

GOD,
I'VE GOT A
QUESTION

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James Merritt



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God, Is the Bible Really Your Word?

I am not sure how Bart found our church, but I'm glad he did. Bart is a skeptic by nature and had wandered into our church with a pocketful of questions about God, Christianity, faith, Jesus, and the church. I love apologetics, and I would rather witness to the “convert me if you can, buddy” type than the “I am so ready to become a Christian, where do I sign?” type. (You can occasionally find the latter, though more rarely as our culture becomes more secular.) Bart was just what I wanted.

When I was informed of his interest, I set up an appointment to go to his house hoping to build a bridge to his heart. He intrigued me from the beginning. Bart reminded me of the rich young ruler, except he was anything but rich. A graduate of The Citadel, his military background and training was evident from his firm handshake, confident demeanor, and his look-you-in-the-eye attentiveness. He was flanked

by his family—a sweet wife who longed for Bart to come to faith and beautiful children. As I found out more about his background, I was warmly drawn to the military code of honor ingrained in his DNA.

No small talk for Bart. He got right to the point as he began firing questions at me as if I were the target and his tongue were an AK-47. “Why are you a Christian? What is it about Jesus that is so different? How can I ever believe?” It became obvious quickly that the “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life” approach would get about as far as Rush Limbaugh at an ACLU convention.

That night has now turned into a two-year conversation built around breakfasts, lunches, office meetings, and discussions about books I have given him by authors ranging from Lee Strobel to Josh McDowell. Frankly, it has been both frustrating and exhilarating. Sometimes it has been “three steps forward and two steps back”; at other times it has been “two steps back, forget forward.”

The most enlightening meeting we had was our third one at a Cracker Barrel not far from our church. (I am convinced that the one place you can always feel the presence of the Holy Spirit, besides the church, is a Cracker Barrel.) I had moved Bart from atheism to agnosticism fairly early by admitting that no one can either prove or disprove the existence of God. He readily grasped the fact that taking an “I don’t know whether God exists or not” position is far more defensible than claiming an “I know for sure there is no God” approach that is possible only with perfect omniscience. Allowing for the possibility of a God enabled us to make progress on the spiritual track we were on together.

As we waited on our breakfasts, we began the same procedure of circling each other like two boxers in the first round of a major title fight—neither wanted the other to land the first blow, and both wanted to avoid the dreaded knockdown.

“Bart,” I began, “contrary to most philosophers, the most important

question about God is not ‘Is there a God?’” That is what the infamous Dr. Lofton said that day in class and what most people assume is *the* question about any supreme being.

“It’s not,” Bart said with eyes wide and eyebrows arched.

“No.” I allowed a pause to get heavily pregnant before I continued. “The most important question about God is this: ‘If there is a God, has that God spoken?’”¹ Bart, let’s assume that there is a God. Let’s retire for the time being any atheistic or agnostic thoughts. I know that’s a big jump for you, but humor me for a moment.”

Bart shifted uncomfortably in his seat and reluctantly agreed to my scenario. I then took my AK-47 and began my rapid-fire salvo.

“Does this God have a name? Does He know me? Does He care for me? Does He have a plan for my life? Can I have a relationship with Him? If so, how? What does He consider right and wrong? Is there life after death? Can I have a relationship with Him that transcends time and space? How can I live in such a way that pleases Him and keeps me on His good side? Why did He put me here?”

As our breakfast was served, the look on his face was that of a boxer saved by the bell. I could tell he was trying to get his intellectual equilibrium back to counter what I admit was a self-conscious effort to knock him off balance and take the offensive early.

He picked at his food, obviously deep in thought, then looked at me and admitted, “I don’t know how I could come up with the answers to those questions.”

I put my hand on his shoulder and said, “Bart, *you can’t* come up with those answers on your own, and neither could a thousand Einsteins. The only way we can know the answers to those questions is if God Himself told us—what’s known as divine revelation.”

“So you obviously believe that God has spoken through the Bible.”

“Yes.”

Bart then leaned back in his chair and said, “That is a big problem because I don’t believe the Bible is God’s Word any more than I believe that this morning’s newspaper is. Both were written by men who we both know can and do make mistakes. Besides, at least today’s newspaper can be verified by present-day witnesses and other corroborating evidence. Why should I believe a book that is two thousand years old? After all, you are basing *everything you believe* on the Bible aren’t you?”

