HEY, JUDE, THERE ARE THREE JOHNS IN HERE!

Or… 3 Johns Don't Make a Straight Flush

T here's light at the end of the tunnel near the end of our 3-year joyride through the entire Bible. With only five of 66 books to go, today we steam through four the size of postcards, but still relevant 19 centuries later.

In the slammer, convicted Watergate felon Chuck Colson audited his life to date: brilliant Marine stint, toney law degree, big bucks job at a cheeky law firm and catbird seat as White House counsel. In his "come to Jesus" meeting with himself, Colson actually came to Jesus.

He writes about Julie, a follower of Christ who discussed God with her college roomies. "Julie was excited -- they all seemed open to the Gospel. But to her surprise, they responded just as warmly when Sally said she was into the New Age movement and believed in 'the god within *all* of us.' And when Amy said she believed God is a '*force*,' like in Star Wars. And when Ruth said she was a 'very spiritual' person but didn't believe in *any* god at all.

"What really baffled Julie was that the others agreed that 'we're all saying the same thing' in the end. … In a new book called *How to Stay Christian in College*, J. Budziszewski (but-you-can-call-me-Bud!) says Julie had run into the powerful myth that 'truth is whatever you sincerely believe.' If you believe it, then it's true for you--and the ordinary rules of logic and evidence don't apply. …Can we really make something true just by believing it?"

Is whatever anybody believes about God true? Someone said your view of God determines how you live. If that's correct, then we'd best ask ourselves…."What do I *really know* about God?" If the Bible is the God-inspired, truthful, error-free (in its original writings) and *only* written revelation from Him, shouldn't we be clear on what He wants us to know about Himself? If not, whose view of God should we buy into?

There are boo-koo options…God is a tyrant, a joke, a senile senior, a Creator who deserted His creation, or the reincarnation of a fungus which evolved into divinity. With only six billion of us, how 'bout if the majority opinion wins? Or …….. we can discover what God says about Himself and …. TRUST HIM.

What a concept.

Surveying the Old Testament's 39 books and the New Testament's 27, we see God describe Himself as holy, always right, perfect, all-powerful, everywhere-present, faithful, loving, just, impartial, merciful, gracious, all-knowing, infinite, eternal, unchanging, Creator, absolute Truth. As we said in the Army, rank has its privileges, ergo God *is* who He *says* He is.

Last March at McChord AFB Liz and I attended services for a friend's father, Gen. Errol Van Eaton, who died in the Caribbean flying his chopper on a rescue mission. Only in his 50s, his eulogy included: "We tend to measure life by its length. We *should* measure it by its depth."

The speaker said four things marked this patriot's life: (1) He honestly evaluated himself and **discovered he was a sinner**. We all are. (2) He had **a genuine, life-changing relationship with God**, *not* religion. (3) He had **a deep faith in Jesus Christ**, believing in his heart that Jesus had lived on earth, died for our sins and risen from the grave to give hope to all who put their trust in Him. And (4) he was a very secure person, **convinced that God had a perfect plan for his life … and his life-after-death.**

My favorite uncle died last week. Nearly 99, Marvin was a genius, rising from Ozark poverty to father five professionals (one of three medical docs got his MD at 20). He was a religious scholar, yet never indicated he'd accepted God's forgiveness of his sins thanks to Christ's dying for him on the cross. We *hope* Marvin's with God in heaven, *not* in a place the Bible calls hell, reserved for those who pass up God's free offer of a new life in Christ.

To be *forever* in God's presence -- where there's no sin, sickness, death, only joy and beauty -- it's unreal! At Gen. Van Eaton's service someone said, "If we knew *now* what *Errol* knows now, we'd run to be the next one to go!"

Soren Kierkegaard said most folks read the Bible like a mouse eyeing cheese in a trap. They nibble the edges just enough not to get caught! We've taken the Bible's first 61 books in big gulps. Rather than summarize them here, you may request the notes, then nibble at will.

