

# Born to Win

## 2,000 Years of Jesus

by Ronald L. Dart

Well, we made it. The millennium rolled around and the world did *not* come to an end. I decided on December 31<sup>st</sup> I was going to give it the acid millennial test. I turned my computer off and I went to bed. The way I figured it was: if the sun came up the next morning, we would be okay. That would mean that God's computer is Y2K-compliant, and we just don't have to worry about that. Guess what? The sun came up, this radio station is on the air, and all is right with the world.

That's the good news. The bad news is that you'll have to keep that dental appointment, after all. And all that stuff you put on your card in December—your credit card, loaded that up—those bills are all going to come due in January. Sorry about that. Tough luck.

There were a few other disappointments. I told you last week [*Millennium Madness*] that some of the tabloids were reporting that some 11,000 Americans had seen visions; and that Elvis was coming back, and he would appear in the clouds over Memphis, and everyone would see him to announce the return of Jesus in the year 2000. Well, Elvis didn't make it. Elvis was a no-show. There is still time for *Jesus* to return, I suppose, and a lot of people seem to think that he'll return in the year 2000. But it already appears that Pope Urban IV was wrong. Some time in the 13<sup>th</sup>, he's supposed to have said, "As this present age comes to a close, then will the Son of Man return in his glory. He will appear with the rising of the sun to the east of Rome on the first morning of the first day of the first year of the next millennium." So reported the *Sun*.

I say it "seems" he was wrong. There's no way of knowing if he meant this week or the first day of 2001 (which, technically, is when the millennium really begins). You know, I think one of the most interesting stories about the year 2000 will be to see who was right—the people who rushed around in a panic reprogramming their computers, or the people who decided to wait and see what broke and fix it when it broke. I understand already a lot of the new programs are presenting their own problems and, if the unfixed computers boot and run, think of how much money those people saved and how much trouble.

But the people who puzzle me the most are the religious people who expect the return of Christ *this year* for no better reason than that it's the millennium. And the reason it puzzles me is that it's not the millennium until next year, and the 2,000<sup>th</sup> birthday of Jesus passed *five years ago*. What happened this week, to a Christian, was of little more important than turning over the odometer on your car.

But it's been more *entertaining* than that, hasn't it, as we've watched all the going on? And it has been kind of fun. One useful byproduct of all this millennial interest is a renewed interest in Jesus of Nazareth. In December, *Time* magazine featured a cover article titled *Jesus at 2000*. (Nevermind that it should be 2005 or so, it made a great cover. And the year 2000 is just more dramatic than running this article back in 1995 would have been.) And, oddly for a news magazine, the article was written by a *believer* and was intended to be inspirational. It was written by a novelist, Reynolds Price, and the piece examines the history of Jesus in the intuitive way that only a novelist would really approach it. He begins his piece in *Time* magazine (this is the December 6<sup>th</sup> issue of *Time* magazine):

The memory of any stretch of years eventually resolves to a list of names, and one of the useful ways of recalling the past two millennia is by listing the people who acquired great power. Muhammad, Catherine the Great, Marx, Gandhi, Hitler, Roosevelt, Stalin and Mao come quickly to mind. There's no question that each of those figures changed the lives of millions and evoked responses from worship through hatred.

It would require much exotic calculation, however, to deny that the single most powerful figure—not merely in these two millennia but in all human history—has been Jesus of Nazareth. Not only is the prevalent system of denoting the years based on an erroneous 6<sup>th</sup> century calculation of the date of his birth, but a serious argument can be made that no one else's life has proved remotely as powerful and enduring as that of Jesus. It's an astonishing conclusion in light of the fact that Jesus was a man who lived a short life in a rural backwater of the Roman Empire, who died in agony as a convicted criminal, and who may never have intended so much as a small portion of the effects worked in his name.

*Reynolds Price - Jesus of Nazareth*

Isn't that the truth. I have to agree with the conclusions Reynolds Price comes to at this point because, when you think about Jesus—when you think about what we know about him historically—and then you consider the *impact* that his short life, death, and resurrection has had on the history of man, it is nothing short of *astonishing*. And, as he concludes, he has to be considered the most powerful figure in human history.

