**THE GOSPELS: Part 2**

Welcome to Month #2 as we zip through the Bible’s high points, getting just a hint of the wide-screen, majestic Dolby sound of this “book of books.” Sixty-six of ‘em, to be precise. 37 in the Old Testament, 29 in the New.

In its pages God divinely inspired some 40 men to record His very utterances, spoken through His prophets, as well as eyewitnesses. Writing over 1,600 years, these authors were, let’s say, *diverse* -- kings, princes, poets, philosophers, prophets, statesmen, both well-educated and unschooled. Truly, it’s a book for Everyman. And Everywoman.

While the OT’s Hebrew writings chronicle the Creation, Noah’s flood, the moment when people became divided into nations (at the Tower of Babel) and the appearance of the Jews, its major theme is: “God plans to visit earth in the form of a Man, the Messiah.”

The NT covers the birth of Messiah (Jesus Christ, God’s only Son) and documents Christ’s early fans who in the 1st century were dubbed “Christians.” The NT also sketches God’s long-range business plan.

From classrooms to barrooms the Bible is debated daily. Agnostics aren’t sure there’s a God. Atheists, while debunking absolutes, are absolutely *sure* there’s no God.

Chuck Darwin himself said to think that the human eye could be produced by natural selection made even *him* ill. After all, if it had evolved over eons, it would’ve been useless until fully formed.

In the OT book of Psalms (139:14) we read, “I praise you (God) because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.”

The Bible blows the theory that creation exists by chance. Someone, with lots of spare time, discovered that if you mark ten coins from 1 to 10, drop ‘em in a bag, shake ‘em up and pull ‘em out one by one, the mathematical likelihood that you’d remove them in numerical order is ...... (drum roll) ..... one in ten billion.

Then what are the odds that a baby’s stomach, brain, heart, lungs, arteries, veins, kidneys, eyes, ears and teeth would develop *in concert* in the womb, then begin functioning perfectly on the surgeon’s downbeat? Writing in Genesis (1:26-27), Moses quotes God who said to *Himselves* (yes, He is three-in-One, i.e., Father, Son and Holy Spirit): “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness. ... So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them.”

What about the *macro* view of creation? Astronomers say the Andromeda star group, like our Milky Way, is comprised of *billions* (can’t you hear Carl Sagan now) of giant suns. And Andromeda is only one of some 100 billion island universes visible through mega-telescopes!

Astronomers get bug-eyed talking about how some of these island universes of suns are literally dancing *through*  each other at super-geeky speeds, all perfectly synchronized like Fred and Ginger, orbiting according to some Supreme Dispatcher.

King David, who wrote half of the Psalms, tells us (19:1-3): “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.”

If creation is a demo of grand design, there *must* be a Designer. Enter this Nordy’s luncheon series where we’re discovering this Designer behind Door #3 where He reveals Himself as ..... God.

Because we’re persons, with personalities, relating personally, our Creator -- in whose image we were created -- must be a personal God. Like every child who longs to know its parents, there’s a hole inside all of us that can only be filled by our Father, God.

Once we respond to His invitation to have a personal, intimate relationship with Him, any doubts about Him vanish.

Today we tackle Mark, the NT’s second book and the second of a 4-pack called The Gospels, written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

 “Gospel” means “good news.” Each of these writers, from different perspectives, highlights what happened during the Carpenter from Nazareth’s 33-year life on earth.

Matthew, the hated tax collector, wrote of Christ the **King**. Mark, son of wealthy parents, wrote of Christ the **Servant**. Luke, a physician, wrote of Christ, the **Son of Man**. John, a full-time fisher, wrote of Christ, the **Son of God**.

After the sermons by all the preachers, evangelists, pastors, priests and rabbis, Jesus is still a mystery to most. Why else would some use His name to curse while others melt into worship at the sound of it?

Thanks to the inspired gospel writers, we see Christ up close -- born in a Bethlehem barn, growing up with Mary and Joseph, learning the carpenter’s trade, prep-schooled in the temple for His mercurial 3-year career. We see Him moving among all levels of society, embracing children, healing the sick, raising the dead, verbally disarming self-righteous hypocrites, calming a storm, walking on water -- and training a motley band of twelve disciples who’d start a revolution that’s multiplied exponentially over the past 2,000 years.

