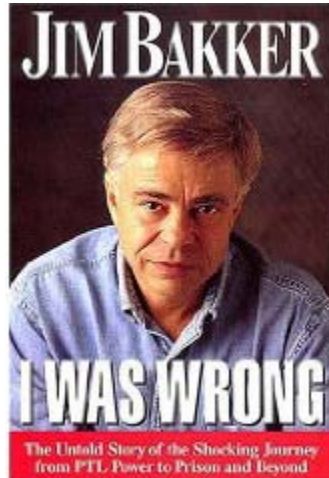


"I Was Wrong"

Excerpts from Jim Bakker's Book



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About the time of my parole hearing (1993), I completed my study of all the words of Jesus in the New Testament. To my surprise, after months of studying Jesus, I concluded that He did not have one good thing to say about money. Most of Jesus' statements about riches, wealth, and material gain were in a negative context. Even "The Prodigal Son," one of my favorite stories told by Jesus, took on new meaning as I read it again for the first time with an overview of Scripture in mind. I quickly noticed that the story began with the younger brother saying to the father, "Give me! Give me my part of the inheritance" (Luke 15:12). He didn't even say, "Please give me." He simply demanded. Before long, that young man landed in the pigpen. I began to see that the fastest way to the pigpen begins with "Give me" ... and the fastest route to the "big pen," the federal penitentiary, often begins with the same phrase, "Give me!"

I was amazed at this "new" revelation, but beyond that, I was deeply concerned. As the true impact of Jesus' words regarding money impacted my heart and mind, I became physically nauseated. I was wrong. I was wrong! Wrong in my lifestyle, certainly, but even more fundamentally, wrong in my understanding of the Bible's true message. Not only was I wrong, but I was teaching the opposite of what Jesus had said. That is what broke my heart; when I came to the awareness that I had actually been contradicting Christ, I was horrified.

For years I had embraced and espoused a gospel that some skeptics had branded a "prosperity gospel." I didn't mind the label; on the contrary, I was proud of it. "You're absolutely right!" I'd say to critics and friends alike. "I preach it and live it! I believe in a God who wants to bless His people. Look at all the rich saints in the Old Testament. And the New Testament clearly say that above all, God wants us to prosper even as our souls prosper. If your soul is prospering, you should be prospering materially as well!"

I even got to the point where I was teaching people at PTL. "Don't pray, 'God, Your will be done,' when you're praying for health or wealth. You already know it is God's will for you to have those things! To ask God to confirm His will when He has already told you what His will is in a matter is an insult to God. It is as though you don't really trust Him or believe that He is as good as His Word. Instead of praying 'Thy will be done' when you want a new car, just claim it. Pray specifically and tell God what kind you want. Be sure to specify which options and what color you want too."

Such arrogance! Such foolishness! Such sin! The Bible says we are not to presume upon God, but we should say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that" (James 4:15).

I may not always have been so blatant about it, but I often preached a prosperity message at Heritage USA and on our *PTL* television programs. But when I began to study the Scriptures in depth while in prison, something I am embarrassed and ashamed to admit that I rarely took time to do during the hectic years of constant building and ministering at PTL, I was very distressed at what I discovered. I realized that for years I helped propagate an impostor, not a true gospel, but another gospel - a gospel that stated "God wants you to be rich!" Christians should have the best because we are children of God, "King's Kids," as I often put it. And shouldn't the King's kids have the best this world had to offer?



The more I studied the Bible, however, I had to admit that the prosperity message did not line up with the tenor of Scripture. My heart was crushed to think that I led so many people astray. I was appalled that I could have been so wrong, and I was deeply grateful that God had not struck me dead as a false prophet!

How could I have taught and even written books on the subject of "how to get rich" when Jesus spoke so clearly about the dangers of earthly riches? One of the statements of Jesus that kept echoing in my head and heart was in the parable of the sower, where Jesus said that "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful" (Mark 4:19). *The deceitfulness of riches.* The more I thought about it, the more I had to admit that I had fallen into that snare. I had allowed the quest for material possessions and the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts for other things to choke the Word of God in my own life and in the lives of my family members and coworkers. As PTL grew larger and our ministry more widespread, I had a financial tiger by the tail, and just coming up with enough money to meet the daily budgets dominated my thoughts and my time.

