

BORN TO FAIL

“Look at her? She can’t be more than 15 years old, and pregnant. What’s wrong with young people today? Where are their morals? Where are their parents?”

“How long have they been married? I know it hasn’t been more than nine months.”

“I heard the baby isn’t his. I bet she doesn’t know who the father is.”

“I always knew she was that kind of girl.

“Did you hear she is trying to convince people she is still a virgin? How outrageous! Does she take us for fools? She must be crazy. She says the father is God.”

“I bet her parents are devastated. This is the last thing Joachin and Anne¹ need.

“If she were my daughter I would disown her. In past generations, she would have been stoned.”

Mary heard the whispers, felt the stares, as she mingled with her neighbors. No matter how far she traveled, she would never escape the rumors. Even now, 65 miles from home, riding on a donkey on her way to Bethlehem, 9-months pregnant, she could feel the sting of shame rising within her. It hurt her to know people did not believe her. It hurt her to think she had disappointed her mom and dad.

Joseph wished she could stay home. Since the Jewish custom was to trace heritage through the mother, the census required Mary to travel with Joseph to their

¹ The Bible does not give the name of Mary’s parents. However, according to the *Gospel of James* (a 2nd century Jewish-Christian work) their names were Joachin and Anne. The *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (an 8th century Latin copycat of the *Gospel of James*) also mention their names as Joachin and Anne.

ancestral home. Mary didn't mind, she desperately wanted to get away from her village. Who could blame her? But for some reason the Roman Government wanted to take another census. Joseph knew a tax increase would soon follow, it always did.

Mary tried to remember the words the angel said to her on the night she found out she would soon be carrying a baby, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High...The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."² Holding on to the angel's promise was the only thing that kept her from believing the lies of others.

How much farther? she thought. *It's getting late and I can't take much more. Where will we stay when we arrive?* Worry was wearing on Mary. She grimaced as the baby moved—or was that another contraction? Any time now, she could deliver, and the donkey ride only aggravated the situation. "Please don't let the baby come tonight," she prayed.

Joseph was hurrying, but the days had been long since they left home and he was feeling the pain of exhaustion. None of his friends understood why he went through with the marriage. "How can you marry such a tramp?" they asked. "There is no way I could marry a girl who was pregnant by someone else."

"Get rid of her."

"Turn her over to the religious leaders for punishment."

"You are too young to waste your life on her. There are plenty other girls to marry."

² Luke 1:30-32.

Joseph knew they would never understand; he, himself, didn't understand everything, but he held tightly to the words of the angel: "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."³ He knew the angel was real, knew the prophecy was true.

He knew he loved Mary. And knowing these things he knew what he had to do.

As Joseph walked in front, leading the donkey, he heard Mary grimace. Looking back he asked, "Are you all right my precious wife? Hang on. We are almost there. Just a little farther. Look! I can see the lights of the city." He hoped his voice would comfort Mary, and admitted he was also trying too soothe his own frazzled mind.

Why another census?⁴ Why now? Will we be able to find a room for the night. Do I have enough money. I hope I still have a job when I get back to Nazareth. I can't believe this is happening. "O, God," he prayed, "Please don't let Mary deliver while we are away from home."

Tired and despondent, Joseph kept these thoughts to himself, and continued walking toward the unknown, trusting in an unseen God, even as human doubts plagued him. What else was he to do?

Everyone has obstacles to overcome. No one chooses the time, place, and manner of their birth; and no one chooses their parents. From the very beginning Jesus had every strike against Him. He was conceived out of wedlock to a poor teenage mother who others must have thought delusional, claiming to be a virgin while pregnant.

³ Matthew 1:20-21.

⁴ There is historical evidence that Roman governing officials took census (mainly local, and sometimes targeted at certain groups) on a regular basis. A purely Roman census would not have required adults to travel to their ancestral homes, suggesting that this particular sentence was targeted to the Jews, probably to increase their tax burden.

He would always be Joseph's step-son, never knowing what it was like to have a human, biological dad. He lived on the wrong side of the tracks.

Nazareth was a farming community, a small town on the backside of nowhere. The people from Nazareth were the butt of ethnic jokes from both Jews and Gentiles who lived in the surrounding area. It was a town known for its wickedness and despised by the Jews. Nothing, and no one, good could possibly be from Nazareth!

Jesus spent his infancy as a refugee, fleeing from a king who wanted Him murdered. When He was 12, His family went to the Temple, but they were too poor to afford the customary sacrificial lamb. Instead, Mary and Joseph offered a pair of doves and two young pigeons. Jesus' earthly step-father, Joseph, died when Jesus was a teenager, making Him the man of the house; placing on Him the responsibility of providing for His mother and brother and sisters.