**FIRST JOHN WAS *NOT* A PLUMBING BREAKTHROUGH**

We're in a neighborhood of the NT known as the epistles, or letters, written to teach 1st century believers how to live Christianly. There are 21 such letters:

13 by Paul, a Jew who converted from tormenting Christians to become the first missionary carrying the "good news" of Christ's gift of eternal life around the Mediterranean. Two epistles were written by Jesus' half-brothers, James and Jude. Two by Jesus' pal Peter. One (to Hebrews) from an unknown author. And three by John, Jesus' closest disciple, who wrote the Gospel of John (with the Bible's most famous verse, John 3:16) and the Bible's last book, Revelation.

When he penned these three letters about AD 90 in Ephesus, principal city of the Roman province of Asia (now western Turkey), John was Jesus' oldest surviving *disciple* and *apostle* (he'd literally seen Jesus and been sent to spread His message). John was a hothead teen when he began following Christ, it's said, explaining why Jesus called him "son of thunder." He probably never wed, opting for lifelong service to the Son of God, apparently also his first cousin.

John's three letters are about loving God, loving His Word and loving others. First John was for Christians then and now who face the dangers and lures of living in an evil world where anything goes in greed, sex and religion.

John contends that *authentic* Christianity is based on truth, righteousness and love, qualities flowing *only* through a *personal* connection with Jesus.

Why do we all need that connection? And how do we make it? As Paul wrote to the believers in Rome, every person since Adam has been born into the world as a sinner desperately needing a Savior. (We're not sinners because we *sin*; we sin because we're *sinners*.) God is holy and can't look on sin. Yet He loves each of us and wants to have a loving relationship with us. But He *can't* because of this ……. "sin thing."

Being just but compassionate, He sent His Son Jesus to earth to take the punishment for *everybody's* sins by dying on the cross. With that single act God the Father pardoned every sin you and I *have* ever committed or *will* ever commit. Too good to be true? That's why it's ….. the good news!

We can't earn it; we don't deserve it. It's a gift from God to us. To receive it, we simply agree with God that we're sinners, needing a Savior, and that Christ *is* our Savior. Paul says if we agree with God in our hearts that Jesus is who He said He is, and if we believe that God raised Him from the dead, we'll be *saved*. Saved *from* what? Eternal separation *from* God. Saved *to* what? Eternal life *with* God. If you've never stepped from unbelief to belief, just check out mentally here for a minute while we read on….ask God to take His rightful place in your life now. Then rejoin us a paragraph from now.

Ray Stedman writes, *"The wisdom of Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Confucius and Buddha contain the same advice for living that you find in the New Testament. … if all you need is good advice, you do not need the Bible. … but one thing these leaders and philosophers do* not *give you is the* power *to* live out *their wonderful advice. … though (the Golden Rule of our Lord Jesus) is also expressed in other religions, Jesus goes a step further and empowers us to live by the Golden Rule. How does He do that? By showing us the secret of unity with Him! Fellowship with the Lord Jesus gives us the power to live out the advice He gives us."***Let's read 1st John ch. 1.**

Eyewitness John insisted Jesus had actually lived on earth as God in the flesh. A pop philosophy then was *gnosticism*, touting that our spirit is good, but is trapped in our hopelessly evil bodies. So gnostics tried to have their good spirits released from their bad bodies, to achieve a nirvana-like heaven or spiritual perfection. Since our bods are permanently wicked, they reasoned, why not let them be as bad as they wanna be! John railed against gnostic heresy which minimized Christ's humanity.

John alerted his young-in-the-faith readers to beware of false teachers. If these siren voices claimed that Christ did not actually appear on earth in human form, then they were *anti-*Christ*.* But it's not enough to know and believe the Truth, said John. Yourlifeshould demonstrate it. **Let's read 1st John 2-3:3.**

Too often Christ's followers seem impressed by what they *don't* do. John calls on those who say they love God to love others, even those hard to stomach. That brand of love is described by the Greek *agape*. It's love we *choose* to give others, not because we want to, or because others deserve it. It's a love available not from the Psychic Hotline but from God who loved us long *before* we ever loved Him. **Let's read 1st John 4.**

This Info Age is also the Age of Moral Relativism. Uncertainty is in. *Every*thing is true because *nothing* is *absolutely* true! "We can't know anything for sure" is our era's mantra, so do and believe your own thing.

