

Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians

We're out of the chute in Month #20 of our quest to find out "What in heaven's name is the Bible all about anyway!" It's a subway commute from Genesis to Revelation, moving at top speed, pausing now and then to come up for air.

In his 1997 book, *The Handwriting of God*, Grant Jeffrey asks questions that may have been stymieing you:

"Can we trust the Bible? Does Scripture present the truth about God, mankind and eternity? Is Christianity credible? Can we rationally believe that Jesus of Nazareth actually rose from the dead 2,000 years ago? Is Jesus Christ the only way of salvation for mankind? Is it possible, as we approach the year 2000, for an intelligent person to still believe that the ancient Scriptures are truly the inspired Word of God? Is the Bible 'without error' and trustworthy....?"

If we can't answer those questions to our satisfaction, we must reject the Bible's claim, made more than 3,000 times in its pages, to be the sole, bona fide, written revelation of God.

Or to help us understand this oldest, most controversial, best-selling book ever written, we could turn to that great theologian, Bruce Willis. On June 16, 1998, the *P-I* ran this quote:

"Organized religions are dying forms," said Willis. "Modern religion is the end trail of modern mythology. But there are people who interpret the Bible literally. Literally! I choose not to believe that's the way. And that's what makes America cool, you know?"

Today we come to #47 of the Bible's 66 books. Some 44 men -- writing in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek -- authored this "book of books" over 16 centuries, the longest time ever taken to write any book -- longer even than rolling out the next version of Windows.

3,500 years ago Moses wrote the first five Books of the Law starting with Genesis. This set is called the Pentateuch; Jews call it the Torah.

During the next 1,000 years 34 other God-inspired books were penned, rounding out the Old Testament's collection of history, laws, poetry and prophecy.

About 500 B.C. God motivated the priest Ezra, a descendant of Moses' brother Aaron, to gather all 39 of these books and publish them as a single anthology called "the Scriptures."

Now fast-forward 600 years, and the apostle John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples, finishes writing Revelation, the last of the 29 books of the New Testament. This wrapped up the 66, completing the Bible.

How could this ancient writing, read by hundreds of millions daily around the world, be unique from all other books?

It was circulated throughout the Roman Empire while hundreds of eyewitnesses to its accounts were still alive, people who'd seen and heard Jesus Christ teach, perform miracles, die on a cross and come back to life. These contemporaries failed to deny the Bible's written accounts of history-in-the-making. Had they done so, Christianity would've instantly fizzled like some two-bit, religious theme park.

Meanwhile, each year more and more archeological discoveries in the Middle East validate the total trustworthiness of the Biblical record.

A survey was conducted years ago by the editor of a well-known London newspaper who sent a letter to 100 of the UK's most important leaders in many fields. His letter posed a single question: "Suppose you were sent to prison for three years and you could only take three books with you. Which three would you choose? Please state them in order of their importance."

All but two of the 100 respondents selected the same book first -- the Bible. We're told that very few of those surveyed were religious. Most were not regular churchgoers. Some were openly atheist or agnostic. Yet each knew, at some subterranean level, that no other book offered such meaningful hope, joy and peace when cast, hypothetically, into a dungeon.

That the Bible has survived 35 centuries, facing vicious persecution and censorship, further commends its veracity. It's the miraculous medium God chose to preserve, protect and present to us the good news that Jesus, His only Son, came to the world to pay with His life the price to have His Father forgive and forget our sins.

We must decide for ourselves if it's the real deal. Our eternal destiny hinges on that choice, so let's make it carefully, but soon. After all, *not deciding* to catch the 3 o'clock to L.A. today is the same as *deciding not* to catch it. Same is true of our answer **to life's most crucial question**, the one Jesus asked His friend Martha (John 11:25) when He said:

"I am the one who raises the dead and gives them life again. Anyone who believes in me, even though he dies like anyone else, shall live again. He is given eternal life for believing in me and shall never perish. Do you believe this, Martha?"

Martha replied, "Yes, Master. I believe you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one we have so long awaited."