What's odd about this though, in a way, is how little scholars have, for so very long, thought they really *knew* about the life of Jesus. It was (I don't know why) but there's always been a suspicion of the four gospel accounts—probably because they conclude with the story of Jesus' resurrection from the dead; probably because of all the miraculous elements in them—and yet the evidence is so strong. What Reynolds Price does in this *Time* magazine article is to pull together fragments and pieces—not only from the four gospel accounts, but from the various and sundry other apocryphal books, New Testament apocrypha, the pseudepigrapha, some of the manuscripts that have been found in different places—and to use the novelist's intuition to fill in the dark places, the little holes, the things that a person might not know. He acknowledges the problems that the New Testament scholars have. He says:

And so we have the four Gospels. It has been fashionable among New Testament scholars for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to say that the Gospels are not what they claim to be: brief biographies. Yet their special claim would seem to be the preservation of reliable accounts of the career, teaching, death and resurrection of one extraordinary man. Many modern scholars, however, have tended to see them as propaganda, as campaign biographies—documents that contain fragments of actual history, but history so shaped and transformed by faith as to require caution in the reader who seeks firm fact.

*Reynolds Price - Jesus of Nazareth*

But he takes the new approach here of a novelist again, and he says:

Yet a fair-minded reader, with a normal human capacity for storytelling, might well consume all four Gospels in a night and conclude that their individual accounts bear enough relation to one another to suggest that they spring from a common event. Their internal differences are occasionally extreme, and their views of the nature of Jesus range from Mark's affirmation that he was the "beloved Son of God" to John's flat claim that Jesus was the Word, that eternal

aspect of God who created the world and who has a continuing interest in the life of worldly creatures—ourselves above all. Nonetheless, the four together make a strong case for the urgency with which Jesus' early followers longed to preserve trustworthy records of a supremely important life, one lived in a particular place and time.

*Reynolds Price - Jesus of Nazareth*

I suppose we have to acknowledge the fact that scholars... their job is to be skeptical; their job is to doubt; their job is to inquire. But the truth is that the the *honesty* of the four gospel accounts, the *truthfulness* of these accounts—the way they read and the way they touch your life down through 2,000 years—has persuaded generation after generation after generation that they tell *the truth* about Jesus.

Reynolds Price, in this issue of *Time* (And I recommended it to you. It's the December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1999 issue of *Time*.) takes in hand to produce six short vignettes—a novelist's approach—to the story of Jesus. And he derives a lot of what he does (well, most of it, frankly) from Mark; but also from some of the other little notes and sources of archaeological evidence, archaeological discoveries, and other manuscripts—all of which make little suggestions and hints that, in his mind, create a story.

Reynolds Price's view—his image—of Judas, I think, is fascinating. Judas has fascinated all of us down through generations as we ponder this strange character who Jesus called among his 12 disciples *knowing* that he was going to betray him. He made it very clear that he knew from the beginning what Judas was going to do. And dealing with this fact—dealing with the awareness that Jesus *loved* this man even when he *knew* this man was going to betray him—is hard to deal with. Well, Reynolds Price, as he speculates on this and muses on it, writes this:

Judas lasted on, entirely alone, through the Sabbath night and day after Jesus' death. He'd stood on the ground not 10 yards from the cross and heard his teacher's astounding final words—"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And he'd stayed for Jesus' final hoarse shout a moment later. Then Judas had found his way to the house of another old pupil, one whom Jesus had been forced to send home when he caught him tampering with children for the second time—Hamer from Bethlehem.

Hamer had taken up his old life as a plasterer, and he lived with his toothless mother and a wife who loathed Judas the moment she knew he came from the old days—Hamer's wild days with Jesus, not so long ago, maybe 16 months. Hamer shut her up fast, and she cooked them a decent meal. Afterward Hamer took Judas out to the edge of the village, a plateau aimed at the distant Dead Sea. He said to Judas, "You know Jesus told me, early on, that he was born here—it's David's town, remember? Said he was born in one of the caves right down here below us."

Judas said, "He told people lots of things, Hamer."

Hamer stood in silence for so long Judas was aching with the bitterness of what he'd accomplished. Then Hamer stepped back a long four strides and stared at Judas the best he could in the slim starshine. Finally he said, "I know he told me you'd be the death of him."

Judas said, "Me? You're lying to me." He'd already established that Hamer knew nothing of Jesus' arrest and speedy death, and Judas hadn't told him.

Hamer said, "When he told me I'd have to leave, I fell down and begged him for a scrap of forgiveness, and he said, 'Oh, son, I forgive you surely—I've forgiven Judas this far in advance. But you can't work with me after today; the millstone of what you've done is around your neck, and the two of us are helpless to move it.'"

Judas said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. He had no reason to forgive me, ever.”

