**WHY ON EARTH GOD? WHY GOD ON EARTH?**

**CRACKING THE GOSPEL OF JOHN**

**Chapter 2**

*American Demographic* magazine has announced that "I'm into spirituality, not religion" is "the mantra of the new millennium." Americans, it seems, want to connect with their spiritual side, but not with dogma or doctrine. Many believe all spiritual roads lead to the same place, that the answers to our transcendental quest lie within us.

Christianity, some say, is just one of those acceptable roads. Ah, but if they traveled it far enough, they'd discover that Christianity claims not to be *a* route to spirituality; its founder claims to BE *THE* Truth!

But if it's only *another* route, it can't be *THE* Truth, thus making it a lie. What is it then -- fake or fraud? Chuck Colson argues that Christianity can be held to the test that *every* worldview must face, i.e., "How does it explain **Creation**, the **Fall** and **Redemption**?"

**Creation** deals with origins. Where did the universe come from? Are we mere evolutionary accidents? The **Fall** (when Adam and Eve first sinned) tackles evil and suffering. **Redemption** is about the remedy for evil, suffering and sin. Okay now, which worldview offers the best answers to these ultimate questions?

Re **Creation**, New Age thinking -- which is basically Eastern religion with a Bob Vila remodel -- says there's no *personal* God who created and loves us, only an underlying, pervasive "universal spirit." Hold it -- the rules of logic insist that an *effect* cannot be greater than its *cause*. How could *personal* beings be created by an *impersonal energy*?

Re the **Fall**, New Age-ism blames evil and suffering not on human sin but on our failure to *comprende* that we're all just part of God, and thinking that we're each unique only produces greed and anger. Try telling Columbine parents that evil is just an illusion.

What about **Redemption**? The New Age calls not for redemption but enlightenment. "Just meditate to get in touch with the divine in you." But look around, does humanity honestly look and *act* like God to you?

Doesn't it take more faith to believe that we flawed mortals are actually divine -- than it does to believe in a personal, sovereign God who designed and created the universe and each of us?

I hope we're finding, as we hike through the Bible, that *it alone* rings true.

**In our last episode we saw that…..**

John, the lone survivor of Jesus' twelve disciples, is nearing the end of his life. Moving to Ephesus from Jerusalem where he had co-led the early Christian movement, he writes the fourth book of the New Testament, the Gospel of John. It's an intimate narrative about this God/Man Jesus Christ of Nazareth, His mentor and dearest Friend some sixty years earlier.

At the end of his book (ch. 20:30-31), John gives his purpose for writing: "Jesus provided far more God-revealing signs than are written down in this book. These are written down so you will believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and in the act of believing, have real and eternal life…."

John opens by describing Jesus as "the Word," the only Son of the living God who came to earth to be born in a barn, to grow up in a carpenter's home, to at age 30 announce that He is the Son of God, then to teach and validate His message by performing miracles, to be named Public Enemy #1 by the religious establishment which convinces Palestine's Roman occupation forces that He's a threat to them. His own disciple, Judas Iscariot, betrays Him, fingering Him for the Roman soldiers who drag Him through an awful night of trials with Jewish crowds chanting, "Crucify Him!" And they do. On a rocky crag outside Jerusalem He's hung between two thieves on a wooden cross that's been called the Hinge of History. There He takes on Himself the sins of all mankind once and for all, purchasing our forgiveness with His own life. Three days later He comes back to life, sealing the victory that can be ours over death and sin, not by working to earn it, or by joining a certain church, but by agreeing with God, by faith, that we're all sinners who need the pardon that Jesus paid for in full.

As we saw last month, next we meet another John, John the Baptist who was sent by God to introduce Jesus as the Jews' Messiah, the One their prophets had been promising for centuries. John urges his audiences to stop running their own lives, and to make room in their hearts for Jesus.

John says following Christ isn't embracing a certain philosophy or becoming part of some religious system; it's a relationship between Jesus and you.

J.B. (John the Baptist) then baptizes Jesus, and God's voice splits the skies at that moment, saying, "This is my Son; I'm pleased with Him!"

Then Jesus starts drafting His team of disciples prior to His upcoming, national tour. Andrew and John (author of the Gospel of John) were the first to sign. Then Andrew's brother Simon whom Jesus instantly renames Peter. Then Philip and Nathanael.

