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PREFACE

It's not easy to write an objective book about the Bible. By its very nature, the Bible demands a response. Unfortunately, people's responses have been determined under less than ideal settings.

Many of us have experienced religious zealots, who cram shattered fragments of Bible down our throats with the predictable effect of stimulating the spiritual gag reflex. This has left people inoculated with just enough Bible information to create misunderstanding, but not enough to generate true comprehension. On such a basis, many have chosen to *reject* the book rather than *accept* it. Most try a neutral platform—they avoid it altogether.

With the above in mind, I've endeavored to stay away from that *preachy* tone that sets one's teeth on edge. I've worked to explain the Bible clearly, allowing it to speak for itself—to say what it says—letting you draw your own conclusions. Some may accuse me of losing objectivity because I've communicated the Bible as being true. I felt that was a risk I must run, as the Bible itself makes that claim. To do otherwise would not be true to the text. Indeed, I've tried to capture the spirit of the narrative to make it interesting as well as clear.

Secondly, I was determined to not *water down* the message. Where the Bible demands a choice, I've tried to illustrate that choice clearly. The Bible is quite direct about what it has to say and I've endeavored to reflect that reality by shunning any sort of vagueness. In keeping with this, I've avoided the confusion of being politically-correct at the expense of the message. Initially, I was perplexed at knowing how to express some words in our gender-neutral society. I eventually gave up on *humankind* and went with the traditional *mankind*.

As with any book, some may find it easy in the first few pages to decide that "it's not for me." I wish to challenge those who are inclined that way, to read the entire volume before deciding what to believe about the Bible. There was a time when I too would have thrown the Bible out with the proverbial bath water—but then I was challenged to pause and look again. I'm still looking, and continue to marvel over this *Book of all books*. There is a good chance you will too.

1 PROLOGUE

The year—circa 33 A.D.

The sun burned midday hot. All was quiet. Even the birds refused to sing in the oppressive heat. Cleopas kicked a clod of dried mud from the dusty road, drew a large breath and blew out his cheeks in a weary sigh. Squinting into the haze, he could barely make out the next ridge. A few miles beyond lay Emmaus—home. Sunset would be on them before their arrival. Normally they would have left Jerusalem sooner—after all, seven miles is a decent walk—but the events of the morning had kept them hanging back, wishing for more concrete news. Emmaus wasn't much of a town, but today it seemed very attractive. Any place but Jerusalem, with its yelling rabble, its Roman cohorts, its governor—Pontius Pilate.

Cleopas' heavy thoughts were jerked back to the present as his irritated companion asked a question for the second time. The two of them had been discussing the day's events—the last few years' events—until it seemed no detail could be dissected more. Cleopas was tired, but more than that, he was confused by all that had transpired in Jerusalem. These days, it seemed, life held more questions than answers.

Trudging down the hill they rounded a bend. It was then they met the stranger.

Hours later, the same day, the same night, when the two of them stood hot and sweaty before their friends back in Jerusalem—for it was there they had rushed—they couldn't give a good answer as to how the stranger had joined their twosome. At first, Cleopas thought he had stepped out of the shadow of a big boulder, but that didn't jive with his friend's explanation. The bottom line was, they just weren't sure where he had come from. Lamely, Cleopas had said that the stranger had "kinda, well just sort of—appeared." That had been met with some derisive statements about the heat and too much sun.

But of one thing they were sure. The stranger had taken that ancient collection of books—the Bible—and starting at the very beginning, over the next several hours, had explained

it in a way that made incredible sense. The stranger's message had driven all despondency and doubt from their minds. So thrilled were they by their new understanding that they had hurried all the way back to Jerusalem to tell their friends about THE STRANGER. Somehow, somewhere, they too needed to hear this message—the message they had heard ON THE ROAD TO EMMAUS.

So just what did THE STRANGER say about the Bible—a book that has puzzled so many—that made so much sense?

That is what this book is all about. And to understand it clearly, we will do what THE STRANGER did—start at the very beginning.

2 GETTING THINGS STRAIGHT

When you stop and think about it, it's entirely reasonable—indeed, just plain logical—to take a few hours out of your entire life to gain an understanding of the Bible.

After all, the Bible has some very profound things to say about life ... and about death.

For centuries it has been a best seller. Anyone who claims to be the least bit informed should understand its basic content. Unfortunately, the Bible has fallen into disrepute, not because of what it says, but because some very prominent men and women, who claim to follow the Bible, have made some of the worst choices in life.

