

# SALVATION

by JERRY OLTION

\* \* \* \*

Might there be more than one way?

The scientist was sweating. The conference room of the Universal Church of the Divine Revelation was air-conditioned against the muggy Florida heat, but no amount of cool air would comfort the supplicant seated before the board of regents. That suited the Reverend Billy Dickerson just fine. Scientists ought to sweat in the presence of clergy, just as they would sweat in the afterlife to atone for the multitude of sins they had committed against the Church over the past two millennia. Especially scientists like this William Winters, the type of snooty academic who would no more call himself “Billy” than he would get down on his knees to pray to the Lord. His kind were all equations and electrons and tensors and theories—theories presented as if they were facts, when everybody knew that the very word “theory” meant that it was just some egghead’s crazy attempt to remove God from the explanation.

Oh yes, let this scientist, this precious William, with his refined mannerisms and his ridiculous ideas, sweat. Let him loosen his tie and wipe his palms on his polyester pants while he tried to impress the regents with his credentials. Let him squirm, because the words he spouted were insults to the Savior and to the men of faith who preached His word.

“You’re used to buying scientists,” William was saying. “People who will rubber-stamp your preconceived notions of the way things work. All that does is call your own integrity into question. It’s time you bought some actual science for a change.”

That bought him a ripple of indignant frowns from the other six regents seated at the conference table, but Billy couldn’t resist a smile. He had to admire the man’s nerve, if nothing else. This blasphemer had walked into the lion’s den on his own initiative, knowing the reception he would get, but he wasn’t mincing words in an attempt to curry favor. He was sticking up for his principles, however misguided they might be.

“You’re no doubt referring to our recent work on intelligent design,” Billy replied. “You may think what you like, but all our researchers are given complete autonomy in their investigations.”

“After you hand-pick them for their adherence to the paradigm you

support,” said William. “I’m talking about looking at the facts and accepting what those facts tell you about the way the universe works.”

“And these supposed ‘facts’ would be what? Newtonian physics? But no, that was later proven wrong by Einstein. Lamarckian inheritance? No, that was disproven by Mendel and his peas. Evolution? Where are the intermediate forms?”

“Probably in your lungs,” said William.

That caught Billy off guard. “What?”

“There are intermediate forms of viruses and bacteria all around us. They’re constantly evolving. Why do you think you need a new flu shot every year?”

“I don’t get flu shots,” said Billy. “Vaccination is an evil plot to destroy the minds of our children through mercury poisoning.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” said William. “You’ve caught the A.M.A. red handed. How remarkable. But we were talking about your belief that there were no intermediate forms to prove the validity of evolution. So if you were to catch tuberculosis, may I assume that you would ask your doctor to treat it as if the bacillus hadn’t evolved?”

Billy hesitated. That was a trick question. It was like asking a man if he had stopped beating his wife; there was no good answer to it. He considered how he should respond, but Roland Matson was already stepping in to cover his back.

“You didn’t come here to lecture us on evolution,” Roland said in the thin, reedy voice that had kept him from developing his own television ministry. “You’ve asked us to buy science rather than scientists. Why don’t you explain that statement instead? What kind of science would you have us purchase?”

“Physics,” said William. “Specifically M-theory, which posits ten spatial dimensions and one time dimension, any of which are accessible with the proper equipment. I’m asking you to fund the construction of that equipment.”

Billy found his voice again. “What for?”

“To save humanity.” William let that statement hang for a second

before he went on. “The energy level in these extra dimensions is wildly different from the three that we see. And any time you have an energy gradient, you can generate power from it. In this case, enough power to fuel all of human society a million times over, without pollution and without strife.”

“An admirable goal,” said Billy, “if it were to succeed. But the fact that you’re coming to us instead of the federal government tells me that your chances of success are slim. What makes you think that we would be interested in funding this when the Department of Energy would not?”

“The Department of Energy won’t touch it because the people who run it—that is to say, Congress—have a considerable investment in the status quo,” said William. “And you will because the same equipment that opens up the spatial dimensions can be used to open the temporal dimension,” said William.

None of the regents, including Billy, wanted to touch that statement.

“I’m talking time travel,” William went on. “You could go back in time and meet Jesus. Assuming he existed.”

\* \* \* \*

Billy remembered that day in the boardroom with the clarity of a car wreck. The pandemonium that erupted after the physicist’s statement was a thing to behold. Three of the regents had begun shouting at once, accusing him of blasphemy, chicanery, and outright flim-flammery, while two more rose from their chairs and stalked out of the room. Old Roland had giggled like a schoolgirl. And Billy had watched the scientist clench his jaw and glower like a man who had played his last card and lost, but who had expected every one of those reactions from such Philistines as these.