**Jesus' Miracle #1.**

**#2 would be getting Alex to be a lifer with the M's.**

Having walked the 70 mile, two-day trek from where John the Baptist baptized Him in the Jordan River near Jerusalem, Jesus shows up in Cana, Nathanael's hometown, near the Sea of Galilee in today's northern Israel where He did most of His miracles and teaching. Jesus had grown up near here in Nazareth.

He and His five pals arrive in Cana, unannounced, at a Middle Eastern wedding, the kind that are notoriously extravagant and long, often lasting a week.

**Let's read John 2, verses 1 through 11.**

Jesus' mother Mary is here, in a starring role, because it may have been the wedding of one of Jesus' younger brothers or sisters.

Unable to email ahead, Jesus and His road-weary Dirty Half-Dozen show up -- six unexpected, thirsty guests who help drain the wine supply pronto, prompting Mary to inform Jesus, "They have no wine." She didn't send Him to QFC. And she wasn't expecting miracles since He hadn't done any….yet.

Remember when the angel told Mary that God would give her a Son, and He'd be the Messiah, the King/trust-buster/Joel Klein wannabe, who the Jews were hoping would boot out their Roman oppressors? Mary knew Jesus had

rounded up some disciples, so perhaps she thinks it's high time that He assumes the Messianic position to throw His holy weight around.

Jesus' response to His mother's "They have no wine" is: "Dear woman, why do you involve Me?" He rebukes her respectfully, indicating she really doesn't "get it" -- His reason for coming to earth, that is. In a way He says, "Mom, don't freak. I'll handle it, now … even though 'my hour' hasn't come yet."

Jesus *knew* what was coming, that He'd have to go to the cross and die for you and me to pay the penalty for my sins and yours, opening the door for each of us to, by faith, be personally connected to God forever. This was not some unforeseen Greek tragedy that would ambush Him….nor was it a sick death wish. These "signs" He was about to introduce would eventually reach critical mass, leading to His execution. Little did Mary know, but her implied request would trigger Christ's first step on His journey to Golgotha.

His "My time has not yet come" seems to assuage Mary. She turns to the servants and says, "Just do what He tells you." She steps aside, realizing Jesus needs no broker.

Okay, the scene's set. The Jews at home are glued to TBN as the laser light show kicks off, the orchestra lurches into "Theme from Star Wars" -- and from stage left enters a Liberace-like healer followed by The Temptations as the announcer goes, "Let's get readdddddddddy for a miracle rummmmmble!!"

Nope. Jesus quietly says to the caterers, "Fill the jars with water." No lightning. No hocus pocus. No magician's scarf. Jesus had only to *will* this supernatural event. 180 gallons later you'd think that He'd order a magnum of His newly-bottled private reserve, then proudly present it to the groom, waiting to be high-fived. But no. He says to the servants, "Now draw some out, and take it to the emcee."

The process that requires months, water, vines, grapes, sun and fermentation takes only long enough to fill six ceremonial pots with clean water. After one sip, the emcee exclaims to the groom, "Yo, usually you serve the best wine *first*. Then when we're all goofy drunk, you sneak in the Mogen David. But no, Welch's breath, you've saved the best 'til last!"

This was no coup for Jesus. He'd hung the stars, so it's nothin' to splash water into a pot and transform it into Pinot Noir! With His complete control over all creation, the Master Vintner easily produces vino at its peak, having the appearance, bouquet and elegance of fine, vintage wine. Jesus had created Adam as a full-grown, fully-functional man, not a helpless infant.

So how tough would it be for Him to create the universe, making it *look* billions of years old already when it was new!? (John 1:3, Hebrews 11:3)

John reveals the point of this wine-making "sign," as he calls it, indicating that a sign is more than a miracle; it's performed to uncork a truth that would otherwise remain unknown (John 3:2, 6:26). Jesus had demonstrated what happens when He becomes part of life's ordinary situations.

**Jesus Does His Impression of a "Reno Raid."**

Now that Jesus has proven His power over nature, the Galileans might be wondering, "Hmmmm, maybe there's something about my *life* that Jesus could change."

**Now let's read John 2:12-25.**

You've seen the shots of Jesus loving the babies, and of Him kicked back with his friends having dinner. Somehow we prefer the image of "gentle Jesus, meek and mild" to accounts of Him being angry. Yet this story of His cleaning house at the temple is essential if we're to understand who He is.

