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

**THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: Chapter 11**

***“Dead Man Walking”***

A

t 3:30 a.m. last week my palmtop flashed, “Battery low. Change battery.” Even as a card-carrying Luddite, I’d successfully performed that simple procedure many times.

I bought this tech-toy last July, forsaking my trusty, spiral-bound dinosaur I’d had for 33 years! But hey, I’m an edge guy, so I plunged into paperless data storage, trusting my life to this tiny info-tool.

It gave me peace of mind since nightly I could “hot-sync” my palmtop and desktop, securing all the vitals I’d scribbled that day on my handy, virtual valet. But sadly, I’d failed to do it consistently. Being a non-geek, sometimes the transfer worked, but often the message popped up, “The hot-sync was not completed because” of some screw-up I certainly couldn’t figure out for myself! And have you ever tried to get help from an IT vendor by phone, when you *need* it!! Helloooooo! So I made do with my casual, sloppy back-ups.

Back to last week. At 3:30 a.m., sleepily groping for fresh AAA batteries, I mumbled, “No biggie. This is not rocket science.” (Nor, I was about to learn, am I “Tito, the Space Tourist!”)

Apparently I accidentally left the gizmo “on” while changing batteries, only to learn *that* is a no-no! I pressed “ON,” and up came blankness! Every appointment for the next millennium, nuked!

No prob, I’ll hot-sync all the info from my desktop, losing only the data I’d entered since my last back-up, whenever *that* was! But yikes, only about 1% of it was there on the desktop! Some black hole has my precious, irretrievable stuff. I’m still seething over my fatal carelessness and procrastination to learn how to “get it right.”

What’s this got to do with why we meet here? We male sapiens, the root word for “saps,” tend to (1) be active, not contemplative, to address what’s immediately before us rather than seeing the big pic

and weighing possible outcomes of our short-range decisions; and (2) we tend to do enough to get by, but lookin’ cool like Steve Martin.

My palmtop crash was a painful reminder that my actions have consequences. So do my inactions. I may whip out my PDA at lunch to jot down an project my client’s just given me, loooooookin’ good doin’ it. But some day, when I’m least expecting it, it’ll be showdown time when I’ll crave the peace of mind of a secure, failsafe, back-up -- something I can put all my trust in, and never sweat if it’ll be there for me.

How’s your life sync-ing up? When the hospital calls, “You’d better get down here.” Or the doc says, “I wish you hadn’t skipped your physicals because something’s come up.” Or your #1 client harrumphs, “Sorry about this business downtick, Grisbey, but we’re gonna have to ‘Greenspan’ you.” What then?

#### More Questions Than Ben Stein Has Money

In his Gospel, written about A.D. 90, the aging John, Jesus’ closest disciple, gives us an insider’s look at his three years with God’s Son. But can we trust the Bible?

The preface from the 1996 New English Translation Bible states, “No ancient literature has survived in its original form; everything we have is derived from copies of the originals. The NT is no exception. However, in comparison with any other ancient literature, the NT is without a peer, both in terms of the chronological proximity and the surviving number. Several ancient authorities are preserved in only a handful of manuscripts. Not so with the NT. There are approximately 5,500 Greek witnesses, ranging in date from the 2nd century AD into the Middle Ages. Besides the Greek evidence, there are nearly 30,000 versional copies (e.g., Latin, Coptic and Syriac) and over 1,000,000 quotations from the NT in the church fathers. NT textual criticism has always had an embarrassment of riches unparalleled in any other field.”

### Lazarus: Going, Going, Gone

### John 11:1-16

In his book John singles out seven of Jesus’ famous “I am” sayings … and seven of His miracles, like turning water into vino, feeding 5,000 people out of a lunch bucket, walking on water, healing the blind and lame. But the miracle here in ch. 11 is the grand salami of His “God-signs” because it demonstrates convincingly His power over our most formidable enemy, death.