He couldn’t say why he invited William into his private office and poured him a two-finger glass of his finest bourbon. Perhaps it was God directing his will, or perhaps it was simple curiosity, or maybe even a touch of admiration for this misguided sinner who nonetheless believed what he believed with an intensity that rivaled Billy’s own faith in the Lord. Whatever the reason, the two of them were soon talking like old fraternity buddies, and William was telling Billy how his theories predicted time travel as an almost inevitable consequence of dimensional transfer.

“Why did you come to us with this?” Billy asked him. “You don’t really believe that we could go back in time to meet Jesus, do you? You don’t

even believe in Jesus.”

William swirled the last of his bourbon around the bottom of his glass. “I believe there was probably a man named Jesus. Perhaps a very remarkable man. But I believe he was just a man. And frankly, I would like the chance to prove it to one of you true believers. Maybe if you saw what he really was, you’d put your effort into reality instead of promoting a fantasy.”

“Reality,” Billy snorted. “Like time travel.”

“Like time travel,” said William.

The man would have made an excellent televangelist. He believed what he was saying with such intensity that he nearly made Billy believe it, too, but that didn’t happen until the sheet of paper appeared in the air about a foot above Billy’s desk and fluttered down to drape itself over the telephone.

The two men regarded each other like witnesses to a UFO abduction, then while the scientist checked his watch, Billy slowly reached out and grasped the paper. It was his own letterhead. Written on it in his own angular, precise handwriting were the words, “It works. Give him the money. You almost named the dog Solomon.”

The hair stood up on the back of his neck. Paper appearing out of nowhere was a good trick, but it might easily be just that: a trick. Duplicating his letterhead and his handwriting wouldn’t be all that difficult either. Knowing the name that Billy had considered but rejected for his German shepherd fifteen years ago was a different level of feat entirely.

“May I see that?” William asked. Billy handed the paper to him, and when the scientist read the words scribbled on it, his mouth bent upward in a grin that his face clearly wasn’t accustomed to hosting. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said softly.

“Yes, probably so,” said Billy. “And so may I. But it seems we may find ourselves doing business after all.”

\* \* \* \*

The board of regents wouldn’t be swayed, so Billy split his ministry away from the others and funded the project on his own. He became a regular visitor to William’s lab, at first to watch where his money was being

spent, then later out of genuine interest in the science behind it. If William was deluded, his was one of the most self-consistent delusions Billy had ever seen. And as his equipment slowly grew in sophistication, his theory became closer and closer to practice, until the day when William's wristwatch appeared in the transmission chamber that he had just that morning declared ready for a test.

"One of the things I love about time travel," William said, picking the watch off the chamber's wire mesh floor, "is the instant gratification." He compared the watch with the one he wore on his wrist. They looked identical except for the time. The new one read an hour and ten minutes fast.

"No pressure," Billy said, chuckling softly.

William laughed with him. "Right. Let's get this show on the road."

It actually took less than an hour to set up the jump. They still had fifteen minutes left before William's original watch would read the correct time, and they were having a hard time waiting. William said, "I'm tempted to do it now and see what happens. Will the universe let us create a paradox?"

"Why don't we see?" asked Billy.

They looked at each other like children who had dared each other to jump off the end of a pier. "There are a million good reasons why not," William said. "And one very good reason to do it," he added, setting the watch in the cage.

"Science," said Billy.

"Exactly. We already know time travel works. Let's do the next experiment."

William hit the switch. The watch disappeared. For a moment, that seemed to be the end of it, then there was a feeling of disorientation, as if they were in an elevator car that had begun to rise and descend simultaneously.

"What was that?" Billy said.

"If I had to guess," William replied, "I would say that was the universe rearranging itself to fit the new reality." He looked at his wristwatch, then at

the digital clock on his workbench. They read the same time. "It adjusted," he said. "Do you remember the paradox?"

"Gugenfrienchen?" asked Billy. "Wakari misu?"

"What?"

Billy burst out laughing. "Gotcha! You should see your face."

William slowly grinned. "All right, smart ass. Now let's do the next jump straight."

It took them most of the evening to haul the equipment to Billy's office, but they got it set up by nine and the jump calculated not long after. "It was three-twelve," said William. "I checked. Do you remember what you wrote?"

"I don't need to." Billy took the paper out of his desk. "Should we send the original, or should I write another?"