I looked at Bart and thought that Jesus must have had similar feelings as He looked at the rich young ruler. On the one hand, I believed that Bart was being sincere in his question; on the other hand, I was saddened by his striking admission of complete skepticism toward God’s Word.

(I give Bart a lot of credit for asking a legitimate question. It’s a question not only to be expected from an unbeliever but seriously contemplated by every believer as well. If you are a believer, let me ask you, “Why *do you* believe the Bible?” I suspect that most believers have not thought through this question, and if faced with a Bart, would quickly feel cotton in their mouths. It’s one thing to know what you believe; it’s another thing altogether to know *why* you believe it.)

I took a deep breath and affirmed the legitimacy of Bart’s question. “Bart, you have raised a great question that reveals more about the differences we have than you think. I appreciate you giving me the opportunity to answer a question that will take us even farther down the road than I had hoped for at this meeting. Do you have the time for a very thorough answer?”

He laughed. “I only have an hour.”

“Then you just committed to another meeting, because an hour won’t be enough time.”

“Seriously?” he said.

I was deadly serious, and you’ll see why as I unfold to you my response

to Bart over our next two meetings. I began by explaining the concept of a worldview, which is foundational to dealing with any essential question.

First, *everybody has a worldview*. Everybody has a set of assumptions and presuppositions that determine the way they look at the world, their place in the world, and what they think in the world is really important. Regardless of your creed, religion, faith, or lack thereof, you bring to the table certain preconceived beliefs and codes that affect your view of truth, morality, and life itself.

Everybody looks at this world through certain assumptions and presuppositions, some provable, some nonprovable. The Christian cannot prove that God exists, but the atheist cannot prove that God doesn't. Both worldviews are based on faith.

Second, *there are only two basic worldviews—the Christian worldview and the non-Christian worldview*. These worldviews are radically different at practically every point. Whether it is answering questions such as:

- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- How do you explain human nature?
- How do you determine what is right and wrong?
- How do you know that you know?
- What happens to a person at death?

the Christian worldview gives answers radically different from every other non-Christian worldview.

Third, *every worldview is based on faith*. Everybody looks at this world through certain assumptions and presuppositions, some provable, some nonprovable. The Christian has a worldview based on the belief that God exists. The atheist has a worldview based on the belief

that God doesn't. The Christian cannot prove that God exists, but the atheist cannot prove that God doesn't. Both worldviews are based on faith. The question is, which worldview has the strongest evidence to support the faith of its adherents?

Fourth, *every worldview is only as valid as the evidence it is based upon*. When answering essential questions, this concept must be kept in mind. It is at this point that the so-called “culture wars” are being waged. Chuck Colson put it this way: “The culture war is not just about abortion, homosexual rights, or the decline of public education. These are only skirmishes. The real war is a cosmic struggle between worldviews—between the Christian worldview and the various secular and spiritual worldviews arrayed against it.”²

The first Sunday I was away at college, I attended a church and went to the small group (it was called Sunday school back then) for college students. As soon as the class started, a man got up without saying a word and wrote three questions on a chalkboard:

- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- Where am I going?

Mr. West would repeat that task every Sunday and then challenge us with some thought-provoking comments. After the first couple of Sundays, he arrested my attention with this declaration: “One word will determine what we believe and why we believe it. That word is *truth*.”

Which worldview is true? Better, which worldview gives the right answers to those questions? If we are unable to answer those questions correctly, we have no discernible purpose or meaning to life.

The Christian worldview goes beyond all other worldviews in one crucially important respect: It asserts not just truth but *ultimate eternal*

truth. The Christian worldview provides answers for the three key themes that alone tell us what is wrong with the world and how it can be made right again, namely, creation, fall, and redemption.

The doctrine of creation tells us we are not evolutionary accidents. We are a direct creation of the Creator of the universe. Practically all other worldviews deny this concept.

At the same time, it is obvious something is wrong with this God-created world; either God blew it or this is not exactly the world God created. The Christian worldview tells us the problem is the introduction of sin into the world by the fall of mankind in the Garden of Eden. Sin has corrupted the entire human race as well as the physical world we live in. The non-Christian view invariably denies that sin has anything to do with our problem.