All the major religions spin Jesus. Buddhists call Him just another enlightened man. Judaism says He’s a good man but a false Messiah (a curious oxymoron). Hindus say He’s an avatar (incarnation of a Hindu deity). New Agers visualize Him as an example of Christ-consciousness.

But Jesus, the God/Man fits in *none* of these boxes. Who else left the cushness of heaven to land on a lowly planet in that vast sea of island universes? Who else was born in a stall’s stench, endured jeering mobs, was dragged unjustly through rigged legal proceedings, made to lug His own heavy cross toward a scar-faced hill outside Jerusalem, strung up between thieves, held there by nails pounded through His hands and feet? Who else hung there, praying for His accusers, “Father, forgive them because they don’t have a clue?” Who else died of His own free will -- He wasn’t *killed*; He *gave* up His life -- was wrapped tightly in sheets and buried in a borrowed tomb? Who else rose from death three days later and walked *through* that huge stone, out among hundreds of witnesses, then ascended into heaven to rejoin His Dad, having paid the price on that cross for your sins and mine?

What’s all this mean to you and me? Only Jesus, wholly God and wholly Man, could pay the debt you and I could never pay. Writing in his gospel, John says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

**The Gospel of Mark**

While Matthew targeted a Jewish reader, Luke a Greek demo and John everybody, Mark zeroed in on the Roman market. These power-trippers had zip time for family trees, sacrifices and Kosher food. They were on their cell phones. “Have your admin call my admin, and we’ll do lunch.” “E-mail me the pitch, and I’ll print it out in my front seat on the way to that all-day leadership seminar in Key Arena.” The Roman lifestyle. You know it; you love it. “Dont’ *tell* me, baby; *show* me the money.” Because his audience was movin’ and shakin,’ Mark’s gospel is a “quick read.”

Mark could’ve been the first gospel written, perhaps in the A.D. 60’s. A young man named John Mark is the author. His mother Mary was likely an upscale lady with a big home in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12).

Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas (whom we’ll meet in the Book of Acts) as they spread the Jesus story on the isle of Cyprus.

Later we see Mark understudying Peter, one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. Could be that early believers were so impressed with Peter’s speeches that they asked Mark to write them down. Perhaps this is how we got Mark’s Gospel because it definitely reflects Peter’s experiences with Jesus.

One of my heroes, the late Ray Steadman, said “Mark is the most translated book in the world. No other book appears in as many languages.” That’s because missionary translators, working with remote tribes around the world, are attracted to Mark for two reasons. It’s the shortest of the four gospels (and it’s not easy slaving over a laptop dodging some cannibal’s spears). And because it targets Gentiles, it’s ideal for introducing the Bible to people of all backgrounds.

Starting with chapter 1 Mark asks us to “give it up for” the Messiah, a Ruler who serves and a Servant who rules. Rather than digging for Jesus’ birth certificate, Mark takes us back, back, back, back to the prophets.

As Matthew did in long form, so Mark, in fast-forward, touches on John the Baptist’s intro of Christ’s national tour. It’s about 30 A.D, and people have trouped 20-30 miles out of urbane, Metro Jerusalem into the wilderness to hear some hippie named John preach. There in a barren spot that looked like Parched Skull, Arizona, the only wet for miles is the Jordan River -- where John did his baptizing.

Obviously folks were drawn to this freaky recluse because he touched a nerve, a universal human need that’s just as real today. A need driven by sin, guilt and fear.

The Bible describes sin as self-centeredness. We all struggle with this. God tells us in the Scriptures that He loves each of us and wants us to convey His love to those around us. Ah, but instead of focusing on others, despite our best efforts to be “points of light,” we get hung up on loving *ourselves* first.

Sin downloads guilt, self-disgust, self-*dis*respect, even self-hate.