"Write a new one," said William. "If we send the original, we put it in a closed loop and never get it back. We don't want to lose the first object to travel in time. We'll want that for the Smithsonian someday."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose you're right." Billy took out a fresh sheet of letterhead and wrote on it: "It works. Give him the money. You almost named the dog Solomon." Then he slipped the paper into the cage, the wire mesh floor of which stood about a foot above the surface of his desk, right where the phone was before they had moved it to make room.

William watched the countdown clock on the computer screen. When it hit zero, he pushed the "go" button. The paper vanished.

"Now we build one big enough for people," he said.

\* \* \* \*

That was the work of another year, a year that Billy spent learning Aramaic and brushing up on his Latin. He flew to Israel several times to scout out the territory, eventually renting a ground floor flat in a new settlement on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Two thousand years ago the area where it stood would be far out in the wilderness, at least half a day's walk from the ancient city. The time travelers should be able to arrive there without attracting attention, and more importantly they could store their

return equipment there without it being discovered and stolen by passersby.

Of course it was anybody's guess whether the flat would still be standing when they arrived from America with the time machine. The Palestinians were still lobbing rockets into the settlements every few days and the Iranians were threatening to do the same. It was business as usual in the Middle East, but Billy didn't know how they could go on like this, nursing hatred for generation after generation in the holiest of lands.

Perhaps he would ask Jesus if He could do something about it.

At last William declared the human-sized time machine ready. They tested it with short jumps in his own lab, and they tested the portable return unit that they would carry with them, and it all worked as he had designed it. So they boxed it all up and took it to Israel.

When they got there, they bought desert clothing and survival gear that they hoped would pass for authentic two millennia earlier, keeping it as plain and simple as possible. They carried gold and jewels to buy whatever else they needed once they made their jump.

Within a surprisingly short time, they were ready to go. Billy had already calculated the best time to find Jesus in Jerusalem, settling on the last year of his ministry. William keyed it into the control computer and sent the return machine to those coordinates, then he set the destination time back ten minutes and motioned Billy into the transfer cage.

"This is the moment of supreme faith," Billy said as he stepped in and pulled the wire door closed. "Ironic, isn't it, that I'm placing my faith in science?"

William shrugged. "No more ironic than our first major trip being a visit to a religious fanatic. Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." Billy saw William reach for the "go" button, and then his ears popped and bright sunlight stabbed his eyes and he dropped about six inches onto dry sand.

"Welcome to the past," William said from off to his left.

Billy blinked and squinted until his eyes adapted to the light. He knew that William had planned to set the coordinates for his own jump to arrive a few minutes before Billy, but it was still disorienting to find him already

there.

They had arrived in a rocky wilderness filled with scrub brush and the occasional twisted, stunted tree. The city was just visible several miles in the distance, and a camel caravan was winding its way around a hill to the east, but there was nobody anywhere close to their landing site. Billy noted that William had already cleared the rocks away from the spot where he stood.

“I almost turned an ankle on one,” William explained when he realized what Billy was looking at.

Billy took a deep breath of the air. He had expected it to smell better than twenty-first-century Israel’s air, but there was a smoky tang to it that spoke of many, many wood and dung fires burning for many, many years in this land.

“Well,” he said. “Here we are.”

They spent the next few minutes preparing a place to hide the return machine. When it arrived, they carried it over to the hollow they had dug beneath a cedar tree and buried it there, wrapped in plastic to keep the sand out of the works. Then they set out for Jerusalem, looking back often to fix in their minds the spot where their return ticket waited.

When they arrived in town, their robes drew stares not for their style but for their cleanliness. Apparently, people walking in out of the desert seldom looked like they had just stepped out of a modern flat only a few hours earlier. Billy was apprehensive about that at first, thinking that it was seldom good to stand out among strangers, but the two travelers were immediately greeted as visiting royalty, and when Billy explained in his strangely accented Aramaic that they had come from a far, far land to visit Jesus, they all nodded knowingly.

“His influence spreads like the wind,” said one of the men in the crowd. “Come. I can take you to him.”

They set off through town, dragging a train of curious onlookers behind them. Their guide kept up a constant barrage of questions about their homeland and their travels, eager for news of the world beyond his own, and Billy was hard pressed to portray a consistent story that didn’t make them sound like lunatics. His Aramaic was stretched to the limit, and William’s was even worse. The physicist had to make do with Latin, which the locals seemed less than pleased to hear.



