**READING PAUL’S MAIL TO THE ROMANS: PART 1**

We’re off on Month #17 of our cruise through the entire Bible, taking on all icebergs and turning them into Orange Julii. (Considering today’s topic, it’s time to brush up on your Latin!)

John Templeton, Tennessee-born billionaire and founder of the Templeton Funds, recently wrote in the *New York Times* that **“the Earth is only one of many planets around only one star from 100 billion in our galaxy, which is only one of more than 100 billion galaxies in the universe.”** This begs some questions:

• Then what-the-hay’s so important about us specks of human dust?

• And why would God ship His only Son giga-light years away from what must be indescribable luxuries in heaven to come to this neck o’ the universe, only to be crammed into an earthsuit -- and humiliated, persecuted and executed by ingrates whom He’d created!?

Those questions -- and others -- are deftly fielded by our guy Paul in his letter to the Romans. But first, let’s step back for the big picture.

A year and a half ago we launched our get-acquainted tour of the Bible. We’ve rolled through 45 of its 66 books, all written by mere mortals divinely inspired by God. Exactly *how* God did that, we’re not told. But, make a note of it, so we can ask Him when we see Him.

The 39 books of the Old Testament (OT), Genesis through Malachi, set the stage for the Bethlehem arrival 2,000 years ago of God’s one and only Son whose name you hear a lot at work, in sports bars and on construction jobs when things fall on union guys’ toes.

Larry Wright, a Phoenix friend, writes: “One outstanding fact completely isolates (Jesus) from all others. It is that **only one Man in the history of the world has had explicit details given beforehand of His birth, life, death and resurrection. These details are in documents given to the public centuries before He appeared.**

“Christ’s coming to earth is the central theme of the Bible. ... There were 60 major messianic prophesies with approximately 270 ramifications in the OT that were fulfilled in one person, Jesus Christ.

“For example, He’ll be **born of a virgin** (Isaiah 7:14). He’ll **perform miracles** (Isaiah 35:3-6). He’ll be **born in Bethlehem** in Judea (Micah 5:2). When He enters Jerusalem, He’ll **ride in on a donkey** (Zechariah 9:9). He’ll be **betrayed by a friend for 30 pieces of silver** (Zechariah 11:12-13). He’ll **die but He’ll come back to life**, having not rotted in the grave (Psalm 16:10). He’ll **die by having His hands and feet pierced.** When David wrote this, crucifixion was unknown as a punishment (Psalm 22:16). As He hangs on the cross, **His clothes will be divvied up and gambled for** (Psalm 22:18). **Not a bone in His body will be broken** in spite of this common practice to make sure those crucified were indeed dead (Psalm 34:20). His body would be **buried in a rich man’s grave** (Isaiah 53:9).

“Now what are the odds of those particular ten prophecies coming true in the life of any one man in history?

“Prof. Peter W. Stoner, using the science of the laws of probability, has calculated that for any eight of these biblical prophecies to be fulfilled in any one individual, the odds would be **1 in 10 to the 17th power.** That’s a 10 followed by 17 zeros!

(1,000,000,000,000,000,000)

“**It’s equivalent to covering the state of Texas two feet deep with silver dollars, marking one of them, stirring up the whole mass thoroughly all over the state, then blindfolding a man, telling him he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up the marked dollar and *say* that it is the right one.** What chance would he have? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, providing that they wrote them in their *own* wisdom.”

But the *greatest* prophesy was that Christ would offer every person, including each of us here, the gift of new life -- *eternal* life -- rescuing us from eternal torment in a place the Bible calls hell. That prophesy has also come true. We call it.... The Gospel. So it’s no real stretch to figure out why The Gospel is called ... The Good News!

