message of the Bible out of a need to protect their own feelings and ideas from a higher authority. If you can't beat Him, reinterpret Him! Perhaps this is why there are so many different churches, all claiming to follow the Bible!

What should we do, quit trying to understand ourselves or the higher realities of the universe? I'm not sure we could if we wanted to. There is something about the human spirit that asks questions and demands answers. And throughout history, hundreds of millions of people have found the Jesus of the Bible to be the answer to life's deepest questions. Hundreds of millions of people have been willing to die for the things they have learned from the Bible. It makes sense that we give it a serious shot for ourselves, at least once. I'm inviting you to do it now, using this book as a guide.

Getting the Big Picture

Is there a way to read the Bible that will leave us more open to its message? Is there a way to avoid making the mistakes so many others have made in contemplating its pages? A good way to understand any book is to spend time with the author of the book. So it is helpful to invite God, the ultimate Author of the Bible, to be present as we read His Book. If anyone can help us understand the Book, it is the Author of the Book.

The next step is to approach the Bible in a way that is quite different from that of the young man who thought the Bible was telling him to commit suicide. It is to take a big picture approach to the text. To look for the flow of what is actually happening in the Bible, rather than seeking to impose our own flow on the text. It is to be open to the whole Bible, as it reads, rather than picking and choosing what looks good to us at first glance. It is to ground one's understanding on what is clear in the text, rather than trying to make the less clear things say what we want them to say.

How did I learn this method? One day in Brooklyn, NY I had a visit from a Jehovah's Witness. I decided to spend some time studying the Bible with him to see what they were all about. As might be expected, we disagreed over every Bible text that we looked at. In frustration one day I suggested something radical, "If the Bible is the ultimate source of truth, then no organization should be allowed to control what the Bible says."

Finally, we agreed on something! So we decided to lay aside all books and articles about the Bible and just read the New Testament (the part of the Bible that focuses most directly on the story of Jesus) through from beginning to end. When we finished we each asked ourselves the question, "Do my beliefs reflect the central themes of the New Testament or do they reflect what someone else has taught me?" We both discovered that the Bible, broadly read, was a very different book from what it seemed to be when you take a text here and a text there and put them together.

Now I don't know what our encounter did for that Jehovah's Witness in the long term, but I know it changed my life. I learned to test every opinion I held about the Bible with the

plain teachings of the text in its widest context. When I began to do this, I became amazed at what I had missed. The Bible became a very different book than the one I had thought I knew. I present the result of twenty years of such Bible study is what you will find in this book.

By all means test what you learn here by the text itself. When you have finished this book, do your own reading of the Bible. Read the big picture of the Bible for yourself, not just a little here and a little there. Don't judge my book by what you already think. Test it by what the Bible actually says. If you are already active in a church or have spent a lot of time with the Bible, I invite you to do what that Jehovah's Witness was willing to do. Lay aside everything you have ever heard about the Bible and approach it fresh, as if for the first time. I think you will be amazed at what you have missed. If you are not a Christian and don't know much about the Bible, count yourself lucky! In some ways you will have an easier time following the rest of this book than will someone who already knows a lot about the Bible.

The goal and purpose of this book is to understand both the question and the answer implied in that billboard I mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction. Reading this book will introduce you to the Jesus I never knew growing up in a Christian home. In an age when terrorists can succeed in unspeakable acts, we also need to know whether or not God is up to His job. I believe that reading this book will bring you the picture of a mighty God who is alive and well today. He is a God who can use the unspeakable acts of a tormented human race to create a better world. Reading this book will take you into previously uncharted waters, but I believe it will be a life-changing adventure!