They found Jesus in an inn, drinking wine with a couple dozen other patrons and playing some kind of game that involved tossing little beanbags about the size of golf balls into a mug on a high shelf across the room. He looked nothing like the paintings in Billy's church. He was short and dark skinned and bearded, with dark curly hair that was cut short enough to expose his earlobes, rather than the long, luxurious locks so often depicted in bibles. To Billy's Anglo-Saxon eye, he looked, in fact, like practically every other man in the room, and some of the women.

When he had been pointed out, Billy knelt before him and said haltingly, "Lord, we have come from afar to hear your wisdom and offer you our devotion."

"Lord?" Jesus said, a bit taken aback. "Don't say that in front of the Romans or I'll be in serious trouble."

"My apologies, Lo—my apologies," Billy said. "I have no wish to hasten your martyrdom."

"Me either," Jesus exclaimed, to much laughter. "Come now, this kneeling isn't necessary. Rise and share a cup of wine with us and tell us of your travels."

"We would be honored," said Billy.

It didn't take long to grow comfortable in the savior's presence. The man had charisma, that was certain. He knew how to get people talking about themselves, and he would listen intently, as if they were the most important person in the room. Billy found himself revealing much more than he had intended, stopping only at the news that he and William were from the future.

"You have built churches to spread my teachings?" Jesus asked, incredulous.

"We have," Billy admitted. "I'm the leader of one. That's why I've come here: to learn from you directly."

"And you?" Jesus asked William. "What is your purpose in coming all this way?"

"I came to see if you really existed," said William in Latin.

Far from being offended, Jesus laughed. Also in Latin, he said, "I appreciate your honesty. And what do you think? Do I exist?"

William nodded. "The man, certainly. The son of God? I don't have enough data to make that judgment yet."

"Nor do I," said Jesus.

Billy nearly choked on his wine. "What? What about the loaves and the fishes? What about the sermon on the mount? And you raised Lazarus from the dead!"

Jesus shook his head. "I don't remember raising anyone from the dead. Simon and Andrew and I had a good day with a net during the famine several years ago, and I've preached my share of sermons, but the tales seem to grow in the telling."

"But ... you ... I..." Billy spluttered, unable to bring himself to argue with Jesus's depiction of his own life, but unable to quite believe what he was hearing, either.

The conversation went on like that for some time, with Jesus showing amusement and occasional irritation at how his reputation was getting out of hand. "I'm tempted to change my message," he said at one point, "just to see if anybody's actually listening anymore."

"You couldn't!" Billy said, aghast.

"I could. There are dozens of ways to improve people's lives. That's all I'm trying to do: help people to see that their existence doesn't have to be all drudgery and despair."

William gave him an appraising look, then said, "You should try science."

"Spoken like a Roman," said Jesus.

"Spoken like a humanist," William replied. "Science packaged with your message of love and compassion could transform the world two thousand years early. We could have an age of reason and an age of enlightenment simultaneously. Humanity could escape the cycle of religious fanaticism that has kept us fighting like cats and dogs for millennia."

Billy could hold his tongue no longer. "Who are you to preach to the

Lord of Creation? Still your blaspheming tongue before I still it for you!”

“Ah, yes, threats of violence for espousing rational thought,” said William. “I rest my case.”

“Come now,” said Jesus. “You surely didn’t travel all this way just to continue an old argument. Have more wine and see if you can get one of these in that cup over there.” He held up one of the beanbags he had been about to toss when they had arrived.

\* \* \* \*

The party lasted well into the night. Billy was surprised to find himself less sure about Jesus as the night progressed. The man was wise beyond his years, certainly, and he commanded the respect of everyone in the inn, but that’s as far as he took it. He downplayed any mention of his divinity, deflecting it into a discussion of the divinity of everyone, and he spoke mostly about practical matters like usury and making sure there was food and housing enough for everyone. At one point he began talking with William about footwear, of all things, asking to see his sandals and pressing him for details on how they were made. William launched into a discussion of how rubber was vulcanized, which morphed into a discussion of science in general, ending with a description of the scientific method of investigation. “That’s what you need to incorporate into your message,” he said. “Science. Rational thinking.”

Jesus took it all in like a sponge, but when William had run down, he said, “You should have gone to Rome rather than here. The Romans already believe as you do.”

“Hah,” William said. “They worship gods even crazier than yours. No offense.”

“None taken,” said Jesus, holding up his hand to forestall Billy’s almost instinctive response.

“Rome is on the way out anyway,” said William.

Jesus expressed his doubt of that with a raised eyebrow.