Not answering this question is like saying, “No, Jesus, I don’t believe you’re who you say you are.” The Bible says God decides our eternal destiny not based on our net worth, accomplishments or good deeds. His only concern “What did you do about my Son?”

The Old Testament, from Creation and concluding with the liberation of the Jews from captivity in Babylon, is a prologue to the New Testament. The NT documents Christ’s coming to earth, His 33 years here, His return to heaven, the early years of His followers, how His life impacts each of us, and what God’s ultimate plan is for the universe. Now let’s dive into today’s book-under-the-microscope.

SECOND CORINTHIANS:

When We’re Weak, We’re *Strong*? Yeah, Sure!

Paul wrote 13, perhaps 14 of the NT’s 29 books. Named Saul by his parents, he was born in Tarsus, capital of the Roman province of Cilicia in what’s now Turkey.

Tarsus’ inhabitants became wealthy by shipping goods between the Mediterranean and central Asia Minor. Its university was more famous than the world’s only other two -- in Athens and Alexandria.

Saul’s father was a Pharisee, Judaism’s most conservative wing, and a member of the tribe of Benjamin. Saul was undoubtedly born into privilege, enjoying the finest schooling. Since his father was a Roman citizen, Saul was “freeborn,” a trump card our hero would play later when arrested by Roman authorities for preaching the Gospel.

At about 13 Saul was sent to Jerusalem to study Jewish law under the famous rabbi Gamaliel. Two years after Christ’s execution, anti-Jesus sentiment soared as the ranks of the slain-but-risen Messiah’s followers swelled. Saul was a honcho in this reign of terror.

Incensed toward these Jesus people, Saul was en route to Damascus, Syria, to inflict more damage against them when he was suddenly halted on the road (Acts 9:1:22) by a bright light from above and a voice from “up there” which said, “Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?” “Who’s speaking, sir?” Saul asked. “And the voice replied, ‘I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting! Now get up and go into the city and await my further instructions.’”

Subsequently, Saul became Paul, doing a 180 by becoming leader of the pack *for* Christ, taking His “good news” to other nations as the very first Christian missionary.

He established a group of new converts in 52-53 A.D. in Corinth, a beautiful urban center of half a million people west of Athens on Greece’s Peloponnesian peninsula. Corinth was a pleasure and philosophy mecca, with lavish temples to pagan gods. Sex Pistol #1

was the goddess of love, Aphrodite, whose temple was home to 10,000 priestesses, or full-time prostitutes on the federal payroll.

Framed by Athens' great secular thinkers (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) and sex-soaked heathenism, whipsawed between the military heel of Rome and the legalistic glare of the Jews, Paul enters Corinth, debating in the town square, touting faith in Jesus who 20 years earlier had given His life to secure our forgiveness.

After Paul left for Ephesus in today's Turkey, word reached him that the new Corinthian Christians were caving in spiritually and morally: (a) breaking up into competing factions, (b) an incestuous relationship rattles the church, (c) church members suing each other, (d) promiscuous sex creeping in, (e) doubts arising about the need for marriage, (e) women in the church acting immodestly, etc.

So, Paul shipped off a letter of correction, urging them to get their focus back on Jesus and His teachings. Meanwhile, in Ephesus (see Acts 19:23-41) Paul and his buds there ran afoul of big business -- many craftspeople making shrines to the goddess Diana. The temple there, built in her honor, was one of the seven wonders of the world. Silver replicas of it were thought to bring prosperity to their owners, so Paul's teaching about "the one *true* God" became a competitive threat. A silver baron saw his profits in free fall and created a near riot. Paul quickly left for Greece, making even Dilbert's life look appealing to a missionary.

In Philippi, a city in northern Greece, 200 miles north of Corinth just south of today's Bulgaria, Paul rendezvoused with one of his main mentees, Timothy, who'd brought good news. According to Tim, most of the believers in Corinth had turned from their backsliding and were again living all-out for Jesus. But some were still questioning Paul's authority as "the man" in the heavenly hood.