This single, supernatural feat also sealed Jesus’ earthly doom, galvanizing His enemies in their intent to waste Him for good. **Now let’s read John 11:1-57.**

Jesus frequented Bethany since this little village east of the Mount of Olives was an easy, two-mile trek from Jerusalem. His pals Mary, Martha and their brother Lazarus saved the guest room for Him.

Tired from verbal sorties with the testy Pharisees, the Master decides to take some comp time up in Perea, beyond the Dead Sea. Mary and Martha get word to Him there that Lazarus is deathly ill, ‘though it means luring Him back near Jerusalem where the authorities are conspiring against Him.

Instead of grabbing a cab to Bethany (a 20-mile, day’s walk away), Jesus reacts seemingly heartlessly as He reassures His disciples that Lazarus’ll be cool, and this little drama will prove that He, Jesus, really *is* the Son of God. (Whoa, is this our *compassionate* God? Or is it hubris-heavy Rush Limbaugh?)

But Jesus was on-message. To zip down to Bethany prematurely would be like stumbling in the dark rather than walking in His Father’s grand, illuminated purpose.

Jesus knows His “Lazarus sign” will give His disciples a new reason to believe that He’s God’s Son. It’s like He’s already screened “The Mummy Returns” and knows the outcome; it’s positive. But His disciple, the loyal pessimist, “doubting Thomas,” is resigned to going to Jerusalem with Him … and *dying* with Him, if need be.

### Jesus Pops THE Question to Martha:

### John 11:17-27

Mary, Martha and Lazarus must be well networked in Jerusalem ‘cuz quite a mob rolls into the ‘burbs to comfort the girls and mourn. As Luke describes (10:38-42), Martha is the quintessential Martha Stewart; Mary’s the shy, retiring Laura Bush. Both sisters are confident that Jesus can revive their brother.

Jesus reassures Martha that her brother will live again. She assumes He means that someday *all* the dead will rise to face God on Judgment Day. Nope, Jesus is saying Lazarus will forever live in God’s presence, escaping eternal damnation in a very real, dark, fiery, violent pit the Bible calls h-e-l-l. Jesus tells Martha this gift of eternal life comes merely by placing her faith in Him. Then He asks her the same 5-word question He’s asking you and me: **“Do you believe this, Martha?”**

What would *you* say? The Bible says God will base your eternal destiny on your answer, whether you reply or not.

Ultimately, each person who ever lives, billions upon billions of us, from Harlem to Hungary, from Kentucky to Korea, will be *forced* to answer that question. Tragically, their answer will come too late for most. Let’s read Philippians 2:5-11.

Only Jesus, God’s Son, can present you to His Father in heaven one day as holy, blameless, perfect and complete *because of* Christ! We can’t do anything to earn it. The Bible says God’s forgiveness isn’t our reward for sacrifice, communion, church membership or good deeds. It comes only one way -- as a free, UNdeserved gift from God, through faith, offered to us because on the cross Jesus died to wipe out, once and for all, the total penalty for your sins and mine.

### Mad to Sad to Mad

### John 11:28-38

‘Til now Jesus is calm, collected. But when Mary comes to greet Him, we read the Bible’s shortest verse: “Jesus wept.”

Remember Jackie Wilson’s Motown hit written by Berry Gordy, “Lonely teardrops, why do you never dry? Lonely teardrops, come home, come home. Just say you will, say you will.”

Then there’s Smokey Robinson & The Miracles’ “Tears of A Clown.”

God comes to earth, is born in a barn, skins His knees, eats, sleeps, gets mad because sin causes so much pain, shares the heartaches of His friends. And almighty God bursts into tears! What a picture!

### “If I’m Dyin,’ I’m Lyin’”

### John 11:39-44

Keeping His pledge that Lazarus would live again, and that God would get the credit for this death-defying act, Jesus orders the stone removed from the tomb. In a loud voice (Well, He *is* talking to a corpse!) He shouts, “Lazarus, this way out!” No incantation, no smoke, no assistants in glittering swimsuits. Just His word.

Only a twisted mind would wonder what Lazarus’ first words were, once his graveclothes had been peeled off. So with apologies to God, here are the Top 10 things Lazarus *might’ve* said first:

10. “I thought you said this aroma therapy would just relax me.”

