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

**THE GOSPEL OF JOHN: Chapter 18**

***Gypsies, Tramps, Traitors and Thieves***

W

here's Cher when you need her to sing back-up!

We're going where some have never gone, scanning the Bible's sixty-six books, ala the "Over Washington" videos, peering into what that purports to be the very words of God.

Jesus Christ, claiming to be God's Son, knits the Bible into one seamless whole, giving us wisdom to cope today, while inviting us to become personally related to Him. This is no faddish Sun Valley seminar where we fawn over the latest pop prophet who's as credible as an O.J. Simpson soundbite. No, God's Book answers the basics: "Am I loved?" "Can I have my own way?" "Sez who?"

We've hiked from Creation to the Revelation of events that will mark the end of the world as we know it, and usher in "a new heavens and new earth." We've heard Jesus speak into being the universe, then breathe life into Adam and produce Eve from one of his ribs.

You gotta wonder about Adam, there in Paradise with a lovely lady, empty hangers in their closet, and *he's* tempted by an *apple*?? No wonder sitcoms typecast us men as brainwaveless Jell-O heads.

We're examining the earthbound exploits of Jesus, as recorded by His last living disciple in the late 1st century, an ex-fisherman named John. We saw Jesus' family tree -- a racial mix of bluebloods and bullies, heroes and harlots. With such an eclectic pedigree, this God-Man can identify with every race, creed and color.

***Let's See What's On The History Channel***

Someone said no subject is ever studied thoroughly 'til it's studied historically. So check out this backdrop for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah 2,000 years ago.

In 586 B.C. King Nebuchadnezzar seizes Jerusalem and deports its 20,000 citizens to Babylon (Iraq). Persian King Cyrus allows a few Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. Jehovah worship, tainted by Persia's "salvation by good works," is restored in Palestine, and the high priest shop opens in 359 B.C., pooling all religio-political power in one man.

Alexander the Great leads 35,000 troops through Jerusalem, and in 332 B.C. conquers Egypt and builds Alexandria. For two centuries Jews are dominated by Egypt and Syria. Syria's King Antiochus Ephiphanes fails to capture Alexandria. Fuming, he decimates Jerusalem, bans Jewish worship, and mandates pagan sacrifices.

Beginning in 167 B.C. Jewish patriots oust Syrian rule, and bask in twenty years of independence as the Pharisee and Sadducee religious sects become prominent.

Rome invades Jerusalem in 63 B.C. and installs local puppet leaders like cruel Herod who slays his own family, and tries to murder the baby Jesus. One of his successors, Pontius Pilate, rules 25-36 A.D.

History writes, "In its 38 centuries Jerusalem has been destroyed at least 17 times, its name changed on many of these occasions. While it's the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, it's probably the least stable city that's ever existed, having been ruled by 25 different peoples." Hellooooo, Sharon and Arafat!

Into this paranoia pit God the Father sends His Son, not as conquering King with an army of angels, but as a baby born to a tradesman and his teen-aged bride.

Jesus canvasses tiny Palestine for three years, teaching, doing miracles to validate His Messiahship, and mentoring twelve men. He's been saying, "My time has not yet come." Now suddenly, less than twelve hours before His death, He's hurtling down a slippery slope toward the cross.

Life can creep, like Congress and glaciers, deceiving us that we'll have *yearrrs* to face the Truth. But nothing could be *further* from it.

Life's like a Mariano Rivera splitter: you *know* somethin's coming, but it's so *sudden*! Using prophets and Scripture, God often previews His deeds *in advance*. He said, "Time and again I warned you about what was going to happen in the future. Then suddenly I took action, and all my predictions came true." (Isa. 48:3) When God pitches, we don't want to be caught with bat on shoulder.

In 1000 B.C. God tells *where* Christ will be born (Micah 5:2), and *who'd* come to *worship* Him (Psa. 72:10). In 800 B.C. He tells into whose *family* He'd be born (Jer. 33:15). In 700 B.C. He says *how* He'd be born (Isa. 7:14). 300 Old Testament prophecies spell out His birth, death and resurrection, but only a few shepherds got the bat off their shoulders when Joseph and Mary check into Motel 6.

What are the odds of even *one* of those 300 prophecies coming true when, how and where they did? Here's one statistician's scenario. Cover Texas with silver dollars a foot deep. Paint a red "X" on just one. Fly over the state, drop a parachutist, and if he lands on that X, that's how likely it is for *one* of those prophecies to come true.