So, from Philippi Paul wrote this second letter to the Corinthian Christians, drilling down deeper into his personal history than in any of his other letters.

In his opening chapter he gets honest about heavy times he'd been going through. Dark valleys can turn us *toward* God for comfort. Others, however, turn *from* God, believing that if God were really God (there's a brain-twister!), He wouldn't let bad things happen to good people. Really? Why then did He let His only Son die on a cross!?

Some of us, facing crises, have decided to give God another look. No matter *why* we turn to Him, God's always ready to accept us just as we are. **Let's read ch. 1.**

In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul addressed the sticky situation of one of the church guys living with his dad's wife. Paul revisits this in this second letter. He also uses a scene reminiscent of Rome's conquering heroes who returned from battle with long lines of captives in incense-scented processions. Some prisoners would live; others would be killed. **Let's read ch. 2.**

Paul lived on the edge, not in the Dennis *Rodmanesque* sense. After terrorizing Christ's people before he met Jesus personally, Paul now had been on the receiving end for thirty years. There'd been plots to kill him. He was driven out of towns, stoned and left for dead, beaten with rods, put in stocks, faced angry mobs, thrown into prison for two years in Caesarea and did two more years in a dungeon in Rome. There he apparently appeared before Nero whose hands were stained with every conceivable crime and unthinkable vices. This tyrant had Paul, a bigger-than-life spiritual giant, beheaded like a criminal in A.D. 66, four years before Jerusalem was laid waste.

What was Paul's attitude toward suffering? **Let's read ch. 4.**

Death was a daily option in the first century, especially if you were following the Carpenter from Nazareth who'd claimed to be Messiah.

People constantly questioned Paul about what happens after death. One of the Bible's clearest statements on this topic is here, along with one of its most powerful messages about how God, because of Christ's death, no longer holds our sins against us. The \$50 word is "reconciliation." It simply means "to make peace with."

Because He's totally holy, God can't look on sin. For us to have a positive, personal relationship with Him, our sin had to be dealt with once and for all. Otherwise, the Bible says we'd spend eternity in a place called hell. Ah, but thanks to Christ's death and resurrection, God the Father accepted that death as the sacrifice that obliterated our sin once and for all, allowing us to "live with God." Our response is *not* to *try* to be good, or to *do* good to *earn* God's forgiveness. Nope, the Bible says we enter into fellowship with God by just *believing* that He died for your sins and mine, and *welcoming* Him into our lives as our Saviour. **Let's read ch. 5.**

If we have time, Paul's position on experiencing God's strength in our own human weakness is worth the price of lunch alone. **Let's read 11:21-30, 12:9-10 (which contains the great key to living the Christian life) and finally 13:5.**

Eagles Nest Notes

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THROUGH HIS EYES

By Jeff Walling

The day's over. You're driving home. You tune in your radio. You hear a blurb about a little village in India where some villagers have died suddenly, strangely, of a flu never seen before. It's not influenza, but three or four fellows are dead, and it's kind of interesting, and they're sending doctors over there to investigate.

You don't think much about it, but on Sunday ... you hear another radio spot. Only they say it's not three villagers; it's 30,000 villagers in the back hills of this particular area of India, and it's on TV that night. CNN runs a little blurb; people are heading there from the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta because this strain has never been seen before.

By Monday when you get up, it's the lead story. For it's not just India; it's Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and, before you know it, you're hearing this story everywhere, and they've coined it now as "the mystery flu." The President has made some comment that he and everyone are praying and hoping that all will go well over there.

But everyone is wondering, "How are we going to contain it?" That's when the President of France makes an announcement that shocks Europe. He's closing their borders. No flights from India, Pakistan or any of the countries where this thing's been seen.

That night you're watching a little CNN before bed. Your jaw hits your chest when a weeping woman is translated from a French news program into English: "There's a young man lying in a hospital in Paris dying of the mystery flu."

It's come to Europe. Panic strikes. As best they can tell, once you get it, you have it for a week and you don't know it. Then you have four days of unbelievable symptoms. And then you die.