Finally, the Christian worldview tells us redemption is the only solution to the problem. We need a Savior to remedy the sin problem and to give mankind a new heart and a new mind that is truly centered on God. The non-Christian worldview denies the need for personal redemption at all.

To many non-Christians, the Bible is no more than an antiquated collection of myths and fables. To others it is a good book, but it is not *God's* book.

If you are a believer reading this, then I know I am singing to the choir. But if you are a Bart, or even a nominal Christian, your question still remains, “But you get this view from only one source—the Bible—so why believe the Bible as opposed to any other truth source, religious writing, or human reasoning?”

I concede it is not only a fair question but an inflammatory one given today's culture.

Most of this world denies that it is important to believe the Bible or even to consider it anything other than just another book. Recently, the Colorado Supreme Court threw out the sentence of a man given the death penalty because jurors consulted the Bible in reaching a verdict. The court said this constituted an improper outside influence and a reliance on a “higher authority.”³ The Supreme Court of Colorado was saying in essence it is improper to consult the Bible because it is just another book.

To many non-Christians, the Bible is no more than an antiquated collection of myths and fables. To others it is a good book, but it is not *God's* book. On the other hand, two billion people, roughly one-third of this world's population, claim to believe in the God of this book and to believe this is the book God wrote. Even the men who wrote it believed they were writing the very words of God.

Jesus Christ made the ultimate statement
concerning any word inspired by God's Spirit when
He said to the Father: “Your word is truth.”

The biggest challenge to unbelievers—and their biggest objection to the Bible—is that *it claims to be not just the words of men, but the Word of God*. In the Old Testament alone, phrases such as, “God said” or “God spoke” or “the Word of the Lord came” occur nearly four thousand times (seven hundred times in the first five books, forty times in one chapter). Hundreds of years later, the apostle Paul said this about the Bible: “All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right” (2 Timothy 3:16 NLT).

Yet Jesus Christ made the ultimate statement concerning any word inspired by God's Spirit when He said to the Father: “Your word is truth.”⁴

Now don't miss the tremendous amount of ground Jesus covered with this statement. Jesus was not just stating that the Bible speaks truth. He was stating that this book is the very essence of truth and the standard by which all other "truth" is to be measured. Furthermore, this statement was made in a prayer Jesus was offering to God the Father. He was calling this word God's Word. This book is God's Word because it is truth and it is truth because it is God's Word. But if this statement is true, there should be compelling reasons to believe the Bible is not just reliable truth but divine truth.

My father taught me that "a man is no better than his word." Well, neither is God, and He is perfectly willing to lay His reputation on the line behind the veracity of His Word.

Put another way, a book truly written by God Himself should bear certain verifying marks and evidence that would confirm a divine imprint on its contents. Why? Because God will be judged by His words just as we are by ours. Think of how my skills as a writer, thinker, and researcher will be judged by those who read this book. Beginning with my editor, then my proofreaders, then my publisher, and finally my readers, this book will always be a reflection of me. How much more is God's Word a reflection of His character, nature, and reliability? Perhaps that is why we read in the book of Psalms:

for you have exalted above all things
your name and your word.⁵

My father taught me early in life "a man is no better than his word." Well, neither is God, and He is perfectly willing to lay His reputation on the line behind the veracity of His Word. But we should have solid

reasons for believing that the Bible is God's very word(s), and here are four reasons to support this claim.

The Bible Is Historically Reliable

What would happen if you chose ten different people from the same city to write a book about one controversial topic, such as the meaning of life? Now add these parameters: they share the same culture, same educational level, and the same language, but they are separated from each other, never allowed to talk to or consult each other. What are the chances that what they wrote would be in total agreement? You and I both know the chance of that happening would be zero.

Now imagine a book that is actually sixty-six books in one, written over a period of fifteen hundred years by forty different authors living on three different continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia), writing in three different languages (Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic) on many controversial topics, and yet all concentrating on one basic theme and all being in perfect agreement on their theological conclusions.

Nobody can prove or disprove what has
taken place in the past. All one can
do is present the evidence.

