**CRUISING INTO CORINTH:**

**Following Christ was Greek to Them**

 Let’s continue in our monthly romp through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

 The word “Bible” comes from a Greek term meaning “the books.” The Bible is a *library* of 66 books. Written across 1,600 years in street language, not some befuddling, righteous journalese, the Bible is astoundingly consistent.

 A unified thread of truth runs cover to cover. That could’ve easily been jimmied, had all the authors co-habitated, or shared the same LAN/WAN computer network.

 It contains theology, philosophy, poetry, counsel and future-telling, penned by shepherds, fishermen, kings, priests, prophets, evangelists, tax collectors and physicians. They wrote in different eras, cultures, countries and on multiple themes.

 Yet the Old Testament’s (OT) 37 books sync up perfectly with the New Testament’s (NT) 29. The Old lays the foundation on which the New is built. The God of *both* testaments is the *same*. The OT looks forward to the coming to earth of the second member of the Holy Hat Trick, God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. The NT records His arrival in Bethlehem, His brief 33-year life in an earth suit and His death, resurrection and return to heaven. And it documents how His small band of mentees launched a faith that’s circled the globe, pointing men, women and children to Christ for forgiveness of sins and eternal life with Him.

**Desperately Seeking ......**

 Last summer after the Seattle-King County Leadership Prayer Breakfast at The Westin, I carelessly left my new, red leather, pocket-sized Bible in the Grand Ballroom. I’d lost it; I was bummed!

 I went table to table, asking, “Have you seen a little red Bible?” I called the Banquet office and Lost & Found. I was a serious seeker.

 You may be a seeker, too. If you have “God questions,” you are. That’s good. Jesus said, “Seek and you *shall* find.” (Matthew 7:7)

 God gave us powerful, on-board search engines to learn, inquire and wonder. But He never intended for *all* our knowledge to arise from our own or others’ intellectualism. He wants us to turn to Him for answers to our deepest questions of why we’re here. He revealed those answers to the chaps who wrote the Bible.

 Six centuries before Christ God’s prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 29:10-14) wrote this to the Jewish exiles whom King Nebuchadnezzar had whisked away from Jerusalem to captivity in Babylon:

 *“‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’”*

 Written 2,600 years ago, and certainly *not* to you and me, yet this is still a principle of God’s love. He’s ready to be *found* by any who *seek* Him. He said, “I *will* be found by you.”

 As a seeker, where do you start? First, ask, “*Why* do I want to know God?” Remember the mythical WII-FM (“What’s In It For Me?)?” Maybe something’s missing in your life, like a grand overarching purpose. Maybe you’re in physical or emotional pain. Maybe you fear death. Maybe you think God is your key to wealth.

 As you and I trek monthly through the Bible here, we discover the bennies of seeking God because He gave us life, not because He gives us goodies. He wants to be a powerful presence in your life and mine, not just an idea, or an object d’art, or a religion.

 We use the word “religion” flippantly, like “truth;” we’re not sure what it means. The dictionary says religion is:

 *“Belief in and reverence for a supernatural power or powers regarded as creator and governor of the universe. A set of beliefs, values, and practices based on the teachings of a spiritual leader.”*

 It defines the idiom “get religion” like this: *“To accept a higher power as a controlling influence for the good in one's life.”*

 Weird, eh, that nowhere in those daffy-nitions does the name “God” appear? Bingo! *El problemo*.

 Historically, religions have attempted to answer the question, “What on earth can I do to get to heaven?” Every religion, except Christianity, says you must *do* something to *earn* eternal life.

 Rather than take time now for a thumbnail comparison of major world religions, it’s included here as a P.S.\* for later cogitation.

 Someone said it boils down to this. *Religion* is spelled “D-O.” DO-ing could involve being a good person, kind, generous, maybe even going to church. Problem is, says the Bible, we can *never* do *enough* to earn our ticket to heaven.

 But *following Christ* is spelled “D-O-N-E.” What we could *never* accomplish *ourselves* has been done *for* us by Jesus. He paid the debt we could never pay by giving His life on the cross for our sins.

**FIRST CORINTHIANS:**

**Sex, Lies and Christianity**

 Corinth, Greece, is a coastal city 48 miles west of Athens. In B.C. 146 it was razed by Rome’s armies and rebuilt a century later as a colony of freedmen from Rome. Under Roman rule, on a busy trade route, it flowered as a wealthy capital whose 400,000 denizens indulged in extreme luxury, overt immorality and viciousness. Only Rome, Alexandria and Antioch were larger Roman cities.

