

How I Changed my Mind About How I Read the Bible

I wanted to share briefly about how I changed my mind about how I read the Bible. After I had been a preacher almost a dozen years, I began to change how I read the Bible. In my earlier days, I read the Bible defensively, with a view to having to defend it against modern thought. That meant that I tended to dismiss statements that were at variance with the cosmogony and cosmology of the mid to late twentieth century Western views of reality. For example, the NIV translates the Hebrew *ruach*, spirit, as “feelings” in the trial by ordeal laid out in Numbers 5, so we read “feelings of jealousy” throughout the passage rather than “spirit of jealousy.” Of course, *ruach* could mean feelings rather than the more literal, spirit, and I found the approach of the NIV was helpful in avoiding the statements that made me uncomfortable as a Modern Western person. Glossing over some of the supernatural when reading the Bible pretty much characterized me for my first decade or so as a preacher. I was bound by a hermeneutic driven by modern culture, but then I began to immerse myself in the culture and view of reality of the authors of Scripture and take the Bible at face value.

I began to read the Bible the way I would read Tolkien or the Dune novels of Frank Herbert, not trying to get around the way its authors viewed reality, but, in effect, reading the Bible for its story, sometimes suspending what I believed so I could really hear the story in one place without imposing a logical grid from outside. This approach took place within a context of a series of experiences.

Beginning in late October 1977, I encountered some rather strange things. Up to that time, I would describe myself pretty much a Reformed deist who read the Bible through a somewhat Secularist lens. I tended to view the Bible as a catalogue of extinct species in a museum of natural history rather than as a divinely inspired field guide to teach me about the world that now exists and how I am to deal with it.

The first event came as I was studying for a sermon. I was reading a commentary and came across a comment about the importance and effectiveness of prayer when the thought arose, “I don’t believe that.” It startled me because I began to realize that what the commentator had written was derived strictly from the biblical text, and I was saying, in effect, that I didn’t really believe the Bible. That troubled me for some time, and I began to pray about it. My approach to prayer up to that time had largely been that

prayer is limited to changing our attitudes not our circumstances, to giving us grace to cope with terrible problems rather than eventually rescuing us out of them.

Shortly after that realization, an older woman in my congregation sought counseling from me regarding her obsessive ideation of suicide; she had attempted to take her own life some years before and had been hospitalized for it. At some point in our conversation, I asked her when she first began thinking about taking her own life. I'll never forget her answer: "It was right after my brother's death. He had taken his own life, and I was at the funeral home standing beside his coffin. I laid my hand on his chest and kept thinking about how much I missed him. I said, 'If only I could take something of him away with me.' Shortly after that I became obsessed with suicidal thoughts."

In trying to minister the love of Christ to this woman, I encountered behavior that caused me to realize that I was out of my league, and so I sought outside help. Eventually, one of our elders, her grown son and I took her to a Calvinistic Baptist minister who had had experience in dealing with such matters. I had met him less than a year before when a friend of mine from college and seminary days had come to Louisiana. My friend published literature and was calling on this pastor. When he told me what the pastor believed, I had been full of mockery, but now I was desperate enough that I wanted help from somebody who knew more about these things than I did. That night I witnessed things that I had never seen or heard before, but the woman got relief, relief that lasted until the day that she went to be with the Lord Jesus a couple of decades later.

Around that time one of my elders shared with me that it is sometimes necessary to command tempting thoughts to get out of our minds, affirming the authority that the Lord Jesus Christ has given to every believer. I had never heard of such an idea before, but I filed it away for further reflection. Some months after that, I experienced a powerful attack of lust.

I was ministering in my office to a very loose woman. My secretary was in the next room, but the door to my office was shut. I experienced thoughts such as, "You can (expletive deleted) her on the floor." I tried to pray, but I couldn't. My mind was held captive in a steel trap, and I had no will power to resist the raging thoughts that were filling my conscious mind. Then I experienced the thought, "Get out of here!" I did, and I thank God. I believe

that I would have committed adultery had I stayed in that room. Once I got out of the room, I did something I had never done before: I took authority over those wicked, adulterous thoughts in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, claiming the liberty and cleansing of his precious blood. I commanded them to get out of my mind. The deliverance was instant: I felt as if I had gone from a steam room into an icy, mountain pool. Instantly the fog of confusion was gone. I prayed for protection, went back into my office and had no more trouble with such thoughts the rest of the time.