Would you expect there to be a literary symmetry from beginning to end with the last book being written well over a thousand years after the first one? Consider this: Genesis, the first book of the Bible, begins in a garden in paradise. In the middle of that garden are the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.⁶ When you go to the last book of the Bible, Revelation, written some fifteen hundred years later, you end up again in the paradise of God and there once again is the tree of life “for the healing of the nations.”⁷ In Genesis, man is

driven out of the garden because of his sin and to keep him from eating of the tree that would have sealed his physical and spiritual death.⁸ In Revelation, he is invited to partake of the tree that symbolizes his eternal life and the removal of the curse. In Genesis, a river flows from the garden. In Revelation, a river flows from the throne of God. The golden thread that runs from Genesis to Revelation is the theme of redemption through blood sacrifice: lambs in the Old Testament and the lamb of God in the New Testament.⁹

But how do we know that all that the Bible says actually happened? How do we know it is fact not fable? How do we really know there was a Moses and a Red Sea crossing? How do we know there was a Goliath that David killed? How do we know there was a Daniel in the lion's den? How do we know there was a Jesus, who died on a cross and came out of a tomb three days later? What reasons do we have to believe the Bible?

Admittedly, nobody can prove or disprove what has taken place in the past. All one can do is present the evidence. I can't prove there actually was a man named George Washington who served as the first president of the United States. All I can do is present the evidence. Here we need to keep two things in mind:

1. The trustworthiness of any ancient historical account is based on the evidence for that account.
2. The evidence must come from ancient documents and manuscripts. All ancient history is based on documentary evidence. Remember, DVDs, videos, televisions, and tape recorders didn't exist a hundred years ago.

Furthermore, critics love to point out that we don't have access to any of the original documents penned by the biblical authors. We don't have the original manuscripts that were first written when all these things took place. So how do we know we have the right stuff? How

do we know Jesus even existed? How do we know we are reading actual historical events not made up myths? We are relying on accounts two to three millennia old. Well, to these critics we can enthusiastically say, “Glad you asked!”

Have you ever heard of Julius Caesar? Ever read the writings of Plato? Studied Homer’s *Iliad*? Have you ever heard of anyone questioning the existence of any of those historical figures? Any professor of literature ever declare that Caesar was no more real than Mickey Mouse or that the *Iliad* really wasn’t written by Homer? Not lately . . . probably not ever.

The number of manuscripts we have supporting the New Testament alone is almost forty times the number of manuscripts supporting the writings of Julius Caesar, Plato, and Homer combined.

Yet these assumed to be actual historical figures and literary works have relatively shaky authentication compared to the Bible. Have you ever thought about how many copies or manuscripts we have of the ancient writings of these men and how close in time those documents are to their subject? Have you ever thought about what the time span is between the copies that we do have and the original documents? Let me just give you the manuscript evidence for the ancient writings for these three historical figures.

Julius Caesar—earliest manuscripts one thousand years after Caesar lived; only ten manuscripts exist.

Plato—earliest manuscripts thirteen hundred years after Plato lived; only 7 manuscripts exist.

Homer—earliest manuscripts five hundred years after Homer lived; 643 manuscripts exist. Homer’s *Iliad* has the

best manuscript support of any ancient text in the world next to the Bible.

Now consider this—there are over 24,000 partial and full Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, the earliest one dating from just thirty five years after the book of Revelation was written. The number of manuscripts we have supporting the New Testament alone is almost forty times the number of manuscripts supporting the writings of the aforementioned historical figures combined. And the earliest manuscripts are just one generation removed from the oldest New Testament book.

What about the Old Testament (which as you could guess is much older than the New Testament)? Recently I was in Qumran at the site of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Fragments of almost every book in the Old Testament were found in these scrolls dated approximately 150 BC, only two hundred years after the last event of the Old Testament took place.

No other book from the ancient world has as much manuscript support or is as closely tied to the original event as the Bible.

Putting together all of these manuscripts and comparing them with the version of the Bible we have today, we now know that we have at least 99.5 percent of what would be considered the original document. No other ancient historical source can make that claim. But Bart still needed to ask, “How do we know they got their history right?” It is one thing to accurately record something, but that does not prove the veracity of the thing recorded.

If I read a history book that says Custer’s Last Stand took place at Yankee Stadium while he was eating a chili dog in 1998, I would be disinclined to believe that history book. The number of manuscripts verifying the accuracy of the transmission of that account would be

irrelevant. However, we have a tool to verify the historical accuracy of a document, and that tool is archaeology.