In prison, I decided to dig into the Scriptures further to see what else Jesus had to say about money. I noticed that He said,

Do not store up for yourself treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matt. 6:19-21 NIV)

Another Scripture that seared into my heart was Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money" (NIV). In that same passage, I discovered that God's priorities were much different from what mine had been.

Jesus said,

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? .. So do not

worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For the pagans run after all these things and your Heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. (Matt. 6:25, 31-33 NIV)

Other teachings of Jesus scored direct hits upon my heart, as well: "But woe unto you who are rich, / for you have already received your comfort" (Luke 6:24 NIV). "Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me'" (Matt. 16:24 NIV). This verse dramatically illustrated the stark contrast between what Jesus taught and what I had been teaching. I had taught that Christians could have the best of both worlds, the best that this world had to offer and heaven too. Jesus said, "Deny yourself."

Jesus taught, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." (Luke 18:24 NIV). Unwittingly, I had tried to explain this verse away with the help of modern scholarship. I had taught people that the "eye of the needle" of what Jesus spoke of was a low arch in the Holy Land. Supposedly, a camel carrying a heavy load had to get down on its knees to slip through the "eye of the needle." This was the explanation that I had heard from other prosperity teachers whom I had admired and respected, so I simply passed on their explanation as fact without really examining the verse carefully, especially in the original Greek. Nor had I consulted any Bible dictionaries or encyclopedias. If I had done so, I might have found that not a shred of reputable archaeological or historic evidence supports the came-through-the-arch theory.

In prison, however, when I took time to study the meaning of Jesus' words in the original Greek language, I discovered that Jesus was not talking about camels walking on their knees at all. The word He used was one commonly used to describe a *sewing needle*, not an archway. In other words, the verse meant exactly what it said: It may not be impossible for a rich man to enter heaven, but apart from a miracle, he doesn't stand a chance!

In my cell, I studied the Bible long hours into the night. Often as the sun rose in the eastern sky, I was still poring over the Scriptures. The more I studied, the more I had to face the awful truth: I had been preaching false doctrine for years and hadn't even known it!



Tragically, too late, I recognized that at PTL I had been doing just the opposite of Jesus' words by teaching people to fall in love with money. Jesus never equated His blessings with material things, but I had done just that. I had laid so much emphasis upon material things, I was subtly encouraging people to put their hearts into things, rather than into Jesus.

Was Heritage USA of God? I believe it was; I believe the original concept was His and that He planted it in my heart. But as I said before, Heritage USA - with all its facilities and buildings - was the box, the package. The box was meant to enhance people's appreciation of the true gift, Jesus Christ, but before long, many people began to worship the box ... and I allowed them to do so; no, I encouraged them to do so by what I was teaching and by the manner in which I was living. I lived the prosperity message I was preaching. I should have taught people to fall in love with Jesus rather than the trappings.

I began to share some of the things I was learning with several of the Christian inmates with whom I often discussed the Bible. I was stunned by their responses. Rather than being excited that I had finally come to a knowledge of the truth, they were aghast that I was denying what they considered to be sound spiritual principles taught by sincere men and women of God.

"Yes, but doesn't Jesus also say that He came that we might have an abundant life?" asked David, an inmate whose background was steeped in the prosperity message. We turned to John 10:10 and read, "I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly" (KJV). It was a wonderful statement by Jesus Himself, so I could easily

see how David had related it to material prosperity. As we looked up the words in a Greek-English dictionary, however, we found that the Greek word for "life" used in this verse was *zoe*, a word indicating "life in the spirit and soul" rather than the word *bios* which is used to refer to physical, material life. Of the two words, *zoe* is usually considered the more noble, higher word. Basically, Jesus was saying, "I want you to have an abundant life in the spirit, which is My highest and best for you."

"Hey, that verse doesn't have anything to do with material prosperity," David said, as the light turned on in his heart and mind. "If abundant life meant having houses, cars, riches, parties and entertainment, then I guess the world is experiencing abundant life. Yet we have more hatred, disease, and pain than ever." "Not only that, " piped up Jorge, a Spanish guy with a big smile who had walked into my cell and was leaning up against the bunks as he watched David and me searching through the Bible reference books, "but if you're figurin' how much God loves you by how much money you have, or what kind of car you drive, or how big a house you live in, what happens when all that stuff is gone?" Jorge had hit the nail right on the head.