If the life of Jesus teaches anything, it teaches that your family's dysfunction, or poverty, or low status, or wealth, or fame, does not determine your life's destiny. God uses unusual circumstances to bring about His ultimate plan. Any curse can be reversed. Somehow, and in some way, Christ's birth to a peasant girl, in a Bethlehem barn occurred exactly as God intended. Jesus was no accident, and neither were you. There may be accidental parents, but there has never been an accidental birth. God knew you before you were conceived, and He knows what you need to succeed in life.

Trula was born on June 7, 1924, at the foot of Camp Creek Bald, in the shadow of the Smoky Mountains of east Tennessee. Her family was poor before the Great Depression; during the Great Depression they were despondent. When Trula was 3

years old, her mother died of tuberculosis. Unable to care for her, Trula's father gave her to his sister. Her childhood resembled the bad part of the Cinderella's story.

As a young teenager, Trula's uncle informed her she would have to quit school to care for the children and take over more of the housework. Determined to continue her education, Trula gathered her things in secret, and left her aunt and uncle's home. At 15 years of age, Trula moved into an orphanage in Greenville, Tennessee.

Born during the depression, poor and parentless, Trula Cronk seemingly had slim chance to live a good life. But she overcame tremendous odds! Trula graduated from high school and then college. In college she met her soul mate, Dan. The two of them answered the call to missions, and served 25 years in India, sharing the gospel, starting churches, and building orphanages.⁵

It would have been easy for Trula to believe she was an accident, to believe her life was a waste of time. Instead, she chose to believe her life was an adventure. Trula lived in the Himalayas. She watched the sunrise on Mount Everest; traveled down the Nile at midnight, and sailed the Mediterranean from end to end. She rode across the Sahara Desert by taxi and watched as her son climbed the Leaning Tower of Pisa. She shared her experiences in the Bangladesh freedom struggle with Mother Teresa and met ambassadors and dignitaries from all over the world.

In her autobiography she wrote, "I believe that I was created to be Christian and that the Christian way is written into the very structure of my being. The moral universe is not something we have created but something we have discovered from observation and revelation. It always was. When I live according to God's design for me, life glows.

⁵ Trula Cronk's story is based on her autobiography, *Over Mountain or Plain or Sea*. (2003. Randall House Publications. Nashville, TN.) In October of 1984, the orphanage in Greenville, Tennessee was renamed the Trula Gunter Cronk Home for Children.

When I live some other way, it stinks...The starting point for experiencing a full and abundant life is in the statement 'God loves me.' I didn't always believe that, but now I know that it is true. It does not mean that He approves of everything I do, or that He admires my character. Nevertheless He loves me. He loves what He has made and He is always waiting for me to turn to Him for help in finishing what He began; that is, to make each of us into a happy and fruitful person who reflects well on His good name."⁶

No matter your past, or present, you were not an accident; God has a plan for your life. David wrote, "I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in Your book before one of them came to be."⁷

Amazing! God has your life planned from beginning to end. He loves you and wants what is best for you. You may have thought you were a mistake, your dad may have said you would not amount to anything. Your mom may have deserted you; and you may have been labeled a "troublemaker" by teachers at school. But none of that matters. God knows you, and He can turn your dysfunction into destiny, your abuse into abundance. If you were blessed with a happy childhood, He can bring you into an even more glorious adulthood.

Why should I believe I was not an accident and God has a plan for my life? I can believe it because God is sovereign. He knows my past history, as well as my future

⁶ Trula Cronk (pp. 212 and 216).

⁷ Psalm 139:14-16.

destiny. God has never said, “Wupps, that’s not what I meant to happen”; “I never saw that coming.” Those types of thoughts never enter His mind.

God is in control when things are comfortable. God is in control when things are chaotic. God knows all, sees all, and is in all. The Bible says, “For by Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”⁸

Because God is sovereign, He can reverse any curse. He can bring good out of any situation, including yours.

My wife and I planted a small garden in the back-yard of our first home. We planted corn, tomatoes, lettuce, cucumbers, squash, and okra. It was fun to walk outside in the summer evening and pick a fresh salad, but after one year we decided going to the grocery store was not such a bad idea after all. It was a struggle to keep things alive, except in the back, right hand corner. In that spot of the garden the soil was dark and rich. Things grew better and bigger there than anywhere else.

Why? What was so special about the back, right hand corner? It was special because the previous home owners had a dog pen in that section of the yard. The back right hand corner was the place the dogs deposited waste on a daily bases for years and years, and it was their daily deposits, over time, that made the ground fertile for growth.

The world may say, “Same sh...different day”; but what the world calls dung, God calls fertilizer. God turns trials into triumphs, defeats into victories, sadness into joy, and dysfunctions into destiny. He specializes in using the useless, loving the loveless,

⁸ Colossians 1:16-17.

turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. If the situation you are presently in drives you to your knees and causes you to turn to Him, trusting Him more; guess what? God has you right where He wants you.