The purpose of the 29 books of the New Testament (NT) is to describe Christ’s coming to earth, to record His teachings during His brief three-year career in what’s now Israel; to cover His arrest, trials, crucifixion, resurrection and return to heaven; to document the early years of the spread of the Good News about Him through the then-known world; to lay out how His teachings and life should affect our lives; and to take a wide-eyed peek (in the book of Revelation) at the main attractions coming up in God’s tickler file as He closes the books on what we flippantly call .... “time” ... which, we discover, is merely the warm-up act for .... Eternity.

In the NT’s first four books, known as “the gospels,” we saw four different, albeit corroborative, takes on Christ’s 33-year tour of duty down here as seen through the eyes of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Next, the book of Acts details the early days following Christ’s return to heaven, known as “the ascension.” About that time, people devoted to Jesus were first called Christians, among other names!

Today we crack open the first of the 13 epistles, or letters, written by the apostle Paul. Epistles. Apostles. Disciples. Resurrections. Ascensions. No wonder so many are put off by this strange ecclesiastical jargon. It’s like listening to a bunch of lawyers or computer geeks. C’mon now, is the Bible to be read in a monastery or on Main Street? Voila, that’s what this luncheon series is all about.

These letters of Paul are in the Bible because they spell out who Jesus Christ is -- and what this brand new life He offers us is all about.

In his first four letters (Romans, I and II Corinthians and Galatians) he reveals what it’s like to have one’s life *occupied* by the Son of God. Paul calls this “Christ *in* you.” It’s what sets those who follow Christ apart from all other people of faith. Mohammed doesn’t live *in* Muslims. Buddha doesn’t reside *in* Buddhists. Jehovah doesn’t dwell *in* Jews.

But those who come to Christ in faith, believing that He alone, by His death and resurrection, has paid the debt to forgive all of their personal sins -- past, present and future, these people, Paul says, have the outrageous option of having Christ not just move into their neighborhood -- but take up residence *in* them! Don’t ask me how. Just jot that down on your “To Ask God” list that we’re building.

**Now … ROMANS, Friends and Countrymen…….**

We’ll tackle the entire book of Romans in just two sessions. Some teachers have done it in weekly installments over three *years*! But then, they had tenure! So they were in no rush.

Romans’ author was Paul who was born as Saul -- about the time Mary gave birth to Jesus -- in the wealthy, well-educated city of Tarsus, which reputedly had surpassed even Athens and Alexandria. Saul grew up there in what’s now southeast Turkey. Today Tarsus, now Tersous, is a shabby, rundown town.

Saul’s father was of pure Hebrew stock, of the tribe of Benjamin, a straight-laced member of the Pharisees’ religious sect. He raised Saul to know and obey Moses’ laws “blamelessly.”

Since he was also a citizen of Rome, young Saul was “freeborn” (with dual Roman citizenship), a legacy which would lengthen his life later.

Jewish tradition mandated that Saul acquire a trade before becoming a rabbi, so he learned one of his town’s commonest, tentmaking.

At about 13 he was off to college in Jerusalem to study law. Tutored by the famous rabbi Gamaliel, he mastered the OT (since the NT had not yet been written). Tradition says he then worked in the synagogue for several years.

After Jesus’ resurrection and return to heaven, we find Saul in Jerusalem as a partisan onlooker while Stephen was stoned. Because he’d preached the Gospel, Stephen, a Grecian Jew, became the first Christian martyr. His “crime” (Acts chapter 7) was his *radical* belief that the Gospel was for both Jews and *Gentiles*!

Saul is now a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of Israel -- and a card-carrying, take-no-prisoners honcho in a movement furiously persecuting followers of Christ. Packing documents authorizing him to torment Christ-followers in Damascus, Saul set off on a 6-day walk of those 130 miles.

Within sight of the Syrian capital, weary and dusty, Saul suddenly found himself in a pool of blinding light. Dropping prostrate on the road, a voice rang out, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” Instantly recognizing his radiant Visitor, Saul replied, “Who are You, Lord?” From inside the light the voice of the risen Saviour responded, “I am Jesus Whom you’re persecuting.”