The next night after work, David and Jorge were back. David has talked to his Christian girlfriend on the telephone that afternoon and she had told him, "Of course God wants us to prosper, David. You know the Bible even says so in 3 John, verse two." I knew the verse well. It had been my favorite "prosperity verse" for years; it was the premier New Testament verse upon which I had built my prosperity message and lifestyle. The verse reads: "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth" (KJV).

I had preached on this verse for most of my ministry. It said exactly what I believed - that God wanted His people to prosper, and by that, I interpreted it to mean prosper financially and materially, in other words, to get rich. Again, I never really examined the true meaning of the text, nor did I ever seriously consider why this verse, on the surface anyhow, seemed to contradict so much of what the New Testament said in other places. I simply pulled this verse out of context and took it to the bank - literally!

"First of all, let's look at this verse, David," I said. "We have to take the whole counsel of God's Word, just like Jesus says in Matthew 4:4. 'Man shall not live by bread alone, but by *every* word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.'" We began going through the verse, word by word, deciphering the meaning from the Greek with the help of a few Bible reference books someone had sent me. I didn't tell David that I had been tearing this verse apart for nearly two years and trying to find where it fit with the message of Jesus.

It did not fit. No matter how hard I tried to make my former interpretation of 3 John 2 consistent with the words of Jesus, the verse as I had understood it simply did not make sense. How could John be saying, "above all things, I want you to prosper"? First, David and I looked up the meaning of the word *prosper* in a dictionary. The various forms of the word all had one common meaning: "to increase in wealth."

"David, tell me something," I said pausing and pointing to the Bible. "Jesus said that our number one concern was to love God supremely; after that we are to love our neighbors as ourselves. Why, then, would John say that 'above all' I should have wealth?"

"I don't know, Jim," David replied. "What do you think?"

I ignored David's question and asked him another. "Do you think God wants you to have money above your soul's salvation?"

"No. Of course not!"

"Well, then let's find out what these words mean," I suggested. I suddenly remembered one of my Bible professors warning me never to look up Biblical words in an English dictionary, because the words might have a completely different meaning than in the original biblical languages. I pulled a Bible dictionary and Greek lexicon off the shelf.

We looked up the meaning of the word *prosper*. We found the word translated "prosper" in the King James Version of the Bible came from a Greek word, *eudoo*, which is made up of two Greek root words, *eu*, which means "good," and *hodos*, which means "road, or route, a progress, or journey." **We did not find a single reference in the Greek to money, riches or material gain from the word translated *prosper* in the King James Version.**

The apostle John, the writer, was saying simply, "I wish you a good, safe, and healthy journey throughout your life, even as your soul has a good and safe journey to heaven."

John was not saying "Above everything else, I want you to get rich. Above everything, you should prosper and make money." That is not even implied in the true meaning of the verse. Yet I had based much of my philosophy at PTL and even before that on this one verse that I had totally misunderstood!

Just to make certain that we were not unfairly placing too much emphasis upon the words in this passage, I began looking up other places where the same words were found in the Bible. I found *eudoo* again, for example, in Romans 1:10. The apostle Paul wrote, "Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you" (KJV). Paul often took special care to make sure that his motivation could not be misconstrued or maligned because of money. It would be unthinkable for the apostle to say, "Please pray for me that somehow or other I might obtain wealth by coming to preach to you," or "Please pray that I will make a lot of money on this trip." Yet that is how Romans 1:10 would have to be interpreted if we took the King James Version translation of *eudoo* to mean wealth or material gain. Clearly, that was not the intent of the apostle Paul. He was saying simply, "I sure hope God grants me an opportunity to visit you soon. Please pray that I will have a good journey on the road as I travel to see you."



The apostle John was saying something very similar when he said, "Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth." It was a greeting, a prayerful desire of the apostle's, not a principle suggesting Christians should be wealthy.

David reluctantly agreed that to base a prosperity doctrine on this verse would be shaky indeed, but he was not yet ready to abandon his belief in the prosperity message with which he had been indoctrinated. He took some of the notes from our study sessions and wrote to several leading "prosperity preachers," some of whom were close friends of mine. Day after day, David was back, armed with more books sent to him by prosperity teachers.