 At about age 50 Paul first visited the palm-lined streets of this resort city in A.D. 51-52, staying 18 months while planting a church of new converts to Christ. He wrote First Corinthians from 200 miles east in Ephesus in modern Turkey.

 Three years after his first visit to Corinth, a delegation from the Corinthian church went to Ephesus to seek Paul’s counsel about serious problems surfacing in their congregations. In an urban setting where great thinkers and speakers idolized Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the seaminess of Corinth had seeped into the church, blurring their vision of God.

 Interestingly the Bible opts not to cover up this disgrace, leaving it here for all to see. No paid PR hacks on Sunday talk shows, no attorneys on Larry King, no executive privilege. Just ugly, unspun facts, followed by Paul’s practical advice on how to deal with the pressures and temptations you and I face daily on the brink of Y2K.

 Only three years into their new life in Christ, some Christians in Corinth were into incest, suing each other, playing politics over religious differences, turning communion into pig-outs, dressing their women like call girls, even starting to doubt Christ’s resurrection! What kind of God would want this dirty linen hung out for all time in His Manufacturer’s Handbook, the Bible!!

 In the spring of A.D. 57 Paul settles in with a pot of Istanbul’s Best Coffee and his amanuensis Sosthenese (his personal admin from Corinth) … and dictates this no-holds-barred response to his derailed pals across the Aegean.

 In Corinth, as everywhere except Jerusalem, Christ’s followers met in homes or halls. Not ‘til two centuries later, when religious persecution waned, were church buildings erected. There were lots of small Christian gatherings throughout this bustling, wicked metropolis. Each had its own leader, trying to make a name for himself. Sound familiar?  **Let’s read ch. 1.**

In the shadow of nerdy Athens, the quest for superior wisdom had infected Corinth’s Christians. The Greeks doubted the sanity of listening to a carpenter’s son from backwater Nazareth.

 No scholastic yo-yo, Paul was a college man, supreme court jurist in Jerusalem and perhaps the top scholar of his day. Yet he opted not to brag about his IQ or resume.’ **Let’s look at ch. 2.**

You may have heard that when you give your allegiance to Christ, you begin living in a problem-free, sweetness-and-light zone. If so, dream on, and **let’s dig into ch. 3.**

In chapter 4 Paul faces down arrogant Corinthian believers, reminding them that they have nothing but what was *given* to them by God, leaving no room for boasting.

 In chapter 5 Paul tackles the tackiness of a churchman who married his father’s wife! Instead of being disgusted, church leaders were *proud* of being liberal enough to let this behavior continue. (After all, the economy was doing great!) “Character *does* count,” Paul contends. Each follower of Christ is a living billboard, a “Gospel According to Me.” Paul urged them not to tolerate evil while parading around as Christians. He was concerned that by lowering Christ’s standards, they were setting the wrong example for those inside and outside the faith.

 Chapter 6 deals with Christians suing other Christians. As the defendant in such a case years ago, I had the experience of choosing to *not* countersue. In verse 7 Paul instructs, “To have such lawsuits at all is a real defeat for you. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated?” Stiff medicine in a day when standing up for “your rights” is the politics d’jour.

 Venus was Corinth’s #1 faux deity. Her magnificent temple was home to 10,000 priestess-prostitutes, all on the public payroll. It was sex-on-demand with government workers, sanctioned as approved “worship” to a pagan goddess. Guys then had perfect Sunday School attendance records! “What, me go golfing today with the boys, dear? No way. I’m off to the temple … to worship!”

 Chapters 7-12 deal with the Corinthian Christians’ questions about marriage, the old Jewish law of not eating meat sacrificed to idols, preachers’ compensation packages, how women should dress in church (wearing hats to distinguish themselves from those bare-headed prostitutes), and about turning communion into a gluttonous love feast. This wasn’t church; it was the Maury Povich Show!

