**THE GOSPELS: Part III**

Thanks for joining us as we continue our cruise through the greatest work on history, literature and theology ever written, the Bible.

Confined to the dimensions we live in **on Planet Earth, we can acquire knowledge through just two sources: reason and experience.** That may explain why pluralism, rationalism and existentialism are so popular. What *are* they? Are they catching?

Pluralism contends, says American Heritage Dictionary, "that no single explanatory system or view of reality can account for all the phenomena of life.”

Rationalism maintains "that the exercise of reason, rather than the acceptance of empiricism, authority or spiritual revelation, provides the only valid basis for action or belief and that reason is the prime source of knowledge and of spiritual truth.”

Existentialism “emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable...” One of its own writes, “...the existentialist attitude is perhaps more often associated with

atheistic thinkers to whom religious belief seems like anact of

cowardice, or, as Camus calls it, ‘philosophical suicide.’” Søren Kierkegaard, an existential icon, said, “I stick my finger into existence. It smells of nothing. Where am I? What is this thing called the world? Who has lured me into the thing and now leaves me here? How did I come into the world? Why was I not consulted?”

Handcuffed to just reason and experience, life’s an unsolvable puzzle.

Enter stage right the subject of our monthly search, the Bible, claiming to be the very *revelation* of God Himself, this personal Supreme Being who says He created us and our universe. In this Bible -- 39 books in the Old Testament (O.T.), 27 in the New (N.T.) -- God speaks to all mankind using two types of revelation.

**General revelation** is available by simply observing nature, sensing the inner need each of us has to know and relate to a Power greater than ourselves. **Special revelation** occurs when God has spoken to people in dreams, visions, through angels and, most dramatically, by sending His only Son, Jesus Christ, to live among us.

Just as Jesus is fully God yet fully man, so the Bible claims to be fully *inspired* by God, yet *written* by mortals like us. Peter described this miracle (2 Pet. 1:21): “...men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” Each writer had his own style, but his writing, as included in the Bible, was and is the very Word of God. Paul, who wrote much of the N.T., said all Scripture is God-breathed, or inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16).

Over 1,500 years some 40 authors, most unaware of what the others had written, compiled this amazing Book. They came from all walks: judge, sheep breeder, priest, statesman, scribe, king, prophet, poet, musician, philosopher, farmer, teacher, tax collector, physician, tentmaker, fisherman, carpenter, freeman, slave, rich, poor, educated, unschooled. Imagine a publisher today undertaking a book of this magnitude, with 40+ contributing authors like the above -- trying to make it all hang together and make sense.

The Bible has weathered the test of time. One source testifies, “There is no ancient document which has manuscript support that even approximates that of the N.T. The Scriptures are unique in the quantity, quality, and antiquity of their manuscripts. Many have sought to ban and destroy the Bible, but their efforts have been futile. The Bible is by far the most popular book in the world.”

The O.T. was written in Hebrew. Its *historical* section runs from Creation and the founding of Israel to 400 years before the birth of Christ. The *poetic* books teach how to maximize our relationship with God, others and our world, giving our lives meaning, harmony and beauty. And the *prophetic* books have two tracks: first, they condemn Israel for sinning and chasing after imitation gods; and, second, they describe a great future hope for a day when God will ultimately reign again throughout the universe, having created “a new heaven and a new earth.”

The major message of the O.T. is that God will, at a future date, dispatch His only Son, Jesus Christ the Messiah, to earth to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven, to restore a relationship between the Creator and the people He created, a relationship destroyed by sin way back in the Garden of Eden.

The Bad News is that mankind has sinned, starting with Adam and Eve, right on down to each of us. That we sin -- and thus are sinners -- is not a breaking story! As God had warned Adam and Eve, the *punishment* for disobeying Him was eventual *physical* death -- and what’s worse, eternal separation from God.

Ahhh, but there’s the Good News. God loved the world so much that He sent His one and only Son from heaven to earth to die for all of your sins and mine. With Christ’s death on the cross God’s requirement for a perfect Sacrifice was totally satisfied, and all our sins -- past, present and future -- were forgiven. To make that forgiveness *ours*, all God requires of us is to personally *believe* it, thereby accepting His free gift of salvation. When we do, the Bible says we’ll have eternal life with Him in heaven after we die -- as opposed to eternal life in a place the Bible calls hell -- where people only *wish* they *could* die..

During the four centuries between the O.T. and the N.T. the Jews’ homeland fell under one nation after another. Alexander the Great brought the Greek language to Judah, and Pompey brought Roman roads -- both pre-requisites for the N.T. writers to publish and disseminate to the world their reports of Christ’s coming to earth.

The N.T. books were written about A.D. 45-95 and, like the O.T., eventually collected, copied and sent across the Roman Empire.