1. “That’s the last time I try that McCheney Triple Burger and Fries Value Meal.”
2. “Maybe I shouldn’t have called the rabbi ‘Bubba.’”
3. “You let me sleep through ‘Survivor II?!’”
4. “Maybe *now* I’ll get on ‘Oprah.’”
5. “I can’t answer any questions now. We’re negotiating movie rights with Spielberg down at First Century Fox. He’s got his top writers on the project. Perhaps you’ve read their stuff—Matt, Mark, Luke and Johnny.”
6. “I wondered why I was no longer getting Trend West’s telemarketing calls over dinner.”
7. “Next time the Arafats invite us over, I’m busy, OK?”
8. “Get my attorney on the phone, and sue that doc of mine. Kerporkian, wasn’t it?”

And the #1 thing Lazarus might’ve said after he got unraveled:

1. “Did I hear somebody say, ‘You’ve got mail?’”

This would certainly not be the last time that Jesus’ coming will roust people from their graves. Let’s read what Paul wrote to the believers in I Thess. 4:13-18

Here in Bethany Jesus had dramatically validated His fifth “I am” statement: “I am the Resurrection and the Life.” Only God, the Giver of Life, has authority over death.

Jesus slips off to Ephraim about 14 miles north of Jerusalem, probably today’s village of Taybeh, on the slopes of Mount Asur at the edge of the Judean desert where Jesus could flee if necessary.

### Jesus Retires, Gets Death Watch, No Gold Watch

### John 11:45-57

As onlookers gawk at this incontrovertible proof of Christ’s claim to be God, many *believe* Him. The Greek word here for “believe” is to “put one’s faith in” and “entrust one’s spiritual well-being to.” For them, it took being an eyewitness to seeing a “Tim McVeigh-in-reverse.” What’ll it take for *you* to believe?

Talk about your dead men walking, look what happened in Jerusalem the instant Jesus died on the cross! Let’s read Matt. 27:50-54.

Jesus now calls it a career. No roast. No Man of the Year. Instead the Jewish rulers pull an emergency session of their highest council, the Sanhedrin, composed of Pharisees who live by the letter of the law, and Sadducees who waffle over a literal God, and disbelieve miracles, angels or life after death. Caiaphas the High Priest, a Sadducee, stumbles into the prophetic truth about Jesus’ role in God’s big picture. Terminate this Troublemaker, he says, ‘cuz He’ll trigger a revolt; then Rome will close our temple and snuff out our nation (which they did in A.D. 70, ‘til the U.N. recreated Israel in 1948). So they put out an A.P.B. on Jesus, to kill their own Messiah!

It’s April. The faithful stream in for Passover, the Hebrew Cinco de Mayo. Jerusalem’s population swells to three million, all curious about this Miracle-Man who’d become the Lamb who gets sacrificed.

### Getting in Sync with our OEM

In His famous “Sermon on the Mount” to His disciples Jesus said, “The one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.” (Luke 6:49)

Like my palmtop, one day your life will end, batteries or not. Will you crash and have all your plans and dreams wiped out? Or will your life be secure? You have the same free will that the Pharisees and Sadducees had to follow or to reject Jesus. Today’s the day to solidify your back-up system. The Manufacturer’s Manual, this old book we peer into each month, is here, left by God Himself, so you and I can “get it right.”

He’s the holy Hot-Sync with 24x7, bumper-to-bumper, unending coverage you can always rely on. Before you hit the street now and life goes nuts again, why not whisper to God …. “Dear God, I’ve been skating, pretending I have all the answers to life, but not sure if they’re the *right* ones. I now accept by faith Your incredible gift of forgiveness. Please take everything that I am, which I gladly dump onto Your desktop, and link us up in that eternal, Father-son relationship that You’ve had in mind for me from the beginning. Father, I’m Yours… because Jesus paid my death penalty for me. I’m ready to be the man You designed me to be. And I’ll thank You forever!”

His Deal

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