"Jim, look at this!" David said as he pointed to a passage in the Old Testament to see that he had been referred by some of my friends to Deuteronomy 8:18. I had used the verse myself in countless messages and appeals for money. The verse reads, "But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day" (KJV).

At first glance, the verse did seem to support the idea that God is the one who gives us the power to get rich. When David and I read the verse in context with the entire passage of Deuteronomy 8:1-18, however, it took on a different meaning. We realized that what God is actually saying to His people in this passage is, "When I bring you out of Egypt into the Promised Land and you are enjoying the blessings I have given to you, don't think that you have been successful in your own strength. Don't say that it is your own power, that you did all this yourself." The Lord then warns His people to remember that He is the one who deserves the glory. All God was saying was "When you get into the Promised Land, don't forget who brought you there and gave to you everything that you have."

David and I dug into the words in the passage, looking especially at the word translated *wealth*. By looking up *wealth* in a Hebrew lexicon, we discovered that it comes from the Hebrew word *chayil* which is used 232 times in the Old Testament. In almost every case, the word is meant to imply, "might, strength, power, ability, virtue, valor," and, oh, yes: "wealth." It is used most often to describe valiant men and women and armies.



As David and I read the passage with new understanding, we concluded that God was not saying, "I am the one who gives you riches." What He really was saying was: "Remember, it is God who has given you the power to receive everything you have. He is the one who has given you strength. He is the one who has given you a house, land, or other possessions."

I admit, in the past I had used this verse to make it sound as though it was God's will to make everyone wealthy and if any of His people were poor it was probably due to lack of faith or not applying the biblical "formulas" correctly. That was an improper interpretation of the passage. Yes, it is God who gives us the power to receive all that we have, but to assume that He wants all His people to be wealthy based on this Scripture is an illegitimate extension of that truth.

As David and I studied the Scriptures concerning material wealth, he became convinced that the Bible does not teach that God wants us to be rich in material possessions. "But Jim, doesn't God want to bless His people?" David asked. "Of course He does," I replied, "but we don't have to twist the Scriptures into saying something they don't mean. There are plenty of passages in the Bible that tell us that God will provide for us, and as we honor Him by using the resources that He gives us for His glory, He will continue to pour out even greater blessings upon us." (*Bakker then cites Mal. 3:10-11, 2 Co. 9:6*)

God has promised to bless those people who put Him first in their lives. That principle has never changed. I still believe that God blesses His people and will meet their needs. The sin is falling in love with and seeking after money and material things. He doesn't want us to equate mere money with godliness. In fact, the apostle Paul said that "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness .. supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself. But godliness with contentment is great gain" (1 Tim. 6:3, 5-6 KJV).

For the first time, I began to really understand what Paul meant when he wrote:

But they that will be rich (which I discovered meant: "they that want to be rich") fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. (1 Tim. 6:8-11 KJV)

For years I had glossed over that passage in Scripture. I ignored it, made excuses for it, or tried to explain it away. I refused to accept the obvious interpretation. I now see that the message was right there all the time, ***so plain that even a child could see it and understand it.*** I was wrong.

I knew I could not keep this newfound information a secret. I had influenced so many people to accept a "prosperity message," I now felt that I had a responsibility to tell my friends what I had been learning from my studies in the Bible. I wrote a simple, straightforward letter and sent it to some of the people who had



written to me in prison. The letter was not meant to be published to the world. I didn't know how *The Charlotte Observer* got a copy of the letter, but the paper ran portions of it on the front page .. Soon I began receiving mail from all over the country concerning the letter. Some people were appalled that I - a person they considered as a primary propagator of the prosperity message in the twentieth century - had disavowed my former teaching. Others wrote to me were delighted that I had "finally seen the light."

Frankly, I was not greatly concerned what the critics or the skeptics had to say about my speaking about against the prosperity message. I knew what God had clearly shown to me from His Word. I had studied every word of Jesus over a period of two years, and I was convinced that the prosperity message was at best an aberration and at worst "another gospel" contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although I still believed God blesses His people, the prosperity message I had preached for years was wrong.

In retrospect, one of the main reasons I slipped into believing and preaching a distorted doctrine was because of my lack of understanding of what it really means to allow Jesus to be Lord of my life.