*Reynolds Price - Jesus of Nazareth*

You know, I find his account here—his presumptions—fascinating and really quite believable. It’s quite believable that Jesus would have, had he had to send a disciple away, had he had a situation where he was going to forgive a disciple...for example, in his forgiveness of Hamer and his comment, “Look, I forgive you. That’s not the problem. The problem is that what you have done is a millstone that will hang around your neck for the rest of your life.” And I’ve often thought about Judas—that Jesus could forgive him, but how in the world would Judas ever be able to forgive himself. How would he ever not know that he had betrayed Christ. There is that section where Jesus said:

**Mark 14**

*AKJV*

<sup>21</sup> The Son of man indeed goes, as it is written of him: but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! good were it for that man if he had never been born.

It’s hard for me to imagine how life could become so bad that it would cancel out all the good, and you just would wish that you had never been born. And here is a man in Judas who, having betrayed Jesus, would certainly wish that he had never been born. And his deeds would be like a millstone around his neck that would be with him through all eternity. Forgiven, brought up in a resurrection, given new life, and still everyone would know.

Price closes this section with one of the saddest encounters I’ve ever read. He presumes (based upon one of Paul’s references and another ancient manuscript) that Jesus actually did appear to Judas, also, before he ascended to the Father. And there’s a certain amount of sense in that—a certain *closure* that takes place in that final encounter. And he has the encounter taking place just as Judas is ready to hang himself. There’s a sadness about the Jesus that he presents here—a sadness and a recognition that he’s willing to forgive, he’s willing to protect him, he’s willing to put barriers around him and tell people, to warn people off so they don’t harm Judas. He’s going to give Judas his life back. And Judas is completely unable to take it. It is a sad, sad story. You know, later on in his article he makes this short statement about Jesus that I thought was fascinating. He said that he was:

[...] a teacher who, to our knowledge, never refused a single person who approached him honestly.

*Reynolds Price - Jesus of Nazareth*

He kind of brought into focus in my mind, as I read this, a truism that the unpardonable sin (which some of us sometimes worry a lot about and and fret over) is not a problem of God’s pardon. It’s not a problem of God forgiving us. It’s not a problem of God letting us off the hook and letting us go. It’s a problem of the millstone that we have hung around our own neck that *we* won’t let go—that *we* can’t deal with. For, in fact, God didn’t kill Judas; Judas went out and hanged himself.

Be careful, would you? And don’t ever get yourself into the situation to where you’re not willing to let *yourself* off the hook; where you’re not willing to forgive yourself and to let your own problems go. God’s forgiveness is enough to cover anything you do. The problem is that there are some millstones that you yourself might not ever let go.

We have had 2,000 years of Jesus now, and no one knows with any certainty how much time we have left before he comes back again. And, surprisingly, very few people seem to have any idea why Jesus is going to bother to return. You know, if he’s going to take everybody off to heaven, why fool around

with this thing? Just take all of his loved ones off to some other corner of the universe and live happily ever after and let the earth go to hell. Well, one person characterized it by saying that the message is, “Jesus is coming back and he’s mad as a hornet.”

Well, okay, is that it? Is it that we just get finally bad enough, we finally offend him enough, we finally make him *mad enough* that he’s going to come back and slap us all down? There’s a billboard I’ve seen in Dallas (there’s one of a series called “Messages from God”). The background of the billboard is plain black, and the message on it is simple: “Don’t make me come down there. Signed, God.” Well, it kind of got my attention.

But, you see, this outcome would mean the project was, in the end, a losing proposition. It would mean that God had put all of us down here and it finally got so bad—it finally failed so *finally*—that he has to come down and just clear it all up, blow it all to pieces, get rid of it. The fact is, though, that in the Bible the return of Christ is not because he finally got mad enough to come back, it’s because if he doesn’t come back there’s not going to be anything to come back to. If you look at the famous Olivet Prophecy (it’s found in Matthew 24, verse one), Jesus went out and departed from the temple and his disciples came around and were pointing out, like country bumpkins, all the buildings of the temple.

#### **Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>2</sup> And Jesus said to them, See you not all these things? truly I say to you, There shall not be left here one stone on another, that shall not be thrown down.

<sup>3</sup> And as he sat on the mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and what shall be the sign of your coming, and of the end of the world?

<sup>4</sup> And Jesus answered and said to them, Take heed that no man deceive you.

<sup>5</sup> For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many.

<sup>6</sup> And you shall hear of wars and rumors of wars: see that you be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.

<sup>7</sup> For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.

<sup>8</sup> All these are the beginning of sorrows.

“I’m sorry to tell you this. All this is just the beginning of pain.” He went on to tell his disciples:

#### **Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>9</sup> Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and you shall be hated of all nations for my name’s sake.

<sup>10</sup> And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another.

<sup>11</sup> And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many.