The N.T. can be divided into the five historical books (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts), the books (or “letters”) written by Paul, letters written by others, and the Revelation. The first four books of the N.T., called the Gospels, lay the foundation because they describe Jesus’ life here on earth -- His birth, teachings, crucifixion, resurrection and return to heaven.

Matthew presents Jesus as Israel’s Messiah-King. Mark sees Him as the Servant who came to “give His life a ransom for many.”

If this quick wrap of the N.T. was too sketchy, or if you missed some of our O.T. sessions, the notes are yours for the asking.

**The Gospel of Luke**

Luke was a historian and a physician, given to writing detailed, chronological patient histories, thus qualified to enrich his Gospel, the longest of the four, with many historical details. Sir William Ramsey says of him, “Luke is a historian of the first rank; not merely are his statements of fact trustworthy; he is possessed of the true historic sense. In short, this author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians.”

As the N.T.’s only Gentile author, he wrote another part of the N.T., the Book of Acts, which we’ll come to later. He became a close friend of Paul and was in Rome with him when Paul was thrown into prison. Tradition tells us Luke was from Antioch in northern Syria, and that he died a bachelor at age 84.

Luke’s warm, compassionate narrative was penned probably ten years prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. It was written to an influential man in Greece named Theophilus, or “lover of God,” to confirm Theophilus’ faith in the historical Jesus. More than the Jews or Romans, the Greeks were into culture, beauty, rhetoric and philosophy.

Not an eyewitness himself, this book was the result of Luke’s painstaking examination of the testimony of eyewitnesses and written sources. He was out to create a comprehensive account of the life of Christ to (a) encourage believers and (b) stimulate others to believe that Christ is who He said He was.

Jesus’ great empathy and humanity are stressed, revealing the ideal Son of Man who could relate to sinful, hurting people and be the sinless sacrifice for our salvation. When it comes to the Greek ideal of perfection, nobody else filled the bill but this God-man Jesus. Luke shows Him uniquely qualified to be the Savior of *all* -- Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, wealthy, destitute, loved, hated, politically active and religiously inclined.

Luke takes us back 2,000 years traces the mounting devotion as well as hatred for Jesus that rose simultaneously during His three years of active teaching. It’s the Bible’s most intricate account of Christ’s ancestry (chapter 3). He also gives us the most in-depth of account of His birth (chapter 2), one you’ll hear often during the Christmas season.

Let’s dive in and read 1:1-45.

In Matthew and Mark we looked at John the Baptist’s life. Now let read about his birth in 1:57-80.

We pick up the story now after Christ is born as we read 2:21-35.

Only Dr. Luke records what happens during Jesus’ twelfth year on earth. Let’s check it out in 2:41-52.

After being baptized by John the Baptist, Jesus faces off with the devil (not the hockey player from New Jersey), setting up the announcement of His mission on earth. Here it is in 4:1-21.

You may have heard of "The Transfiguration." Luke describes it for us. On a Palestinian hilltop named Mount Tabor Jesus is literally joined by Moses and Elijah, two of the Jews' most revered patriarchs who represented respectively the Jews' vaunted "Law and the Prophets." It had been nine centuries since Elijah had last set foot on earth, having been spectacularly swept up to heaven in a whirlwind, riding in a chariot of fire. Not a bad exit, eh? For Moses, it was his first visit to Palestine. Of special interest here is the Bible's insight into what goes on with people who die having placed their faith in God. These two men were still recognizable, in their new "heavenly bodies," to living humans. Let's read 9:28-36.

Jesus has been teaching the crowds in northern Israel and mentoring His twelve disciples. He’s just multiplied five measly loaves of bread and two fish, about as lavish as a Long John Silver’s “Catch of the Day,” to feed a throng of 5,000 men plus women and children. Let’s join Him in 9:18-26 as, for the first time, He reveals to His disciples His ultimate mission.

Jesus was consistently hounded by the Jews’ religious leaders who fancied themselves as the world’s foremost experts on everything. They tried to trap Him into making theological errors. Ultimately, they’d have a more sinister purpose. Let’s go to 11:52-12:59.

The Pharisees and teachers of Moses’ law got up tight with Jesus for hangin’ with the “sin crowd.” So, our Hero whips out three of His best stories, using them to illustrate that *religion* is not as important to Him as our *relationship* to Him. 15:1-32 is the key chapter in this book, spelling out the Good News in the language of the street. Let’s read it.

Luke covers Jesus’ arrest by the Roman soldiers, His trials, His crucifixion and resurrection, but we’ll get into that in the Book of John next time.

The final scene in Luke takes place just east of Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives. Jesus has led His disciples there after appearing to them in His resurrected body, having conquered the grave just as He’d promised, making Him officially the world’s biggest Promise Keeper. Let’s close with 24:36-53.

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