“It’s true. Not in your lifetime, but its influence will pass. Science will die out for nearly two millennia. Believe it or not, Italy will become the center of the religion based on *your* message, not theirs, and it’ll get to the point where they’ll imprison Galileo for figuring out the motion of the planets.

Islam will pick up the slack for a century or two, but it'll eventually turn its back on science as well."

"Clearly my traveling companion has drunk too much wine," Billy interrupted.

"Clearly, what Jesus here needs to do," William powered through, "is combine his message with Rome's from the start. Like I said earlier, if you incorporate science into Christianity rather than exclude it, you could have the best of both worlds. You could start the age of reason two thousand years early, and we could avoid all the wars over whose god is stronger and meaner than everybody else's."

"Science," Jesus said.

"Science," William said.

"It's time to go," Billy said, rising from the table.

Jesus wasn't done, though. He and William talked deep into the night, long after the others had drifted off to bed. Billy stayed to defend the faith, but it was clear that Jesus was more interested in William's practical advice and knowledge than in Billy's memory of scripture and dogma. Billy found himself on the fringes of the conversation, tolerated but no longer included, and he even drifted off at one point, only to wake with a start when he heard Jesus say, "Yes, this scientific method sounds very much like something I've been thinking all along, but couldn't put into words. Investigate, *then* explain. It makes so much more sense that way."

At last, when the sun began peeking through the windows, Jesus finally yawned and said, "Well, this has been fascinating, but I've got a temple to raid today, and you two need some sleep. Will I see you again?"

"Probably not," Billy said quickly. "We were just passing through."

"Well, then," said Jesus, "I'm glad we met when we did. I wish you well in your travels." With that he got up and tottered off into the back of the inn.

Billy was in no better shape, but he pulled William to his feet and the two of them staggered out into the dawn. Only a few people were out this early, and those seemed unsurprised to see two men weaving up the street from the inn.

“What were you thinking?” Billy demanded as he dragged his companion out of town. “Lecturing the son of God about science. You—”

Then it hit him. “You planned this all along, didn’t you?”

William shook his head. “Not quite. My plan was to get you close to Jesus so you could come to know him as a person. I figured if you did that, there was no way you would let him die on the cross. You would rescue him, and he would go on to the scandal and obscurity that all religious leaders eventually run afoul of.” He turned to Billy, still walking, and said, “I figured Christianity wouldn’t last a decade after his death if he got a chance to mess it up before he died. But when we got here, I realized I liked the guy. He’s a decent sort, and he’s intelligent, and his heart is in the right place. It’s all the people who came after him who screwed things up. And he asked the right questions. So I decided to try a different approach.”

Billy had to will himself to unclench his fists. “Your—your *arrogance* is beyond comprehension.”

William nodded. “I’m sure it is. So is yours, to me. But maybe if the seeds I sewed tonight take root, we’ll return to a world where science and religion spring from the same well. Where the answers to the deep philosophical questions are provisional answers, subject to change when more data comes along.”

“The nature of God is not a provisional answer,” Billy stated flatly.

“We’ll see about that,” said William. “I guess that’s the core of this little experiment, isn’t it?”

Billy couldn’t find the voice to answer. The two of them trudged out of town toward their hidden time machine. When they reached it, they dug it out of the sand and unwrapped its plastic shroud, then dragged it back to a spot about four feet away from where they had arrived. “That should give us plenty of room to reappear in,” William said. He gestured for Billy to step inside the cage.

Billy turned and looked back at the city of Jerusalem. The morning breeze off the Mediterranean was blowing the smoke from the night’s heating fires away, as if the hand of God were removing a lid of darkness from the town.

“Dear Lord,” he said softly, “may some good come of this, somewhere, somehow.”

Then he entered the cage and stood there while William set up the jump. He watched William push the button, expecting the walls of the flat they had rented to blink into being around him, but instead, the desert around him merely sprouted greenery. He was standing in the midst of a lush forest, with sunlight filtering down through its canopy and birds singing merrily in its branches.

William was already standing before him. "We seem to have made a difference," the scientist said quietly.

Billy's heart was pounding hard enough to make him fear for his life, but he managed to steady his voice enough to say, "So we have." He turned once around, but he could see no sign of people anywhere. That meant practically nothing, since the forest was so thick it would have hidden a skyscraper a hundred yards away, but the stillness spooked him. Had humanity killed itself off in some titanic war a few centuries after Jesus established the doctrine of scientific revelation? Or had it learned how to live in harmony with nature, and he was now standing in the heart of a thriving metropolis?

There was only one way to find out. Billy held out his hand to his traveling companion. "Let's go see what kind of world our savior has created."