

What To Do

The last time you tried reading it, you opened up to what seemed to be the eccentric rantings of a hermit prophet. So, what's in the Word for you?

BY JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

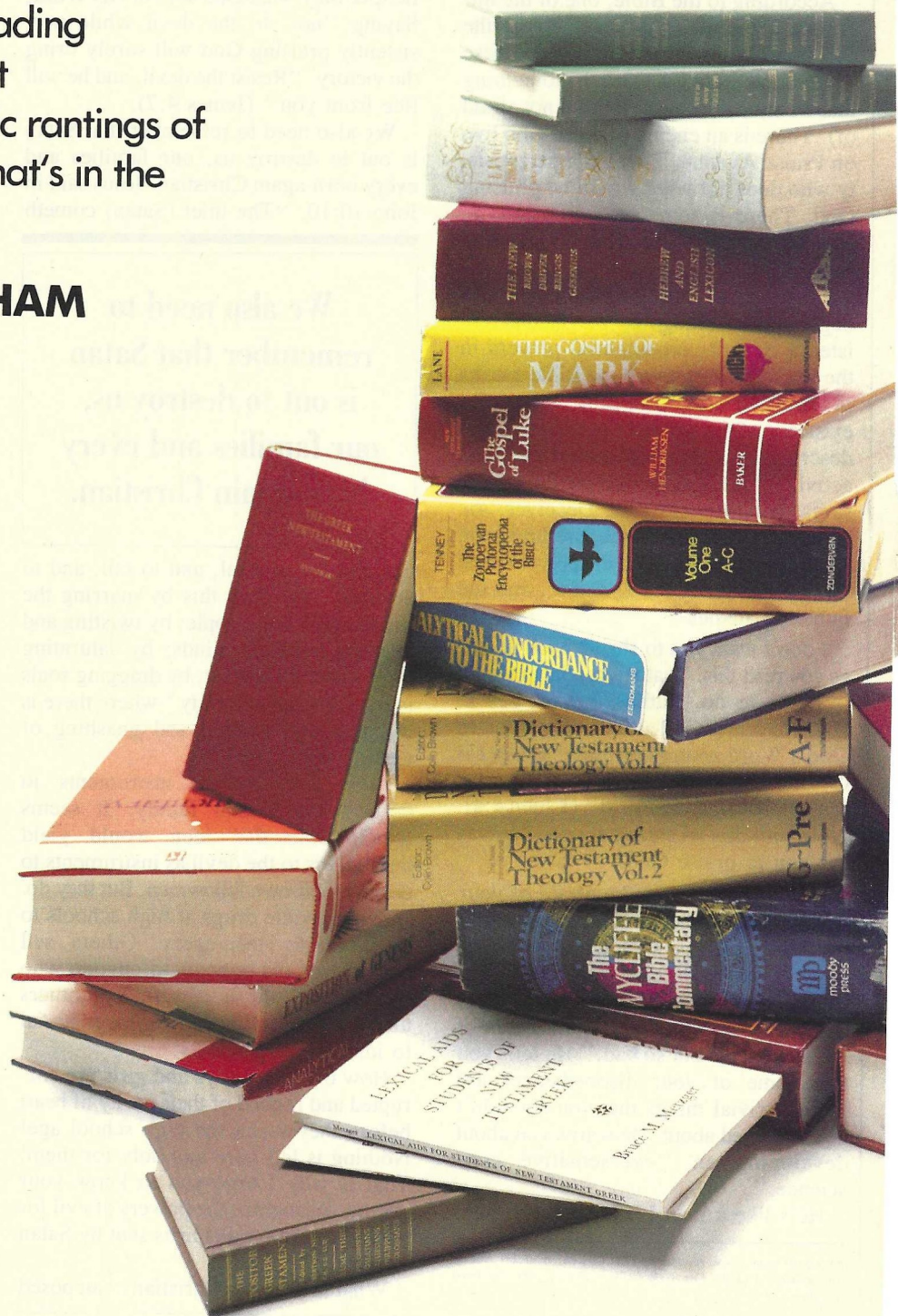
I've heard a lot of stories. In fact, I've told some of them, about people who got so busy they didn't know where they were going.