But *300* did! Hundreds *more* tell of Christ's *next* visit to earth. Only God the Father knows *when* that'll be, not even Jesus. His return is not unexpected, but it will be *sudden*. Remember the bat.

Today Jesus and His disciples are near Jerusalem in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that Jesus asks His mates to wait as He pours out His heart to His Father, agonizing over the inevitable (He's *human* too, remember?), but He submits to His Father's will because He loves Him -- and us! Jesus gets focused, and faces the music, without Cher. **Let's read John 18:1-40.**

***Not Your Garden Variety Party***

***John 18:1-11***

"I went to a garden party to reminisce with my old friends, a chance to share old memories and play our songs again. When I got to the garden party, they all knew my name. No one recognized me, I didn't look the same. But it's alright now. I learned my lesson well.

Ya see, ya can't please everyone, so ya got to please yourself."

Jesus is in the Garden with old friends. After midnight the armed gatecrashers arrive. He tells them His name, in case they don't recognize Him. But unlike Rick Nelson, He's not out to please Himself, just to carry out His Father's plan for Him to lay down His life as the only acceptable, lasting sacrifice for your sin and mine.

I'd step in front of a train for my family, but swallow the crucifixion pill for strangers? Naw. As Gen. Sherman said in 1868: "If I owned Texas and hell, I'd sell Texas and rent out hell."

Conspiring to finger Jesus for 30 pieces of silver blood money, Judas leads up to 50 soldiers and officials into the olive grove where he'd often encamped with Jesus. Here our Nark-in-the-Park does his dastardly deed as he plants a kiss on Jesus' cheek (Luke 22:47).

Palestine's Most Wanted faces foes with torches to enlighten the night (but not their minds). When Jesus volunteers, "I'm your guy," the posse drops like Three Stooges! Having eluded their grasp in an earlier bust, this quiet Messiah trumps the force of mighty Rome.

Jesus adds, "Ya got me; let my friends go." Here's Public Enemy #1 giving His arresting officers orders, and they actually comply!

Jesus' boys have but two small daggers among them (Luke 22:38). Prepared to die for his Boss, Peter whips out one, uncorks his best Jay Buhner swing at the head of the high priest's servant, misses (ala Buhner) and lops off an ear. Instead of triggering Wrestlemania, Luke (22:50-51) says Jesus picks up the ear, puts it back on Malchus' head, and it's good as new -- kind of a bonus miracle! And the disciples scatter (Matt. 26:56), as Peter vowed he'd never do.

***Judas' Priest, It's Annas:***

***A Name Only A Mother Could Love***

***John 18:12-27***

Out of public view, Jesus is hustled to ex-high priest Annas who funnels soft money to his Roman superiors from his twin rackets of money-changing and selling animals to sacrifice at the Temple.

Annas wants to know how big Jesus' fan club is. But under Jewish law the accused is not required to testify against himself. So Jesus counters, "I speak openly. Call witnesses; they'll tell you." Jesus "turns the other cheek" by standing up for His rights, non-violently.

Annas remands the prisoner to the current high priest, Caiaphas, and to the Sanhedrin for more grilling. Earlier Caiaphas (John 11:49-50) had challenged the Pharisees and high priests to do away with Jesus, in case His following grew too large. If that happened, he advised, Rome might get nervous and nuke us all.

The city sleeps as Jesus faces Caiaphas and Palestine's supreme court. Their trumped up charge of treason is justified, they surmise, because Jesus admits to being God's Son. But since only Rome can legally execute, they foist off Jesus on Pilate.

***Jesus In The Dock: Peter In Denial***

Peter slinks back into view but keeps his distance from Jesus. An unnamed disciple (probably John) joins Peter, but leaves him at the courtyard gate as John slips inside for the trial. Isolated now from Jesus and his pals, in bad company, Pete inserts foot in mouth. He's still smarting from being rebuked by Jesus over the ear incident. So when Caiaphas' servant girl recognizes him as one of Jesus' inner circle, Peter counters, "Not me."

Only hours ago Jesus predicted that three times before the rooster crows Peter would deny knowing Him (Matt. 26:30-35). Since John's a known FOJ (friend of Jesus), if Peter had said "Yep," he'd have been home free, but he sings, "I'll do it my way." And a lie is born.

Mark says (14:69) this pesky servant girl follows Peter to the fire and tells the boys there at Camp Kum-Ba Yah, "Here's one of those Messiah maniacs." Again Peter huffs, "No way!" Soon another servant who, unluckily for Peter, just *happens* to be related to Malchus (of new ear fame) chips in, "Didn't I see you at the "Olive Garden" with Jesus doing your Zorro impression?" Now a *third* time, punctuating it with profanity (Mark 14:71), Peter denies knowing Christ, barking, "I dunno what you're talkin' about!"