From time to time after that, I would encounter people with problems that seemed to defy a completely naturalistic explanation. One of the most striking of these involved a young woman who was struggling with lesbianism. I had counseled her without a lot of success. Then months later during a counseling session, she could not speak. After praying for her, I ended the session, and she left. However, within a few minutes she returned, grabbed my desktop fountain pen and scrawled H E L P. She pressed the pen so hard that she bent the point back and destroyed the pen. Not knowing what to do, I left her in my office and went into the sanctuary to pray for wisdom. I thought about taking her to a local, private mental hospital where she could be treated for her hysterical behavior. But as I prayed, several people's names came to mind, and I decided to call them. Within less than an hour, everyone arrived: two elders were involved and a married couple who were friends with the woman.

As soon as we began to pray in earnest for her, she began to growl at us and foam at the mouth. Then she spoke in a low guttural voice, "I'll kill you." But we continued to pray and read Scripture out loud. Then the woman threw herself on the floor and began to bang her head very, very hard. My office had only a thin, unpadded commercial carpet over concrete, and I was worried that she was going to injure herself seriously, so I pinned her to the floor, pressing her head down so that she couldn't bang it anymore, and it took everybody to restrain her. After a time she ceased to struggle, and we released her. We continued to pray over her for several hours and finally there came a break-through.

When she came out of this state, she was in her right mind and able to talk. As we continued to talk and pray with her, her story unfolded. When she was in early adolescence, her father, a professing Christian and a leader in another denomination, had raped her, and she had endured the fear that she was pregnant by him. She wasn't, but she vividly remembered standing

naked in front of a mirror pounding on her abdomen, trying to kill the baby that she thought was there. (I was able later to corroborate her story.)

When we finished that evening, she was a different person. She got immediate relief and was never troubled by such things again. Gone, too, was the pull to lesbianism. In time she married and became very involved in our church. She is still living a godly life today, decades later.

These incidents are not the only times that I have encountered situations that I believe were more than simply the natural struggle with a person's sinful nature. What does one do with such things? They don't absolutely match everything recorded in the gospels. These people weren't running around naked in graveyards, slashing themselves with rocks, breaking their chains and wailing at passers-by (Matthew 8:28--34; Mark 5:1-13; Luke 8:26-33). Without going all the way into the modern nonsense that sometimes characterizes things done by some people involved in Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, we must beware of an anti-supernaturalistic bias that leaves our people defenseless against the modern day onslaughts of the hosts of hell: Reformed deism.

I submit that people's struggles in life cannot be reduced to simplistic formulae. That's why some Charismatics and Pentecostals are wrong: most things are never simply demonic. But the opposite approach is just as shortsighted and ineffective in bringing relief to sufferers because our world cannot be as easily divided as Immanuel Kant would have it. We live in a world that is far more complex than we can imagine, where the natural and supernatural are sometimes indistinguishable. Indeed, as I have studied Scripture, I have concluded that there are three true paradigms for understanding reality: the natural world, the world of cosmic conflict between the forces of God and the dark powers, and the world governed by God's eternal, immutable decree. All three are true and valid, and neither cancels out or minimizes the other. As with the deity and humanity of Christ and so many other truths, the Bible is a both-and, rather than an either-or book.

(My undergrad degree was in philosophy and religion from Presbyterian College in Clinton, SC, a school whose faculty in the Department of Religion bounced somewhere around Paul Tillich back then, though there was a professor nearing retirement who leaned toward Barth. Anyhow, one of the courses that I found of particular interest was the Philosophy of

Science because it left me with a sense of skepticism about any attempt to establish a firm philosophical system by reason, even the existence of God. But I eventually concluded that in the final analysis, people believe what they want to believe. It is a matter of the human will, not the intellect, nor even the emotions.)

Somewhere along the way, I changed my mind about how the universe works, and I began actually to pray with expectation that God would intervene in my circumstances.