But when it happens to you—it's not funny.

Several years ago, during a three-month span, I made six trans-continental flights, two flights overseas and passed through the Atlanta airport so many times I knew which gates the flights left from without checking. Then one morning I stepped off the plane in Kansas City and couldn't remember why I was there. I had caught the 7 a.m. flight out of my hometown of Melbourne, Florida, changed planes in Atlanta, and arrived in Kansas City at 10 a.m. I had spent the entire time on the plane either dictating letters or editing manuscripts. Now here I was, standing in the middle of the Kansas City airport with no idea why.

When I reached in my briefcase for my appointment calendar, I discovered I had left it at home on my desk. I was mortified.

I had no choice but to call my secretary and ask her why I was in Kansas City. She got a chuckle out of it—and I got a



With Your Bible

warning. First a warning to slow down. Second a warning that I should never start on a trip unless I knew where I was going.

I had become like the bus driver who, after a day of hard driving, turned to his passengers and said, "Folks, I have good news and bad news.

“The good news is we’re making excellent time. The bad news is we’re lost and I haven’t the foggiest idea where we are.”

A lot of people start out on their Christian journey this way. They are so excited about their progress they get lost along the way. They are so intent on reaching their destination (and most are confused about that also) they ignore the basic steps they should take to get there. In other words, they ignore their spiritual appointment book, their spiritual road map, their fundamental instruction manual—the Word of God—which has the principles by which we live and die.

As a sea-
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eler along both the turnpikes and the backroads of the Kingdom, I want to open 1984 by giving you some practical, helpful hunts on Bible study—which will make your journey much easier.

Everything you need to know about living life at its fullest is found in this book. In its pages are God's instructions on how to raise your family, how to treat your wife or husband, how to handle your money, how to worship and how to cope with fear, pain, guilt and doubt. In short, every problem of life—from work, to worry, to sex, to death—has its solution in the Bible.

Before you wind up in some strange airport—or worse, in a ditch alongside the road—wondering where you are going, first study the road map.

The Bible is more than a collection of 66 books—it is one book. In Genesis you read how life started; in the Revelation you discover how it all winds up. And from Exodus (the second book) to Jude (the next-to-last book) you see how God carried out His purpose. You cannot dispense with any part of it.

The Old Testament is the foundation.
The New Testament is the superstructure.

A foundation is of no value unless a building is built upon it. Likewise, it's impossible to build a superstructure without a foundation. Thus the Old and

New Testaments are of equal value.

The Bible is one book, one history, one story. It is more than history—it is His story. Behind every event stands God, the Builder of history, the Maker of the ages.

In its original version, the books of the Bible were not divided into chapters and verses. Each book was written to be read from beginning to end. Since God took such great pains to give it to us as a progressive revelation of Himself, you should take great pains to read it from beginning to end.

That means you need to learn to study the Bible systematically.

This does not mean, however, that particular verses or chapters will not become especially meaningful to you. History is filled with stories of men and women who simply picked up the Bible, opened it at random and heard God speaking so profoundly it changed their lives. In the beginning it may be too difficult to wade through long books and chapters. Verses and sections of verses, especially Psalms and Proverbs, and the Gospels, will be meaningful to you regardless of how you read them. This kind of “let the Bible fall open” reading, however, should never become a substitute for earnest, systematic study of the Bible as a complete unit.

The Bible is not a cookbook that you can flip open to “breads” or “poultry dishes” and find answers. It needs to be read as an historical novel, written by a master Author who reveals His plot in a purposeful way.