There are hundreds of examples of how archaeology has confirmed the Bible, and entire books have been written on this one subject. I will give you just one. You probably have heard the story of how Joshua “fought the battle of Jericho and the walls came tumbling down.” For many years liberal critics denigrated this story as completely fabricated for several reasons. First, walls don’t just fall down flat because someone walks around them. Second, the Israelites could not have marched around that city seven times in one day because the city was too large. In many academic circles, the light of this story had been eclipsed by the facts on the ground.

It is illogical to think that the God who created a universe that operates according to the scientific principles He built into it would not communicate in a scientifically accurate way.

Then Professor John Garstang, a British archaeologist, excavated the site of ancient Jericho and discovered that the walls of the city had fallen so completely that the attackers were able to climb up and over the ruins into the city. Why was that so unusual? Because the evidence showed the walls had collapsed outward. Walls do not fall outward; when they are attacked, they fall inward. But in this case just the opposite occurred—just as the book of Joshua records.

I recently visited this ancient site for the seventeenth time. Jericho is actually smaller than the seventy acres my church sits on. I could walk around Jericho seven times in one morning and then go play golf before lunch. It was entirely possible for the people of Israel to march around this city much more than seven times in one day.

This one illustration is just the tip of the iceberg of the incredible archaeological confirmation of the Bible's veracity. Dr. Nelson Glueck, by consensus the greatest modern authority on Israeli archaeology, said, "No archeological discovery has ever controverted a biblical reference. . . archeology continues to confirm a clear outline or in exact detail historical statements in the Bible."¹⁰

As Jesus said, "Your word is truth."¹¹

The Bible Is Scientifically Correct

The Bible is not a science book, but if it is true and if it is God's Word, then just as you expect it to be historically reliable, you would expect it to be scientifically accurate. It is illogical to think that the God who created a universe that operates according to the scientific principles He built into it would not communicate in a scientifically accurate way. Another striking evidence that this book is divine truth and God's Word is that many of the principles of modern science were recorded as facts of nature in the Bible long before any scientist ever confirmed them.

Years ago many believed that the world was flat. Columbus had to overcome this popular opinion in order to finance the voyage that led to his discovery of America. Columbus was convinced as he sailed from Spain that he not only would not "sail over the edge" but that he would eventually find his way back to Spain. He wrote in his diary: "For the execution of the voyage to the Indies, I did not make use of intelligence, mathematics or maps. It is simply the fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied."¹² What prophecy from Isaiah was Columbus referring to?

He sits enthroned above the circle of the earth,
and its people are like grasshoppers.
He stretches out the heavens like a canopy,
and spreads them out like a tent to live in.¹³

Columbus was convinced that the world was a circle,¹⁴ not flat, and that there was no danger at all of “sailing off the sea.” It never occurred to him that Scripture would be scientifically unreliable.

Thirty percent of the Bible consists of prophecy,
and not one of its prophecies has ever
been shown to be false.

Take the science of meteorology. You would expect the Master Meteorologist to know far more than your television weatherman. Years ago scientists thought that winds blew always in a straight direction. Of course, meteorologists now know that wind travels within circuits called “jet streams.” God’s Word spoke of them before Christ was born:

Blowing toward the south,
Then turning toward the north,
The wind continues swirling along;
And on its circular courses the wind returns.¹⁵

Until fairly recent times, doctors saw no need for washing their hands. Many people died from the hands of doctors themselves because they carried on those hands the very germs that would infect and kill their patients. Later, doctors began to wash their hands in still water, but the mortality rate remained high from infection caught from the very doctor who was trying to bring healing. Today, any doctor will tell you always to wash hands in running water to make sure the germs are washed away. Where did that lifesaving medical idea come from? “Now when the man with the discharge becomes cleansed from his discharge, then he shall count off for himself seven days for his cleansing; he shall then wash his clothes and bathe his body in running water and will become clean.”¹⁶

We now know that our first president, George Washington, died from a combination of pneumonia worsened by severe blood loss. The blood loss came from a common cure for many serious illnesses in the day—attaching leeches to the skin of the patient to “bleed” the illness out of the body. Usually the opposite effect happened: the patient would die from losing blood, the greatest source of energy and infection fighting power his body had. If only doctors had taken this verse seriously from a medical standpoint: “For the life of a creature is in the blood.”¹⁷

As Jesus said “Your word is truth.”

