**Series Title:**

**"OUR DILEMMA: GOD'S SOLUTION"**

**Paul's Letter to the ROMANS: Prologue**

***ALL WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT***

***LIFE'S FOUR MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS,***

***WE CAN LEARN FROM PAUL***

R

emember when graduation speakers challenged know-it-all seniors to tackle big ideas? In '63 JFK pledged to American University's grads to work for "peace for all time."

*Now* schools want "stars" to simply amuse today's easily bored seniors. Goldie Hawn tells American U's Class of '02 to "attend the college of *you*." Columnist Anna Quindlen counsels Mt. Holyoke's newest alums to forget others' expectations -- just focus on "what's best for *you*." "Hello, 'elimiDATE'!" Goodbye, Peace Corps.

Rather than seeking to amuse himself, this 1st century trailblazer, the apostle Paul, writes his seminal letter from Corinth in Greece to Christians in Rome in A.D. 57, head-butting *The* Issue of the Ages: who is God, and who we are.

Understanding this sixth book of the New Testament will *transform* us, make God smile, give us lasting fulfillment, AND positively impact our world. Now *there's* a commencement stemwinder!

**God's Boot Camp**

God has a curious HR model for recruiting leaders. Three

God-fearing, Hebrew lads named Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego

are tossed into a fiery furnace. Young Daniel is dropped into a pit of starving lions. Before becoming king, David is a fugitive for years, just beyond the grasp of maniacal, paranoid King Saul.

But no leadership incubator matches the 180 that changed seething Saul (Hamas-style persecutor of Christians) into passionate Paul (Jesus' top gun and writer of half the New Testament).

God wants us to rely on Him for stability and sustenance in life's storms. There's a rye plant only 20 inches high with a root system 380 miles long! 98% of that plant is *below ground*! Shallowness is recommended to our seniors. What are your roots anchored in?

**"In Our Last Episode……."**

Having just drilled down into all twenty-one chapters of John, we recall his sign-off: "Now there are many other things that Jesus did. If they were all written down one by one, I suppose that the whole world could not hold the book that would be written."

("Nordy's Notes" on John are archived at www.nordysgroup.com to give you alternative viewing if Letterman resorts to doing one more *Top 10* about the hapless Mets who moan, "Hey, when Tiger *Woods* gets the lowest score, nobody complains!")

Fortunately, Jesus' story doesn't end in John 21. Forty days after His resurrection He returns to heaven to, as promised in John 14, prepare a celestial condo for all who trust in Him.

After John comes the book of Acts, drafted by the Bible's lone Gentile author, Dr. Luke, a co-traveler of Paul's and writer of the Gospel of Luke. Acts has more narrow escapes, treachery, courtroom drama, rescues and intrigue than a Stallone reunion.

Luke chronicles the early Christian boom's first thirty years after Christ leaves. *Cowardly* disciples who'd deserted Jesus at the cross now *courageously* announce that His death paid for *all* of our sins!

In the 1st century, stoked by eyewitnesses who'd seen Jesus' miracles and open tomb, thousands of Jews and Gentiles embrace the Gospel in thirty-nine cities in thirty countries, islands and provinces in Syria, Africa, Asia and Europe!

Tidal waves of terror bombard the new "born-agains" who are harassed, beaten, jailed, even martyred -- like Stephen, one of the early church's leaders. **Let's read Acts 6:7-15 (p. 985).**

Falsely accused for inciting rebellion, Stephen's enemies go ballistic! Let's join him in the dock as he tells his accusers how they and their ancestors consistently reject God. Here we first see Saul, later known as Paul (Acts 13:9). **Let's read Acts 7:51-8:4 (p. 988).**

**LESSON #1: Pride and Prejudice**

**"No matter how much or how little we obtain or attain to, we'll never be complete without knowing Jesus Christ."**

Saul was twice blessed: he was a Jew *and*, by birth, a Roman citizen.

Humanly speaking, Saul, the cheeky politico-religious boss and anti-Christian zealot, had a lot going for him. If you're on top like that, it's easy to attend "the university of you." **Let's read Paul's own words to the believers in Philippians 3:5-14 (p. 1068).**

Saul was born in Tarsus, a trading hub en route to the Orient, motherless at nine, son of a tentmaker, conversant in Latin, speaking Greek and Aramaic (Judea's language). Tutored by Gamaliel, Jerusalem's star teacher of the law. One of seventy-one members of the Sanhedrin (Jewish Supreme Court, ruling over life and religion), making him "a ruler of the Jews."

Saul was a Pharisee, a religious sect of about 6,000 that longed for a tough-guy messiah to come overthrow the Roman occupation forces. As they saw it, Jesus failed to qualify. They didn't even recognize God when they stood toe-to-toe with Him!

Saul sees the post-resurrection Jesus movement as a threat to his nation and leadership. So he decides to erase it -- all in the name of religion, of course! **Let's read Acts 9:1-2 (p. 989).**

Written in the 1790's, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* title reflects how fair Elizabeth Bennet and her haughty suitor Darcy first size up each other. Saul's pride in his religion and good works blinded him to his prejudice against the Messiah. Your faith is only as sound as whom or what you have faith in.

**LESSON #2 A Tale of Two Cities**

**"Whether you're riding high in Jerusalem, or scraping bottom in Damascus, everything changes when you open the door of your life to Jesus Christ."**

In "Tale" Dickens paints the conditions in 1775 before the French Revolution, hinting that each of us needs our own revolution.