It’s quite a description here, of the world—of the number of people who go around prophesying one thing and another. I mean, how many people have prophesied the end of the world in the year 2000? Well, by the time this year is over, we will know that *all* those prophets were *false* prophets. We’ve got *plenty* of those around. He went on to say:

#### **Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>12</sup> And because iniquity [*that’s lawlessness*] shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold.

The whole society, he says, will go into iniquity—into lawlessness—and because it becomes so common that the love of many...and he doesn't really say here whether he's talking about their love for God, their love for one another. He just says the *love* of many will wax cold. And, you know, we've come to the place where sex even has gone cold—to where it's recreation—and there is no longer the *passion*, the *love*. You know, sex is an act of love, and we're supposed to have feelings about it. It isn't just something we do for entertainment. But it has come to the place where love *has* grown cold. So we have come, in many ways, to the place that Jesus is talking about. He then goes on to say:

**Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>13</sup> But he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved.

<sup>14</sup> And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness to all nations; and then shall the end come.

You know, I don't know quite how to take what Jesus said there. The Gideons have published the Bible I think in every tongue (*nearly* every tongue; there may be one somewhere that they have missed) so that the Bible has gone everywhere. Is there any need to preach *beyond* the Bible, as far as that's concerned, for this to be fulfilled? Well, I know I'm an on here preaching additional words, in *addition* to the Bible; but, by and large, if a person has read the Bible, how could we ever say that they had not heard the gospel? And the Bible has already gone everywhere. "Then", he says, "the end will come." The end of what? Well, he warned that they're going to be some events that take place that lead up to it. He says:

**Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>15</sup> When you therefore shall see the abomination of desolation, spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place, (whoever reads, let him understand:)

There's a caution thrown in here. You've got to be *careful* with this, because there is a reference back in Daniel to an "abomination that makes desolate" [**Daniel 9:27, 11:31, 12:11**]*—something that's placed right in the Holy of Holies in the temple of God—and the suggestion many see in this is that there will be a holy place right at the time of the end. Right now, there is not one. So does this mean a tabernacle? Does it mean a new temple? Well, file it away in your memory and watch what happens in the world. "Let him that reads, understand."* He says, when you see this happen:

**Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>16</sup> Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains:

<sup>17</sup> Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house:

<sup>18</sup> Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes.

<sup>19</sup> And woe to them that are with child, and to them that give suck in those days!

And I can imagine a circumstance where it is *so bad* that, if you're working in the field and you see this or hear of it, that you drop your tools and you head for the hills if it's that bad. Woe be to the poor mother who is nursing a child.

**Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>20</sup> But pray you that your flight be not in the winter, neither on the sabbath day:

And I guess it's out there. A lot of people are trying to tell us it's going to happen *this year*. Although, frankly, I don't see in the world events at large the events I see in the Bible. I don't see the match that says it's coming *that quick*. But who knows? Christ can come whatever he decides he wants to come. He says:

**Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>21</sup> For then shall be great tribulation, such as was not since the beginning of the world to this time, no, nor ever shall be.

Make a note: This great tribulation is *not caused by God*; It's caused by the *stupid, hateful criminality* of human beings. Because he says:

**Matthew 24**

AKJV

<sup>22</sup> And except those days should be shortened, there should no flesh be saved: but for the elect's sake those days shall be shortened.

You understand what he's saying here? What he is saying is that, if God did not do something, we would finally destroy *all flesh* off this planet. You know, when these words were written 2,000 years ago, no one could have known what we know today about the world, about the condition of the world, about what's going on. No one could have known these things. But we know it now, don't we? We now know there's not only one way, there are several ways now that we could probably put an end to *all life*.

The return of Christ is not in anger—not in anger against man; it's in anger against a *class* of man who is in the process of destroying the earth. The return of Christ is to save us from ourselves.

Yes, Jesus is angry, no doubt (the Book of Revelation says he's going to destroy them that destroy the earth [**Revelation 11:18**]) but Jesus has been angry many times in the past 2,000 years, I'm sure. What brings him back is not that his anger finally got bad enough for him to do something about it, but that he has to come back and save us from ourselves. God is determined to *win* this fight, and he's determined that *we win it with him*. All the tragedy around us arises from the simple fact that God wanted us to be *free*. And unless you are free to do evil as well as good, you simply are not free. And the pain and the suffering we create with our freedom to do bad things are a part of the growth process that is ultimately to purify us and make us more like God. Even in the moment of *deepest* defeat and *darkest* despair, we have not lost. For these things only serve to make us deeper and stronger. In the end, we can win; we can overcome those things and, in the process, come to know what it is like to be God. After all, we were *born to win*.

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