The Bible Is Prophetically Accurate

I would be hard-pressed to deny the veracity of the Bible just because of its incredible prophetic content and accuracy. No other book on this planet can match the Bible’s staggering accuracy in foretelling events. Thirty percent of the Bible consists of prophecy, and not one of its prophecies has ever been shown to be false.

Many of the prophecies of Scripture are so specific and so detailed they demand an exact fulfillment. Jesus Himself fulfilled at least forty-eight different prophecies concerning everything from His lineage to His birth, death, and resurrection. The odds of any one person doing that would be one in ten to the 157th power.¹⁸

God’s truth should go beyond
accuracy; it must be transforming.

Not only that, many prophecies predicted extraordinary events, such as a virgin birth. In hundreds of instances, the fulfillment of the prophecy did not take place until after the prophet had already died.

In the Old Testament alone, over two thousand prophecies have already come to pass. Nothing vaguely resembles this in any other book in the world. Twenty-six books claim to be divine Scriptures like the Bible, but not one of those volumes has any specific predictive prophecies.

The Bible even does something unparalleled in any other literary work. It gives detailed predictions concerning entire countries, some of which are being fulfilled in the twenty-first century. One such fascinating example came to my attention.

At one time, Egypt was the greatest nation in the entire world. It was the king of nations. It was the richest country on earth. In one prophecy about Egypt, the prophet Ezekiel said, “There shall no longer be a prince from the land of Egypt.”¹⁹

Until a few decades ago, before Egypt adopted a more democratic form of government, a prince always ruled her. But during the nearly twenty-five hundred years between this prophecy and Egypt’s change to its present form of government, none of its princes were Egyptian. That would be like prophesying today that an American will never again be president of the United States and then having twenty-five hundred years go by with no American president.

How could anybody have predicted something like that? Only God could, who knows everything that will happen before it occurs and whose predictions become, by necessity, commands that must be obeyed.

As Jesus said, “Your word is truth.”

The Bible Is Personally Transforming

Even if you have bought what I have been selling in this chapter, I still have one other thing to point out about the world’s bestselling book that should motivate believing it above all else. When I say the Bible is true, I mean the Bible is factual—it accurately records historical

events. It is scientifically true—one should never worry about established scientific fact contradicting spiritual truth. It is prophetically true—it predicts many events that happened exactly as prophesied.

But God's truth should go beyond accuracy; it must be transforming. Something can be true and factual, but have no personal, spiritual significance. I can tell you the truth about how many buttons I have on the shirt I'm wearing right now, but who gives a rip? When I talk about the Bible being true, I mean it is *transformationally* true—it is capable of bringing about personal, spiritual, and eternal change in one's life.

Years ago I was pastoring a church in Laurel, Mississippi, and I had just finished preaching a sermon on the reality of hell (don't hear many of those any more). Afterward a man came up to me and asked if he could see me in my office. After we sat down, he asked, "Do you *really* believe what you preached today?" I assured him I did. He then asked if I *really* cared whether people went to hell or not, and slightly miffed, I affirmed that I did. He then said, "Good. I want you to promise me you will go talk to my wife." I told him I would be glad to. He made me promise again, to my great irritation, that I would. He then said with a sly gotcha grin, "You need to know two things about Diane—she is an atheist and she hates preachers. But you promised you would go."

I left my office feeling as if I had just been suckered into buying some beachfront property in Phoenix, Arizona. Nevertheless, on the following Tuesday night, Teresa and I made our way out to a double-wide trailer in 95 degree heat with all of the enthusiasm of facing a colonoscopy. (Now that I have had two, that is *exactly* how I felt.) We walked up to the door and were greeted by a lady wearing her hair in a bun, looking at us through thick black glasses with a scowl as menacing as a mother bear whose cubs have just been threatened.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she demanded.

I wanted to say "Avon calling," but instead I introduced us and said,

"I'm the pastor of Highland Church and wanted to know if we could come in and visit with you."

"I'm an atheist and I hate preachers," she spat out with more than a little venom.

"I know," I said. "I've heard so much about you. But seeing as how we drove ten miles out here in this hot weather, could we have ten minutes of your time?"

"I'll give you two."

I decided to forego the usual ice-breaking small talk and jumped in: "Diane, do you know for sure when you die you will go to heaven?"

"I told you I'm an atheist. I don't even believe in heaven—and I know there is no God."