Chapter 13 is often read at weddings. It’s a call to self-examination to see if *we* love others as Christ loves *us*. **One of the Bible’s best-known, lets read ch. 13.**

Chapter 15 deals with false philosophies that had crept into the church. Some Christian leaders, so soon after Paul’s visit, were already denying Christ’s resurrection. Gentleman Paul musters up his strongest language to say that without the hope of our own bodily resurrection, just as Christ had experienced, our faith is a shallow, hopeless sham that should be trashed. This chapter, more than anywhere else in the Bible, deals with the resurrection, a fact underscored by many witnesses.

 Besides appearing to the apostles singly, in groups and to Paul himself, Jesus was seen by 500 people at once. As Paul writes this, it’s been 27 years since the resurrection; probably more than half of those 500 are still alive, able to be legally deposed if necessary.

 Above all, Christ’s win over death supercharged His followers to fearlessly face persecution and death in order to spread the Good News of the Gospel throughout the world. They found uncommon courage in *knowing* that Jesus had lived, died and risen from the grave, just as He’d promised, giving each of us the same hope, if we’ll only cede control of our lives to Him. **Let’s read ch. 15.**

Eagles Nest Notes

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\*P.S. According to the editors of the Bible translation known as “The Journey,”

 “In Buddhism the ultimate goal is enlightenment. It is called ‘Nirvana,’ or the blissful extinction of all desires. According to the Buddha’s teaching, all pain and suffering originate in human desire. If desire itself can be overcome by following the Eightfold Path, one can achieve Nirvana which is total nothingness.

 “The Hindu’s ultimate destiny is to discover that the individual soul is really part of the bigger world soul, which includes everything else that exists. Hindus say that people are repeatedly reborn in endless cycles of reincarnation to try to work out their ‘karma’ (the law of reaping what you sow) so that they can eventually reach this highest state. Achieving this Hindu goal is like being a drop of water that is returned to the ocean. Individuality is lost as the self is absorbed into the world soul.

 “Afterlife to which followers of Islam aspire is called ‘Paradise’ -- a spiritual wonderland of sensual delights. Muslims achieve paradise by staying away from earthly sensual delights in anticipation of their heavenly reward. In addition, a Muslim must follow the Five Pillars of Islam: repeating the Islamic creed, making a pilgrimage to Mecca, giving alms to the poor, praying five times a day, and keeping the fast of the month of Ramadan. Failure to fulfill these commands jeopardizes one’s chances that Allah, the Muslim god, will allow the individual into Paradise.”

 Human effort is the strand that runs through each of these paths to eternal bliss. But that leaves one in a quandry of quaking proportions: how will I ever become good or perfect or holy *enough*!!!? It’s like not knowing if you’ve won what’s behind Door #3 until after you die, and the game is over!

 Only the Bible teaches that we can know for sure in *this* life that we have *eternal* life. According to the Bible, our highest attainment is not to become *part* of God, or even to *become* God, or *a* god. Our opportunity of a lifetime is to have a personal relationship with God and to enjoy Him forever.

 We learned in Paul’s letter to Christ’s followers in first century Rome, which we looked at in each of our last two lunches, that people become “right with God” *by faith* in Him, not based on our good deeds. Paul taught us that Christ has already paid the penalty for our sins by dying on the cross. And that sacrificial act was all God the Father needed in order to forgive each of us of *all* of our sins -- past, present and future. Now it only remains for each of us to accept that free gift of unconditional forgiveness (something we do by faith).

 Fritz Ridenour writes, “Buddhists believe that Jesus Christ was a good teacher, though less important than Buddha.

 “Hindus believe that Jesus was just one of many incarnations, or sons, of God. Yet they also assert that Christ was not the unique Son of God. He was no more divine than any other man, and He did *not* die for people’s sins.

 “Muslims believe that Jesus Christ was the greatest of the prophets below Muhammad. In addition, they do not believe that Christ died for people’s sin.

 “Christians believe that Jesus is God as well as man, that He was sinless, and that He died to redeem humankind.”

 Embracing *all* religions” is as fruitless as O.J. finding the *real* killer at Pebble Beach because, sooner or later, every single religion contradicts the very words of Christ Himself.

 Salvation is the state of being liberated, or saved, from an eternity *without* God, in a place the Bible calls hell. Salvation in Jesus is a totally free gift. Accepting it is as easy as saying, "Jesus, I agree with You that I am a sinner. I agree that on the cross You paid the *only* price that could ever be paid to forgive me of my sin. I now accept Your undeserved forgiveness. And I accept You as my own Saviour.”

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