*"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way…"*

Saul misreads his animus for Jesus as being justifiable, as "the best of times," when it was quite the opposite, as he learned later. Now, like the Crocodile Hunter, Saul's off to bag himself some Jesus freaks. **Let's read Acts 9:3-22 (p. 989.)**

**LESSON #3 Star Wars**

**"Whether you're leaping tall buildings with a single bound, or having your character maligned, your most powerful, reliable ally is having the Spirit of Christ alive in you."**

Some of us have attained the heights, only to have the ladder jerked away. Like a crushed Jedi, we wonder how "The Force" could've deserted us! Later, what seemed to matter most (career, title, big paychecks, perks) is reassessed by emerging priorities. It's tempting to zone in on our circumstances instead of on God.

For Saul, it took a blinding arrest to freeze him in his tracks. Failure in the world's eyes *can* be God's greatest gift to us if it shifts our sights away from "the U of Me" to the life God wants to give us.

After Saul's Damascus date with the risen Christ, and his time alone with the Lord in the desert, getting a crash course in the Gospel, Paul canvases the Roman Empire -- 13,000 miles in three major trips -- planting churches along the way.

One start-up was in Philippi, capital of Macedonia (now Greece). Here Paul and sidekick Silas form the first Christian church in Europe. Forever in danger for speaking the truth about Jesus, they have a little rumble here. **Let's read Acts 16:16-40 (p. 999).**

*"The warden threw a party in the county jail.*

*The prison band was there and they began to wail.*

*The band was jumpin' and the joint began to swing.*

*You should've heard those knocked out jailbirds sing."*

Paul faced every situation with rock-solid faith, convinced (a) he was doing what God had called him to do and (b) that God was committed to see him through his life's journey. It gets no better.

**LESSON #4 Wizard of Oz**

**"If you really want to know how to *live*, you must know how to *die* -- and that means having your life, faith and hope firmly anchored in knowing Jesus Christ."**

Jesus and Paul lived under Rome's thumb. Augustus was Caesar when they were born. Then Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius. Finally Nero ruled 54-68 A.D. and was responsible for the martyrdom of Paul, Peter and thousands more Christ-believers. In 64 A.D. he torched Rome. Four years later, at 31, he killed himself.

Bound in chains in Judea, 'though he'd broken no laws, Paul is shipped off to Rome to be tried as a Roman citizen. It was his first visit to the world's capital. He hadn't planned to go as an accused felon! Yet he knew, as Psalm 46:1 says, "God is our refuge and strength, abundantly available for help in tight places."

Off the Greek coast Paul's vessel encounters "the perfect storm" for two, life-threatening weeks, dumping him, his friends Luke and Aristarchus, and the petrified crew into the deep (Acts 27). But as Paul had consoled them, all arrive safely in Rome.

Through all of life's storms, God wants to be your GPS, to take the helm of your life. The sailing won't always be smooth, but it won't be as scary, and safe arrival at your final destination is a given.

During his first imprisonment in Rome, awaiting the axe of his executioner which ultimately came in A.D. 66, Paul continued carrying out his God-given mission. In jail, surrounded by Caesar's armor-coated Praetorian Guard, Paul wrote letters to Colosse, Ephesus, Philippi, Philemon and Timothy, all of which are in the New Testament for us to read two millennia later!

*"Somewhere over the rainbow way up high*

*There's a land that I heard of once in a lullaby.*

*Some day I'll wish upon a star*

*And wake up where the clouds are far behind me."*

What Judy Garland sang is Hollywood make-believe. What Paul writes from a cell is reality. **Let's read Phil. 1:12-30 (p. 1066).**

**PAUL'S SECRET RECIPE OF HERBS AND SPICES**

In this thank-you note Paul lets us see God's grace at work in him. **Let's read Philippians 4:10-13 (p. 1069).**

This brilliant, devoted servant of Christ models what really counts in this world and the next, and tells all in his letter to the Romans which we're about to explore.

What recipe allowed Paul to be content no matter what life threw at him? He writes, "I have complete confidence in the gospel; it is God's power to save all who believe …. For the gospel reveals how God puts people right with Himself: it is through faith from beginning to end. As the Scripture says, 'The person who is put right with God through faith shall live' (Romans 1:16-17).

Do you have that power in you, that unshakable peace and hope based not on man's words but on God's words like… "God has made peace with us through Christ!" (2 Cor. 5:18) To get this peace, Jesus says it takes more than believing that He's God, more than knowing there's heaven to hope for -- and hell to avoid.

It takes knowing that we're sinners, separated from God, with no hope of spending eternity with God due to our own efforts. It takes turning over the throne of our life to God, placing total trust in Christ to save us from our sin -- sin that God has already pardoned because Jesus fully paid our sin-debt on the cross, so when He returns, He can take us to be with Him forever!

If you've never turned to Christ, don't wait for a Damascus road experience. Right now just tell your Maker, "God, I know there's more to life than I'm experiencing now. I'm running on the fumes of my own strength. I'm a sinner for sure, and I need You. I know Your Son Jesus died for me, that You've forgiven all my sins on the cross, that You want to reside full-time in me. Please come in and be my Saviour and Lord. I really want this. Thank You, Father."

If you've just told God this in all sincerity, don't play "I've Got A Secret" with it. Tell someone, as you start your new life with Christ!

His Deal

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