The Bible is more than history, however. It is the greatest love story ever written. It is the story of God's love for all mankind—especially you. It is not a book of verses such as you would find on greeting cards, it is a revelation. It must be read, digested, studied, questioned and revered from beginning to end. Don't divide it into short devotional paragraphs and think you can understand

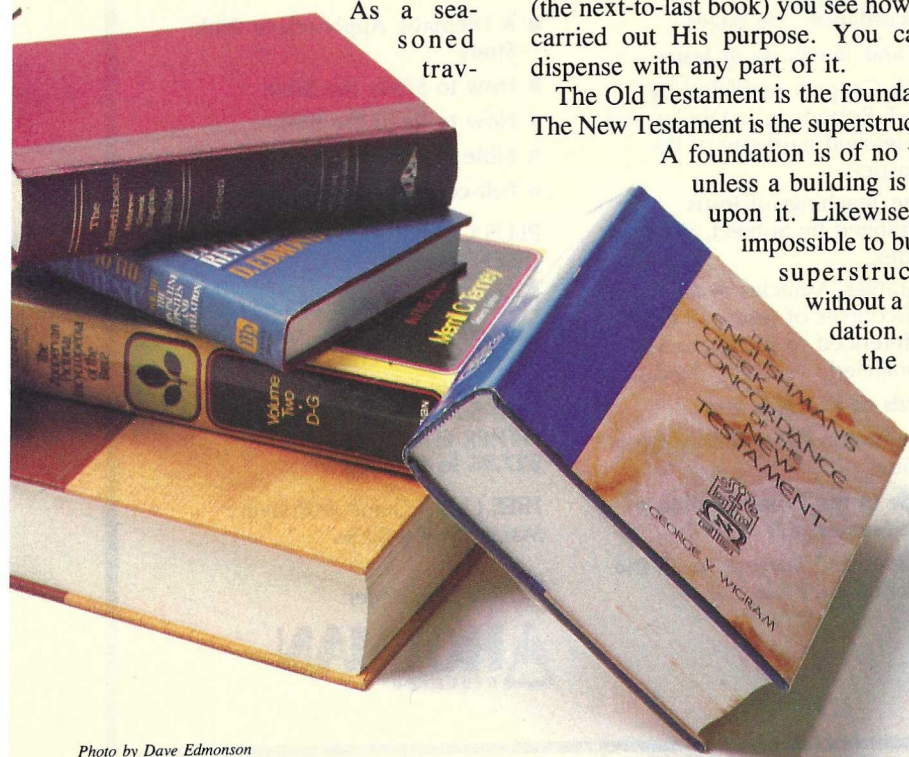


Photo by Dave Edmonson

its message. Come to its pages with common sense, believe that every book is about something special. Then read and reread until you find out what that book is about.

For instance, instead of merely underlining Habakkuk 2:20 which says, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him," you need to read the entire book. Find out that it begins with a cry—and ends with a song. Then you can understand why the prophet was able to reach the conclusion "the just shall live by faith."

Since the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit, you need the Holy Spirit's power to help you understand it, to interpret it. That is one of the functions of the Holy Spirit—to help you understand the Bible. Therefore, before you begin any serious study of the Bible, ask the Holy Spirit to fill you. Only as He interprets it to you will it make any sense. Otherwise, it will be nothing more than great literature, interesting history or a jumble of words and genealogies.

Are all the books of the Bible of equal importance? No, but all are indispensable. Which is more important, your heart or your hand? Yet your hand is important also. So with the Bible. Every book is necessary to make a perfect whole, although, obviously, some portions are more precious than others. You can't take away the book of Esther or the Song of Solomon and have a perfect revelation of God. Yet no one says either of these two books is comparable with the Gospel of John or the Book of Exodus. All are part of an organism and that organism is not complete if any part is missing.