Praying hard and thinking fast, I said, "Diane, I don't believe you are an atheist."

"Why not?"

"Let me ask you a question. Do you know everything there is to know about everything?"

"No, of course not."

"Would you say you know half of everything there is to know about everything?"

"No."

"Well, let's just pretend you do. Would you agree that in that body of knowledge you do not possess, God could exist?"

"Wow! I never thought about that. Well, to be honest, I don't *know* there is no God. I'm just not sure whether there is or not."

"Now we're getting somewhere. You're not an atheist, you're an agnostic."

She smiled triumphantly. "Yes, that's what I am, an agnostic." (I didn't tell her the Latin word for 'agnostic' was 'ignoramus'—I didn't think that would move things along in a positive fashion.)

“Now, are you an honest agnostic or a dishonest agnostic?”

“What do you mean?” she said through a puzzled look.

“Well, an honest agnostic says, ‘I don’t know whether there is a god or not, but I’m willing to find out.’ A dishonest agnostic says, ‘I don’t know whether there is a god or not, and I don’t want to know.’ Which one are you?”

“Well...I guess I’m an honest agnostic.”

I asked her to wait in her chair. I went out to my car and brought her a New Testament. “This is a Bible. I want you to begin reading the Gospel of John, and I want you to read one chapter a day. After you’ve read each chapter, I want you to ask yourself two questions: Who did Jesus claim to be, and what am I going to do about it?”

She gasped. “I don’t believe one thing in the Bible.”

“Then it will do you no harm to read it. John has 21 chapters, so it’ll take you three weeks to read it. You won’t hear from me for three weeks. After you’ve finished, with your permission Teresa and I will come back and see where you are in your spiritual pilgrimage.”

I then bid her goodbye as Teresa and I got up to leave.

“Wait!” she almost screamed. “I don’t believe the Bible.”

“I don’t care,” I said nonchalantly as I got in my car. “See you in three weeks.”

This was Tuesday. On Sunday morning after I preached, I gave an altar call for people who wanted to commit themselves to Christ. To my palpable shock, here came Diane down the aisle smiling broadly as she reached out her hand to me. Showing my great faith in the transforming power of the Bible, I clumsily asked, “Why have you come?”

With a smile as bright as a full moon on a clear night, she said, “I want to be baptized and join this church.”

“Diane, you can’t do that until you’ve trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior.”

“I have.”

“When?”

“Wednesday morning.”

“But...”

She giggled. “I didn’t get past the first chapter.”

That evening I baptized Diane, and she became one of the most committed and faithful members of our church.

I could tell you of many more like Diane, individuals such as Pravera, who recently came to our church and told me over breakfast how he was converted to Christ from Hinduism by closeting himself with the Bible, reading it from cover to cover, and concluding that Jesus was who He claimed to be. Pravera trusted Christ on his own in his bedroom. This world has billions of people whose lives have been eternally transformed by hearing the Bible preached or reading it on their own and believing. I challenge anyone to show me any religious work ever written that has such transformational power.

Our second president, John Adams, put it best when he wrote in his diary. “Suppose a nation in some distant region should take the Bible for their only law book and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited!... What a utopia, what a paradise would this region be.”²⁰

In the end, there is one essential question about the Bible: Does it express our ideas about God or God’s ideas about us? Is it God’s Word to us or our words about God?²¹ Everybody on this planet has to make a decision. There are many sacred writings and religious books all saying different things about God, heaven, hell, creation, sin, redemption, and salvation.²² When it comes to these varying truth claims, there can be only two options. Option 1: they are all wrong. Option 2: only one is right.

Perhaps the Bible could be just a bunch of myths and fairy tales, but

the overwhelming evidence suggests otherwise. Some other religious book may be the real truth and the Bible could be totally wrong but again the evidence indicates the Bible can more than stand on its own against all other religious authorities combined.

John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, spoke best when he said, “I am a creature of a day. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God. I want to know one thing: the way to heaven. God Himself has condescended to teach me the way. He has written it down in a book. Give me that book! At any price give me the Book of God. Let me be a man of one book—this book, the Bible.”²³

No, Bart is still not convinced, but it has nothing to do with the evidence. As I said to him recently, “I have decided I am going to go with the man who came back from the dead, who said, ‘Your word is truth.’ I am going with the Bible.”