The darkest time in American history was the acceptance of slavery in our culture. Unfortunately, the Bible was used by some to support this inhumane practice. From the 1520s to the 1860s an estimated 27,500 slave voyages took place, carrying 11 to 12 million African men, women, and children from their African homeland to the Americas. About 9 million actually survived the Atlantic crossing. Phillis Wheatley was one of those survivors. What possible good could come from a young slave girl? What chance did she have to live a successful life?

Born in Gambia, West Africa in 1753, Phillis Wheatley⁹ was stolen from her parents at age 7. Taken by force from her village, she was led to the coast and confined in a fort originally built during the gold trade between African and European elites. From the confines of the fort she waited for her nightmarish journey to America. Phillis would be lucky to live through the journey. Her ship docked in Boston in 1761, and she was sold at an auction to a tailor named John Wheatley, to be a personal servant to his wife, Susannah.

Phillis was frail and asthmatic, but she displayed a ready intelligence, learning English quickly. By the age of 12 she was reading the Greek and Latin classics, and passages from the Bible. At 13 she wrote her first poem.¹⁰ She became a sensation in 1770 after she wrote a poem on the death of the English evangelist, George Whitefield. But because she was black, no American publisher would publish her. Three years

⁹ "Phillis Wheatley" was the name given to this young slave girl by her American owners. I was unable to find what her African name was.

¹⁰ <http://earlyamerica.com/review/winter96/wheatley.html>

later, Phillis traveled to London, where 39 of her poems were published by Arch Bell, Aldgate, as “Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral.” Her book had to be prefaced by testimonies to its authenticity from her master and 16 of Boston’s most respected citizens. Her book was the first book to be published by a black American, man or woman.

Upon returning to America, Phillis was given her freedom. Writing as a free woman she published an antislavery letter and a poem to George Washington, whom she had met. Washington praised Phillis for her “great poetical talents.”¹¹ Within 5 years of her return from England, both Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley passed away, leaving Phillis to struggle to support herself as a poet and seamstress. She married John Peters, an African American, in 1778, but the burdens of racism proved too much for them and their 3 children. In an act of desperation, John Peters put Phillis and the children into a negro boarding house where foul conditions resulted in the children’s death and a drastic decline in Phillis’ health.¹²

Phillis, however, never gave up. In 1784, several poems celebrating the end of the Revolution and “To Mr. and Mrs.---, on the death of Their Infant Son,” were published under the name Phillis Peters. Despite her obvious literary skills, Phillis was never able to support her family from her writings, and died in complete poverty on December 5, 1784.

However, the story doesn’t end there. Subsequent generations of African American writers picked up where she left off. Her life was an inspiring example of faith and perseverance. In the 1830s, abolitionists reprinted her poetry and the powerful

¹¹ <http://www.topicsites.com/phillis-wheatley/phillis-wheatley-biography.htm>

¹² <http://voices.cla.umn.edu/newsite/authors/WHEATLEYphillis.htm>

ideas contained in her deeply moving verse stood against the institution of slavery.¹³

Another theme, throughout all her poetry, was the salvation message of Christianity—that all men and women, regardless of race or class, are in need of salvation.

During a time in history were many people considered people of color as subhuman, incapable of intellectual captivity, how did Phillis Wheatley achieve so much? Her story reminds me of a line from the movie, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, “Let the past be part of who you are, but don’t let it dictate who you will become.”

Phillis Wheatley never let her past hold her back from a brighter future, nor did she downplay from whence she’d come. She succeeded because she allowed God to reverse her curse. She viewed everything that happened to her as being part of God’s plan. She trusted in the sovereignty of God, and held on to the truth of Romans 8:28, which reads, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” In one of her more familiar poems, titled “On Being Brought From Africa to America”,¹⁴ Phillis Wheatley wrote...

*’Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my beknighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Savior too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
“Their color is a diabolical dye.”
Remember Christians; Negroes, black as Cain,*

¹³ http://www.forerunner.com/forerunner/X0214_Phillis_Wheatley.html

¹⁴ <http://earlyamerica.com/review/winter96/wheatley.html>

May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train.

Your heavenly Father knows what He is doing. He has not forgotten you, and neither has He forsaken you. God desires to use you, and your circumstances, to bring Him honor and glory. He can take your background and use it to build something beautiful in your life. He can take your battle scars and bring about blessing.

- Discussion Questions

1. Why do people allow their family's heritage—good, bad, and ugly—to determine their future destiny?
2. What were the advantages of Jesus being born the way He was, and in the circumstances surrounding His birth? What were the disadvantages?
3. Have you ever thought you were an accident? Why did you think that way? How did you overcome that thinking, or do you still struggle with the idea that you are an accident?
4. How do you reconcile God's sovereignty, your free will, and all the negative things you have experienced in life?
5. What do you feel is God's plan for your life?