Having celebrated Passover each year since He was twelve, this would be His first as the announced Messiah. All across Palestine Jewish families were meticulously spring housecleaning, tossing out yeast or any ingredient used for fermentation. This purification was required by the Torah, their holy book. But when Jesus arrives at the temple, the Jews' holiest place, He was grieved and enraged by the corruption there.

Jewish worshippers had to bring oxen, sheep and doves to the temple to be sacrificed. Each animal or foul was to be without blemish. This was tempting for entrepreneurial priests who had little trouble spotting imperfections. So they'd simply disqualify these critters and demand that the faithful purchase "perfect" sacrifices from merchants inside the temple! Ironically, a cut of each deal went to the temple treasury.

Each Jewish male had to cough up a half-shekel temple tax, payable not in Roman or Greek coins but with a "special temple coin." It so happens that human ATM's were conveniently located on site, happily converting your dough into temple coins for a "modest" exchange rate as much as 50%.

What a skimming scam! And the victims exploited were often the poor. Jesus was ticked, and gathered some cords used to tie up the animals, then fashioned a whip and drove the extortionists right out of the building.

Some would rather picture Christ as an "anything goes" Santa, winking at our sins, telling us we're not really so bad, that our misbehavior is not our fault, that He won't come down hard on sin after all. It's interesting to note that there's a big difference between "the God we *want*" and "the God who is."

The *real* Jesus experienced anger, unlike ours, since it was under control. He was furious with shysters who used religion to swindle innocent people. As David had prophesied (Psalm 69), the Messiah had an all-consuming zeal for the temple, to preserve the dignity of the place where the Jews worship God. He wasn't about to coddle evil.

But wait -- I thought God *LOVES* sinners. Yes, the Bible says He welcomes ANYbody who comes to Him in repentance and faith -- from the slimiest axe murderer to a peddler who pads his commission.

When we come to Christ, He accepts us just the way we are (we don't have to "get perfect" first), yet He won't leave us *unchanged*. Perhaps not instantly, but gradually He begins removing whatever's defiling us because the Bible says the bodies of Christ's followers are God's temple where His Holy Spirit lives. So, He'll patiently, lovingly, intentionally begin cleaning up….or give us the option to, on our own, start dumping the garbage littering our lives. God loves us too much to let us continue to drag these sins around. What do you need Jesus to clear out of your life?

The stunned Jewish leaders greeted Jesus' mop-up by saying, "Who do You think You are? Prove your authority by showing us a miracle!"

Jesus said, "OK, tear down this temple, and I'll rebuild it three days later." He was speaking of His body (not the Kingdome) which would be crucified, then raised from the dead on the third day --the mega-miracle that would seal His credentials. Paul writes, "If Christ was not raised, then all our preaching is useless, and you're still under condemnation for your sins. In that case, all who've died believing in Christ have perished! And if we have hope in Christ only for *this* life, we're the most miserable people in the world. But the fact is that Christ *has* been raised from the dead." (I Cor. 15:17-20)

Three years later, after Christ rises from that garden tomb, the disciples recall this confrontation. Then they *truly* believe both Jesus and the Scriptures. What sign will it take for you and me to believe?

Jesus performs other miracles at this Passover while Jews from all over the world had converged on the holy city. His amazing feats convinced many that He was their Messiah. But Jesus knew people can be fickle. Real faith means commitment and surrender. Fair weather front-runners come and go.

Jesus is no dummy. He's not fooled by outward appearances, by pious words, by big donations in the offering plate. He knows you and me inside and out (Psalm 139). Still, He went to the cross to die for you, so that all your sin could be forever forgiven, so that you can spend life-after-death eternally in God's presence instead of in the default option the Bible calls "hell" and "the lake of fire."

If you've never acknowledged that you're a sinner, and that you want Jesus to take up residence in your life, today's the best chance you'll ever have to do so. Like your American Express card, please don't leave here without it.

 I'm enjoying a fantastic paperback. *Can Man Live Without God* by Ravi Zacharias is available in that profit-free zone called amazon.com. It's one of the most compelling explanations of the Christian faith I've ever read. It's a quick 200 pages, and I commend it to you.

His Deal

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www.HisDeal.org

george@HisDeal.org

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