Even Christ's followers can be unsure about what they "know." Into this skepticism John offers comfort, saying we *can* know *for sure* how to relate to God, and how to experience eternal life. He steers his readers away from idols, i.e., anything that consumes more of our passion than God since only He can fulfill our hearts' desires. **Let's read 1st John ch. 5.**

**TINY SECOND JOHN ONLY *LOOKS* LIKE A HALF-BATH.**

John addressed this letter to a Christian lady of whom we know nothing. Some believe she was a metaphor for a single church or all Christian churches, just as a ship is said to be feminine.

Since at this time the Bible hadn't yet been totally written, Christians relied on godly teachers and their letters to learn about their new faith. It seems some *wannabe prophets* had hyped certain doctrines to our lady, prompting her to write John for his counsel. This letter is John's response, helping us deal with anyone who espouses anti-biblical spiritual concepts.

John's solution is to keep in balance the two qualities that should characterize the life of one who serves Christ -- truth and love. All spiritual error and falsehood, he says, stems from either (a) denying that God came into the world in human flesh as the only Messiah, or (b) refuting Christ's teachings. **Let's read 2nd John.**

**THIRD JOHN, THE BIBLE'S SHORTEST BOOK**

This wee-pistle was written to a stand-up leader in the early Christian church named Gaius -- a gracious, generous, honest guy whose walk matched his talk. John applauds his hospitality to God's traveling teachers.

But another church leader, Diotrephes, was a bothersome sort -- cocky, selfish, trash-talking, disrespectul of John's authority as an apostle, and utterly inhospitable -- a role model of how *not* to live.

A third personality, Demetrius, is totally trustworthy, most likely a traveling missionary who delivered this letter and revered the name of Jesus. In Old Testament times the Jews wouldn't even utter Jehovah's name, esteeming it as too sacred to speak. Ancient scribes would even change pens and garments before writing it. Today in some places overseas Christians are abused, even martyred for defending Jesus' name, certainly not a name to be used flippantly or profanely. **Let's read 3rd John.**

**JUDE IS A 4-LETTER WORD FOR "BEWARE!"**

Jude, who like James (who led Christ's mushrooming band of followers in Jerusalem) was Jesus' half-brother. He dashed off this note to Jewish Christians, urging them to aggressively defend the Truth about their Messiah Jesus. It's probably post-AD 70, following Rome's razing of Jerusalem.

Wanting first to teach them more about the Gospel, Jude suddenly loses it, hearing that false teachers had crept *inside* the church and were polluting new believers, saying they had free rein to live like the devil. After all, they smirked, your sins are totally forgiven, aren't they -- neener, neener!!!

Jude and James wrote from a unique perspective. Both had grown up in their dad Joseph the carpenter's home with their half-brother Jesus. Totally skeptical into young adulthood, they observed a sibling who claimed to be *God* (!), but pulled off some awesome miracles to prove it, like emerging from His tomb after dying on a cross. That did it! Now Jude and James were fired up to defend to their death their resurrected brother, the Son of God! And both were martyred for doing so. (Hmmm, what has my faith cost me?)

Jude believed it's not enough to *know* God's Truth; deceivers must be *exposed*. He provides historical examples demonstrating that sin and rebellion have sooner or later been punished by God's righteous vengeance.

To guard against being infected by false teaching -- even today, Jude prescribes four safeguards: (a) Know the Truth; study the Bible; (b) Pray; stay in touch with God; (c) Agree with God when we find ourselves sinning, instead of ignoring or excusing it; confessing to Him keeps our lines open with God; and (d) Expect the physical return of Christ at any moment!

Jude's last sentence is said to be the Bible's finest expression of praise to -- and hope in -- God. **Hey, let's read Jude.**

His Deal

August 24, 1999

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