If you are serious about Bible study, why not begin reading the same way you would visit an exhibition of photos by a famous photographer. Follow your guide down the long rows of pictures. Don't walk hurriedly. Concentrate on each photo. Don't allow yourself to be distracted by other observers. Listen carefully to your guide as he pauses in front of each picture. He will explain what kind of camera the photographer used, his lens opening, shutter speed and type film. Then he will tell you the setting of the picture, the type of lighting and what the photographer was trying to express. He will point out composition, shadows, techniques and style. Finally, he will introduce you to the photographer himself. And when it is all over, he will leave you alone in front of your favorite photograph, to sit quietly and absorb it until you see in it all the photographer

saw in it. Then you will understand its message to you.

That's the way you should study the Bible.

You cannot truly understand great art works unless you understand the artist. Therefore, as you get serious with Bible study, first learn about the author of each book. As a writer I have learned, for instance, that those who understand my books best are those who know me. The better you know me, the better you understand what I have written.

That's the reason you need to start with the Holy Spirit when studying the Bible. The Holy Spirit working through ordinary men is the Author of each book of the Bible.

Then you need to learn as much as you can about the human writers. Amos, for instance, wrote the book that carries his name. It is helpful to know that Amos was a farmer, a herdsman, and that he lived in a time when the kingdom of Israel was divided into two nations—a southern and a northern kingdom, much like the United States was divided during the Civil War. Amos lived in the southern kingdom called Judah. When he prophesied against the northern kingdom, he got a lot of "Amens!" from his southern audience. But when he began pointing out the sins of Judah, they ran him out of town.

Knowing this background helps in understanding the content of the book.

Take another case. It is helpful to know that the same man who wrote the Gospel of Luke also wrote the Book of Acts. His name was Luke. He was a physician turned biographer. Not only did he write one of the four biographies of Jesus found in the New Testament, but he later traveled with the Apostle and wrote the history of the early church—actually the biography of Paul in a book called Acts. When you discover that Luke was a medical doctor, you can understand his particular language, his close attention to detail and his many references to physical healings and miracles.

Each writer of the Bible—from Moses to the Apostle John—used a different style. John Mark wrote like a youth director, while Paul wrote like a seminary professor. But each was inspired by the Holy Spirit and all he wrote was true and without error. No one writer had a full picture of God, but when their writings are put together you see God in all His glory—in His entirety.

There are dozens of different versions of Bibles on today's market. For years

all we had to read was the Bible authorized by King James in 1611. It is a magnificent book with flowing poetic language which has blessed millions of people across the years. But most of us find the *KJV* difficult to understand. We get sidetracked with the "thee's" and "thou's."

I personally prefer the *New International Version*.

The Living Bible, which is a paraphrase, is easy to read but it lacks accuracy. The *Revised Standard Version* and the *American Standard Version* are scholarly and accurate, but stilted in style. Thus I lean toward the *NIV* as my favorite. It is easy to read and correctly translated from the original languages.

Other popular favorites include the *New English Bible* and the *Barclay* translation.

A good practice is to train yourself to read the Bible one book at a time. The first time you read a book in the Bible, try to get an overall feel for what the book says. This is the skyscraper view. Don't worry about details. Try to get the panoramic sweep. It's like taking the elevator to the top of the Empire State Building in order to see all Manhattan before you start walking the streets.

I nearly always point first-time Bible readers to the book of Mark. Mark is easy to read. It is filled with fast-moving action. Every page has a story about healings, miracles, or deliverance from demonic activity. There is teaching, also, but not nearly as difficult as the teaching in John or Matthew.

Or you may want to start with Genesis. It's the same kind of book, filled with wonderful stories about real men and women. You probably won't read Genesis all at one sitting, but you can read it by sections. I like to read Genesis by people. That is, I like to see it as a book of biographies of men like myself. So I read about Adam and Eve. Then about Noah. There is a long section about Abraham. Another about Isaac. And finally those thrilling stories about Jacob—who was a man such as I am. When you view Genesis as a book of stories about men, it is not only easy, but exciting to read.

Here's a word of caution. Do not start in the middle of the Bible with books like Jeremiah or Isaiah. Even scholars find them almost incomprehensible. The beginning reader will simply bog down if he starts there.

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