Cue the rooster! Now watch this: **let's read Luke 22:59-62.**

Judas and Peter both fail Jesus. Judas hangs himself. Peter becomes a leader of the early Christian faith, proving that God isn't expecting perfection, just a heart for Him. Failures *can* fertilize growth.

***Take Me To The Pilate***

***John 18:28-19:3***

Under Jewish law, capital case acquittals may not be reversed. Cases must be tried and verdicts reached *during daylight*. Convictions must be handed down the day *after* the trial. This farce broke all the rules. But whaddya expect from "Judge *Jew*-dy!"

Jesus knows this kangaroo court will end at the cross. He's prepped His disciples on *how* He'll die (Matt. 20:19), and the locals are eager to help. But, hey, they've got a code of honor too! Tomorrow's the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so they can't enter Pilot's palace (he's a Gentile) because any leaven there (a symbol for sin) will defile and disqualify them from the Feast. Sure, they're railroading their own Messiah, but so what, they're religious. That's what counts, right?

He and these Jews hate each other, but Pilate hears their concern, steps outside and tosses the prisoner back to them. But to get their execution plot rubber-stamped, they flip this hot potato back to Pilate. (Note: 1,000 years earlier God spoke through David in Psalm 22, spelling out *exactly* how Jesus would die. It may *appear* that this Jewish cabal is a loose cannon, but God knew what was coming. It's that predestination/free will conundrum. Let's face it; God's in control. Question: will we buy in, or keep bucking His system?)

Pilate presses Jesus to identify Himself, so Jesus quotes His mission statement (Matt. 1:21), and it wasn't to dump Rome. He came to deal once and for all with mankind's sin problem.

God is holy; heaven is sin-free. The Bible says our sin causes EVERY problem we have, and that it sentences us to be forever barred from God's presence. Before the cross only an *unblemished* animal could be sacrificed to atone for sin. So we can't save ourselves; we need a "perfect" substitute. Only ONE qualifies.

"What is Truth," Pilate asks the One who declared Himself to *be* Truth (John 14:6). Pilate was *this* close to an eternal relationship with God, but he couldn't get the bat off his shoulder. History says he was "banished to Gaul and there committed suicide."

Now Pilate turns to tell the mob that Jesus is no threat to anybody. But instead of acting with integrity by releasing Him, he tries to score points. That politician thing, ya know.

"Will it be Barabbas, the convicted terrorist/murderer, or do we string up this innocent carpenter who's healed our blind and lame, fed thousands of hungry folks, even raised the dead? Barabbas or Jesus, you choose." Well, you know voters.

'Tho' ACQUITTED, Jesus remains CONDEMNED. But because He died and rose again, the *reverse* can be true of us! (I John 3:1, 13, 19-20) 'Tho' CONDEMNED by our sin, we can be ACQUITTED by God through repentance and faith in Christ.

44% of America's Christ-followers believe EVERYbody's going to heaven. Either (a) they haven't read the Bible you and I have, (b) they're *rewriting* it, or (c) they've written it off, to their own peril.

Elton John ruled 1970 with……"If you feel that it's real, I'm on trial, and I'm here in your prison. Like a coin in your mint, I am dented, and I'm spent with high treason. Through a glass eye, your throne is the one danger zone. Take me to the pilot for control, take me to the pilot of your soul. Take me to the pilot. lead me through the chamber. Take me to the pilot; I am but a stranger."

Jesus endured the cross to be the pilot of *your*soul. A day of final accounting is foretold in the Bible. Like Rivera's splitter, it's coming, and the signs from the Bible over there in the third base coach's box say it'll be *sudden* (I Thess. 4:13-18).

Let's be honest, we all need the Lord. People can fail us. Our health can. So can government, employers, friends, even loved ones. But Jesus promises, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." And in this case "never" means always.

We can cash in on that promise, not by *doing* good or *being* good, but by *believing* His words and *receiving* His free gift of forgiveness. Has God given you enough faith to take that next step? Then right now, tell Him something like…"Dear God, I've been slow to see how much You really love me, what Your Son Jesus went through for me. How can I *not* accept Your gracious offer of total forgiveness for my sin, and a free passport to spend eternity with You, instead of in a place the Bible calls hell. I'm signing on to Your team right now. Thank You for giving me eternal life, for sending your Holy Spirit to come live in me. God knows, I need Him! Because Jesus sent me, here I am. Amen."

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