Over these years, I have seen God physically heal people, sometimes literally in seconds: one evening after our mid-week service, a woman who had been diagnosed with degenerated disks and was awaiting surgery as the only solution, was instantly healed as a group of elders laid hands on her. That was three decades ago, and she is still healthy and free from pain today.

Another time, God healed a woman of chronic, debilitating neck pain that she had in spite of several unsuccessful surgeries. A member of our congregation brought her for prayer. As we prayed for her, I was impressed that God wanted to say something to her—I had never seen her before—and I spoke: “I do not know whether or not God is going to heal your neck. But you have great bitterness in your heart. In a moment the power of the Holy Spirit is going to come in this room, and God is going to give you the ability to forgive the person who has hurt you so deeply.” As soon as the words came out of my mouth, the woman began to weep and wail. As she wept so convulsively, tears and mucous ran down her face and dripped on the floor. When she stopped crying, she looked up and said, “My neck doesn’t hurt!” She was healed—literally, actually, permanently. She also forgave her mother. What I did not know when I spoke those words to her was that her mother had forced her into a terrible, traumatic situation and had left her wounded for years. But now she was released in a moment of time in front of her friend and one of our elders. This woman, too, is still healthy today.

People have been diagnosed with cancer and gone back for more tests only to discover that there was no tumor. Of course, I still perform funerals and visit people in the hospital, too. However, I have seen the effects of God causing people to conceive after all human efforts had been exhausted: on one occasion, nine months after our elders anointed the couple with oil. Most did not give birth nine months later; sometimes it was a year later. But we have almost a dozen such pregnancies in our congregation.

Time and time again, I have prayed for money, and God has sent it to me. A couple of decades ago, my transmission went out in our only vehicle; it was going to cost \$900, and I simply did not have the money. I told no one about it but cried out to God on my knees. Several days later, I found an envelope that had been pushed under my door. Inside were nine, one hundred dollar bills. I certainly praised the Lord, but I didn't understand just how special this gift was at the time. When I received the anonymous gift, I had assumed that someone had learned about my transmission from the mechanic and had chosen to bless me in this way. However, some years later a young man came to see me. He was a Southern Baptist from another parish (county) and hardly knew me. He asked me, "Several years ago did you find an envelope with nine, one hundred dollar bills in it?"

"Yes," I replied. Then he told me that he had been praying, and the Lord had told him to go to Alexandria and give this amount of money to me anonymously. Needless to say, I was stunned at such an example of God's kindness in one of his *providentia extraordinaria*.

On September 15, 1996, as I put a check in the morning offering for \$110, God quickened me with what had happened to Isaac in Genesis 26:12. By faith—I had never been able to do this before, nor have I ever had the liberty to pray this way since—I prayed for a hundredfold blessing—we were really hurting financially at the time. I continued to press this home to my heavenly Father in prayer for weeks on end, and then, on November 16, 1996, out of the blue, I received 200 shares of Wachovia Bank stock from a relative on the East Coast. I got on the Internet and discovered that the stock had closed at \$55.00 per share. Do the math: it comes out to the penny.

Through God hearing our prayers, instead of living in a church owned parsonage, we now have a beautiful home of our own, on top of a hill overlooking a lake, and have been able to give away many thousands of dollars.

I could go on and on with such examples of how God has answered our prayers. The thing that under girded our children's faith as they left home to study wasn't the theology that they had learned, nor the compelling Christian apologetics—though we did strive to teach them what we believed and why we believed it—it was that they had grown up in a home where they had seen their father and mother regularly getting themselves into

terrible difficulties, been present when their parents cast themselves on God's mercy and pleaded his promises by grace alone, through faith alone, and then seen God's often dramatic answers to prayer.

I learned a long time ago that my efforts to "fix" things usually made them worse, but God changes things when we pray—things really do happen when people who take God's promises at face value pray.

Along the way, as I read the Bible the way I would read Tolkien, I adopted, in effect, its universe, something I would never do with Tolkien or Herbert—they are fallen, finite and fallible humans. God's Word is, well, God's Word, and without error in all it affirms. But my *Weltanschauung* changed in the late seventies, radically so. Now, the universe is no longer cold and rational. It is hot with good and evil. That's how I read the Bible, and I now live in a "magical" place, a place where prayer is the most important thing I ever do—the most important thing you will ever do, too.