And guilt always travels with fear. We’re fearful because we know we’re really not in control of whatever’s controlling us. So we run from reality. We’ve done it ever since Adam and Eve were sucker-punched by the serpent into eating that forbidden winesap. When God trumpeted, “Adam, where are you?” the First Couple had already hustled their sin, guilt and fear out of sight behind a few well-placed fig leaves.

Today we fear what our bosses, clients, competitors and fellow office stiffs may do to us. Forget Prozac; no drug will cure this inner torment.

*That’s* what pried these crowds from reading their evening scrolls in Jerusalem, making them head for the hills where weird John held court. Whatever he was hawkin’ was workin.’

What was John’s life-changing elixir? Mark breaks it down for us:

• John’s coming was foretold in the OT (blending Exodus 23:20, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3)

• He popped up in the wilderness, just as the prophets had said.

• He showed people the way to God.

• He symbolized that way by baptizing them in the Jordan. Being willing to be baptized was a public statement that “I’m admitting my disobedience, my sin, and now turning to God.”

God knew He’d scare the heck out of people if Jesus simply appeared on earth unannounced. That He pops up in the *desert* -- rather than at a hotel press conference -- indicates this was, well, supernatural. God chose the toolies, perhaps a metaphor for what our lives are like without Christ. But even in the desert there’s Hope!

John said the key to personalizing this Hope was wrapped up in “repentance.” He meant when we repent to God of our sins, we agree with Him that we’re imperfect. When we confess to God that our only Hope of pleasing Him is to receive the free gift of His forgiveness, paid for by the death of His Son Jesus on the cross, we become guilt-free.

And we’re assured that we’re actually brand new creatures in God’s eyes, with a new destination the Bible calls heaven. That’s why this is called .... Good News! Because without it, we’re locked in the fastlane bound for a place the Bible calls hell -- a physical place without God, love, light and happiness. So what’s the big attraction!

That, in a nutshell, is why Jerusalemites were streaming out of their condos, trundling off into the outback.

Now let’s read Chapter 1.

Jesus now returns to Capernaum on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, about 80 miles north of Jerusalem, an area He works until chapter 5 where He moves to the eastern shore, a little Gentile town called Gersa (modern Khersa). Then back across the lake to Capernaum until chapter 6 where He takes His disciples to His hometown, Nazareth, 20 miles southwest of the Sea of Galilee, a body of water 5 miles wide, 8 miles long.

Let’s read Chapter 6, Jesus’ homecoming.

In Chapter 7 Jesus squares off against the self-righteous Pharisees and some Jewish teachers who’ve traveled all the way up from Jerusalem to check out this Jesus phenom.

Let’s read Chapter 7:1-23

Even after hangin’ with Jesus as He pulled off one incredible miracle after the next, His disciples just didn’t get it yet. Of all people they were slow to figure out who He really was.

In Chapter 8 Jesus moves south of the Sea of Galilee into the Decapolis (or Ten Towns) region, closer to J-town (Jerusalem.). Let’s read 8:1-21.

In vintage Alfred Hitchcock, Ray Steadman believes that two cameos in Mark (10:17-29 and 14:50-52) are actually self-portraits of the author.

We say farewell to Mark at this point. Let me encourage you to read this 16-chapter book on your own this coming month.

If you want to drill down deeper, and if you are a cyberhead, here are two interesting sites:

• Terry Blanchard’s “Whirlwind Bible Tour” <www.spectra.net/~diana/wbt.htm> is a whimsically humorous, super-brief overview of the Bible.

• Also, the Discover Bible School at <www.iiw.org/discover/index.html>.

 “Any study of the Bible should accomplish two goals.

First, it should develop in us a sense of humility. God does not hesitate to point out one of our major shortcomings:

‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts,

neither are your ways my ways,’

declares the Lord’ (Isaiah 55:8, NIV).

Second, consistent exposure to God’s Word should create

a desire within us to fill our mind with God’s thinking.

As our confidence in God’s way of thinking grows,

our confidence in God Himself also grows.”

*The Handbook of Bible Application*, Neil S. Wilson, Editor,

Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1992

His Deal
April 28, 1998

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