Britain closes its borders, but it's too late. It's Tuesday morning when the President of the United States makes this announcement:

"Due to a national security risk, all flights to and from Europe and Asia have been canceled. If your loved ones are overseas, I'm sorry. They cannot come back until we find a cure for this thing."

Within four days our nation's been plunged into unbelievable fear. People are selling little masks for your face. People are talking about what if it comes to this country, and preachers are saying, "It's the scourge of God."

It's Wednesday night ... somebody runs in ... and says, "Turn on a radio, turn on a radio." ... the announcement is made. "Two women are lying in a Long Island hospital dying from the mystery flu."

Within hours it seems, this thing just sweeps across the country. People are working around the clock trying to find an antidote. Nothing is working. California. Oregon. Arizona. Florida. Massachusetts. It's as though it's just sweeping in from the borders.

Then, all of a sudden the news comes. The code has been broken. A cure *can* be found. A vaccine can be made. It's going to take the blood of somebody who hasn't been infected, and so, sure enough, all through the Midwest,

through all those channels of emergency broadcasting, everyone is asked to do one simple thing: "Go to your downtown hospital and have your blood type taken. That's all we ask of you. When you hear the sirens in your neighborhood, please make your way quickly, quietly and safely to the hospitals."

Sure enough, when you and your family get down there late that Friday night, there's a long line. They've got nurses and doctors pricking fingers and taking blood and putting labels on it. Your wife and kids are there, and they take your blood type, and they say, "Wait here in the parking lot, and if we call your name, you can be dismissed and go home."

You stand around scared with your neighbors, wondering what in the world is going on, and that this is the end of the world. Suddenly a young man comes running out of the hospital screaming. He's yelling a name and waving a clipboard. What? He yells it again! And your son tugs on your jacket and says, "Daddy, that's *me*!"

Before you know it, they've grabbed your boy. "Wait a minute, hold it!" They say, "It's okay, his blood is clean. His blood is pure. We want to make sure he doesn't have the disease. We think he's got the right type." Five tense minutes later out come the doctors and nurses, crying and hugging one another. Some are even laughing.

It's the first time you've seen anybody laugh in a week, and an old doctor walks up to you and says, "Thank you, sir. Your son's blood type is perfect. It's clean, it's pure, and we can make the vaccine." As the word begins to spread all across that parking lot full of folks, people are screaming and praying and laughing and crying.

But then the gray-haired doctor pulls you and your wife aside and says, "May we see you for a moment? We didn't realize the donor would be a minor, and we need...we need you to sign a consent form." You begin to sign, and then you see that the number of pints of blood to be taken has been left blank.

"H-h-h-how many pints?" And that's when the old doc's smile fades, and he says, "We had no idea it would be a small child. We weren't prepared. We need it *all*." "But - but..." "You don't understand. We're talking about the *world* here. Please sign. We - we need it all - we need it all!" "But can't you give him a transfusion?" "If we had clean blood, we would. Can you sign here? *Would* you sign here?"

In numb silence you do. Then they say, "Would you like to have a moment with him before we begin?" Can you walk back? Can you walk back to that room where he sits on a table saying, "Daddy? Mommy? What's going on?" Can you take his hands and say, "Son, your mommy and I love you, and we'd never ever let anything happen to you that didn't just have to be. Do you understand that?"

And then that old doctor comes back and says, "I'm sorry, we've - we've got to get started. People all over the world are dying." Can you leave? Can you walk out while he's saying, "Dad? Mom? Dad? Why - why have you forsaken me!?"

And then next week, when they hold the ceremony to honor your son, some folks sleep through it, and some folks don't even come because they go to the lake, and some folks come with a pretentious smile and just *pretend* to care. Would you want to jump up and say, "MY SON DIED! DON'T YOU CARE?"

Is that what God wants to say? "MY SON DIED. DON'T YOU KNOW HOW MUCH I CARE?"

"Father, seeing it from *your* eyes breaks our hearts. Maybe now we can begin to comprehend the great love you have for us. Amen."

His Deal

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