Shazam, Saul becomes .... a believer, you bet! His life’s forever changed. From being the Christians’ Public Enemy #1, he becomes their first-ever missionary. Taking the Gospel to the Gentiles becomes Job One. Dramatically, God had chosen the notorious anti-Christian terrorist -- and had transformed him into His most fearless defender.

Now known as Paul, he’d embark on three lengthy missionary journeys up the Mediterranean coast and into Greece and ultimately Rome, hoping to reach Spain. But Spain was scuttled when he was jailed twice in Roma during the reign of Nero whose persecutions of Christians made Saul’s look like Boy Scout badges. Condemned by this demented dictator, Paul was beheaded in about A.D. 67-68, just before Jerusalem fell at the hands of the Roman army.

During his third missionary journey, while in Corinth in modern Greece, Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome, promising to visit them soon. It perfectly embodies the entire message of Christianity. If you could study no other book of the Bible, this one would give you, as Ed McMahon used to say, *everything you need to know* about God and man, life and death, time and eternity, sin and righteousness, heaven and hell.

Romans answers the smug shrug of everyone confronted with their own sin: “Well, nobody’s *perfect*!” Paul convincingly argues that no matter how hard we try to be good, regardless of how squeaky clean our reputation may be, we still fall short of the perfection that God requires in order to admit us to heaven. Our problem is S-I-N, a tiny word that simply means “missing the mark.”

And anyone who thinks he *hasn’t* missed the mark in this sense has other serious problems even Dr. Laura could hastily point out.

But Paul’s *good* news is that God has *solved* mankind’s sin problem once and for all. It happened on that cross on Golgotha outside Jerusalem two millenia ago when Jesus died to pay for your sins and mine, perfectly satisfying God’s righteous demand for justice. Simultaneously, that death exhibits God’s bottomless love and mercy in offering each of us the free gift of His forgiveness, making us totally acceptable to Him.

Paul skillfully explains how God takes us as we are, imperfect to the core, and credits His Son Jesus’ perfection to our account. Then, more clearly perhaps than anywhere else in the Bible, Paul describes how we can actually *live*  this way!

The first three chapters are like “People’s Court” in which God, the world’s Judge Wappner, calls all mankind before His bar of justice where it becomes a no-brainer why this world needs a Saviour.

**Let’s read Romans 1:1-32.**

Ancient Greek and Roman philosophers like Socrates and Emperor Marcus Aurelius were quick to trash the heathen. But even advanced cultures ignored the truth they knew -- and sank to the sewers of civilization, claiming that man is powerless to do what’s right and, therefore, shouldn’t be put down for screwing up. Does that have a front page ring to it today, or was that just Flip Wilson!

As the Rationalists and Philosophers failed to live honorably, so did the religious Jews become self-righteous in crowing about keeping all of Moses’ Law. Thus, God the Supreme Judge calls defendants from every quarter to the stand. **Let’s read Romans 2:1-29.**

In chapter 3 God pulls together the threads of His case, demonstrating that, no matter how hard we try, we can never measure up to God’s benchmark of sinless perfection. Unlike the world’s religions, *only* the Bible teaches that man cannot *earn* eternal life through human effort. *Only* the Bible claims we can *know* for sure, not just *guess* and *hope* that we can have eternal life based solely on what Christ has done for us, not what we can do for Him. **Let’s read Romans 3:1-31.**

**Now let’s read Romans 4:1-3 and 4:20-5:21.**

Chapter 8 is one of the most powerful passages in all of the Bible. It begins with the single most liberating proclamation anyone could ever hear. And, if possible, it gets even better from there! Paul pulls out all the stops to shout it to the Roman rooftops that a person can actually *know God* and *enjoy Him FOREVER*. This is the *only* way to be able to wear those “No Fear” T-shirts. And mean it.

**Finally, let’s read Romans 8:1-39.**

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His Deal

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