Even the message of the book has been attacked at times, often by well-meaning people who have never taken the time to really understand what it says.

But the Bible has not changed. And despite what the hypocrites or critics say, it does make good sense to know it for **yourself**—

... for **your own** peace of mind,

... for **your own** life and death's sake.

A PUZZLE

In many ways, the Bible is like a puzzle. By this, I do not mean that its message is hidden, but rather that to understand the Bible accurately, the biblical pieces must be put together in the right way. We can do this by applying four basic principles of learning.

FOUNDATIONS

The first principle is one we use all the time. To learn any new concept, it helps to build from the foundation up—to *move from the known to the unknown*. You don't start children in kindergarten by teaching them algebra. Rather, you begin with basic numbers, and *move from the simple to the complex*. If you skip the fundamentals, even rudimentary algebra will be beyond your grasp.

It's the same way with the Bible. If you neglect the foundations, your biblical understanding will incorporate some unusual ideas, resulting in the message being confused—the puzzle will present the wrong image. In this book we begin with the basics, and progress through each chapter, building on previously gained knowledge.

BUILDING A CLOTHESLINE

The second principle is especially important when learning history or reading a story. Simply put, it's this—*start at the beginning and move sequentially through to the end*. That may seem obvious, but many people tend to read the Bible in bits and pieces, never taking the time to tie them together. In this book we will cover key events, stringing them together in logical sequence—like hanging laundry on a clothesline. Since this overview is far from comprehensive, expect some gaps on the line. If you wish, the gaps can be filled in later, after you have the overall picture.

Although this clothesline cannot include every story, the events we do study will tie together in one continuous message. If you are a typical reader, by the time you have finished this book, the Bible will make remarkable sense. Whether you believe it or not is entirely up to you. I sincerely hope you will, but that is your choice. My job is to help you understand it clearly.

PICKLES AND PIE

The third principle is of critical importance. *Don't mix your subject matter—stick to one theme at a time.*

The Bible addresses many different issues. It might be compared to a cookbook with its many diverse recipes. Traditionally, the Bible has been broken down into topics, such as God, Angels, Man, and Prophecy. The intention was to create better understanding, but one needs to be careful. Some people, finding certain similarities between topics, attempt to combine the ideas, often resulting in a distortion of the original meaning.

It's like jumping from a pickle recipe to a pie recipe because they both share the initial letter "p." If you begin by making pickles and end with the pie recipe, you will bake the pickles until they are well-browned! Both may start with the letter "p," but combined they make bizarre food!

In the Bible, if you unintentionally leap from one topic to another, the end result will be confusion—your puzzle will be disjointed. To avoid this biblical chaos, we will stick to one *theme*.

MAJOR ON THE MAJORS

This last principle—*major on the majors*—should be applied to any learning situation where the content is unfamiliar to you. The idea is to learn the most important points first.

The Bible covers an incredible array of topics, but not all are of equal importance. In this book we will focus on one major theme—the most significant theme in the Bible. Once you understand it, the Bible will make profound but simple sense.

The mixing of various topics is one of the contributing causes as to why we find so many different church groups, religions and cults, that to varying degrees hold the Bible as their book. The pie has been mixed with the pickles. The puzzle has a jumbled picture. In some cases, the confusion is minor. In other situations, the mix-up has had catastrophic results.

It's been called "the most misunderstood book in history."

Wars have been fought in its name, scandals have been precipitated by it, politics shaped and reshaped at its word. Theologians have both defended and reviled it. Skeptics have done the same. If you are a typical member of the human race, you have often been perplexed by all the "fuss" surrounding the Bible. The question remains, "What does it really say?"

Here is a book that explains the greatest of Bible themes clearly and logically. Rather than focusing on one part—and missing the whole—the author chronologically binds together the entire text into one great universal drama, looking at events from the perspective of those who experienced history in the making. The results are sometimes comical, sometimes frightening—but always true to the intent of the text.

When you are done reading it, you may find yourself believing "the Book" like you never have before. Or you may decide not to. The author's objective approach leaves that decision up to you.

John Cross is lecturer, author, photographer and family man. Over the years his interests have included fishing, hiking, rock climbing, canoeing, sailing, flying, scuba diving, and amateur radio. Among other things he has written and directed five award-winning videos. He has lived and worked in three countries, visited twenty-one others. For a number of years he lived in Papua New Guinea. No passion has equaled his desire to explain simply "the Book." John and his family are from Canada.

The Stranger had a message . . .

. . . for the person who knows nothing about the world's bestseller—the Bible,

. . . and for those who want to know more.



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