

## **THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS**

(Various Scriptures)

Can you imagine growing up Jewish in Germany during the 1930s and 1940s? What must it have felt like to be required to wear a yellow Star of David on your clothes, setting you apart from non-Jews? Can you see the pain on your father's face after being forced to register his business, and then later being forced to surrender that business to non-Jews. Can you imagine what it must have been like to live everyday in fear that the police might burst into your home, arrest you, or members of your family, taking them away to labor camps, never to be seen again?

I can't imagine such horror. I can't even imagine what it is like to live in a community where you are treated like a second class citizen, or looked down upon because of your race, or religious background; but with the help of movies like *Schiendler's List*, I get some idea. I can't comprehend such injustices, but to this day, many in our country can imagine, and many still feel prejudice and discrimination.

Jesus can imagine how they felt because He lived through similar conditions. Jesus did not have the background culturally, educationally, racially, nationally, or economically, to be noticed. He did not have the credentials to make a difference in the world, and yet He made a bigger difference than anyone in history.

And so can you! God redeems your past. He uses the weak things of the world to startle and amaze the so-called wise and qualified. Your lack gives God more opportunity to shine, and allow others to marvel at what God can do. Your upbringing doesn't have to be your downfall. Your background can be your biggest blessing.

## Skeletons in the Closet

A quick glance at Jesus' family tree seems impressive. His roots go all the way back to Abraham through King David.<sup>1</sup> Upon closer inspection, however, you find skeletons in His closet. Three out of the four women mentioned were not even Jewish. Tamar<sup>2</sup> pretended to be a prostitute, Rahab<sup>3</sup> actually was a prostitute, and Bathsheba<sup>4</sup> was the object of the most famous scandal in the Old Testament. It was because of His questionable ancestry that many Jews rejected Him. "These shady ancestors show that Jesus entered human history in the raw, a willing descendant of its shame. In contrast, Herod the Great, reigning king at Jesus' birth, had his genealogical records destroyed out of vanity because He wanted no one to compare his background with others."<sup>5</sup>

Not only was His family tree questionable, Jesus was born into a hostile environment. Palestine<sup>6</sup> stood in opposition to, and constant conflict with, Rome. Alexander the Great tried to bring the whole world under one language, one culture, and one way of thinking.<sup>7</sup> By the time of Jesus' birth, people everywhere dressed like the Greeks, built like the Greeks, played like the Greeks, and spoke like the Greeks. The only exception was in Palestine...Jesus' homeland.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 1:3

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:5

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 1:6

<sup>5</sup> Philip Yancey. 1995. *The Jesus I Never Knew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 50-51.

<sup>6</sup> It is a common mistake to confuse Palestine, Galilee, and Nazareth. Think of the three in terms of largest to smallest. "Palestine" refers to the entire land of Israel. "Galilee" refers to the northern province of Palestine. (Palestine consists of three provinces: Galilee, Samaria, and Judea.) "Nazareth" was a small town in the province of Galilee, in the land of Palestine.

<sup>7</sup> Sometime between 334-331 B.C., Alexander the Great defeated Persia and took control of the Roman Empire. Alexander permitted the Jews to observe their religion, and even gave them a measure of tax freedom, but he sought to bring them under Greek culture, known as *Hellenism*.

Israel remained under Greek control from the time of Alexander the Great till 63 B.C. Between 63 and 37 B.C., more than 150,000 Palestinians were killed in revolutionary uprisings. In 31 B.C., an earthquake rocked the area, killing 30,000 people. The Jews called such events “pangs of the Messiah,”<sup>8</sup> and prayed for God to do something, anything. Things settled down during the time of Herod the Great, but Palestine was still an explosive, inflammable place to live.<sup>9</sup> The whole area had a reputation as a breeding ground for revolutionaries. The most hostile of the three provinces in Palestine was Galilee. Like today in the Middle East, Palestine was a hotbed of revolts and threats of revolts.

People from Galilee were despised by their Jewish brothers and sisters who lived in the south. After the conquest by Tiglath-Pileser, king of Assyria, in 732 B.C., Galilee was repopulated by a colony of heathen immigrants, intermarrying with the Jews. By Jesus’ day, most Galileans were of mixed race, and the “pure” Jews in Jerusalem struggled with accepting them. On one occasion, Teachers of the Law rejected Jesus, saying, “Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”<sup>10</sup> Galileans had a distinct accent and dialect and were the butt of ethnic jokes.<sup>11</sup> After the death of Herod Agrippa I, Galilee became a zealot stronghold until the Romans smashed Jewish resistance throughout Palestine sometime between 70 and 73 A.D.

The rest of the Roman world looked down upon this small strip of land and its inhabitants. Within Palestine, the province of Galilee was most despised. Within

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<sup>8</sup> Philip Yancey. 1995, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Philip Yancey. 1995, 57.

<sup>10</sup> John 7:52

<sup>11</sup> Peter was from Galilee, and it was his accent that gave him away. The Bible says, “Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. ‘You also were with Jesus of Galilee,’ she said...After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, ‘Surely you are one of them, for your accent gives you away’” (Matthew 26:69 and 73).

Galilee, the worst town by reputation was Nazareth, Jesus' childhood home. Nazareth was located in lower Galilee, 1,300 feet above sea level, in the southernmost hills of the Lebanon Mountain range. Nazareth was a small town on the backside of nowhere, known for its wickedness. Close to Nazareth was a large military headquarters set up by the Romans, and so the town had all the vices of a military town. Nazarenes were hated by the Jews, and only occasionally were Nazarenes allowed to attend the services and ceremonies of the Temple in Jerusalem. No wonder Nathanael doubted who Jesus was, saying, "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"<sup>12</sup>

Jesus, and His family, was poor. Joseph worked hard as a carpenter, but he never reached above the "working poor" of the area. Because He grew up in poverty Jesus could relate to the poor around Him, but His background was a stumbling block for the wealthy. Jesus was born poor, lived poor, and died poor, buried in a borrowed tomb. He was the last person anyone would expect to amount to anything.

For a number of years I have taught Sociology at a local community college in Nashville, Tennessee. One of my favorite topics to discuss each semester is "Social Stratification," the system by which society ranks people in a hierarchy. Whether we like it or not, we are taught to judge people by certain conditions that society values as good and bad, better or worse. In extreme situations, societies develop a "caste system" where people are born into a category where they must remain their whole lives. In more democratic societies a "class system" develops where people are ranked by both birth and individual achievement. In theory, a "class system" is an "open system," meaning individuals can better themselves and move up the stratification

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<sup>12</sup> John 1:46

scale. It is also possible, within an open system to move down the scale as well. But in reality, most people live and die in the class in which they were born.

Have you ever wondered why the top floor of a high rise building is called the “penthouse?” While in college, working as a security guard at a high rise condominium complex, I learned why. Everyone who lived in this complex were millionaires. But being a millionaire only carries so much prestige. The high rise, itself, was a measuring stick. The higher up a person lived, the richer they were, and the more prestigious their position. Thus, the person on top was the “top dog.” Living in the penthouse was a big deal, and the people took this ranking seriously.

One family had a town home within the high rise that took up two floors. Their main entrance was on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, but on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor was a door best described as a “back” door, or “side” door. The only thing on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor was their bedrooms. Their living areas and kitchen were on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. (The reason I know this is because on several occasions I had to go into their apartment to make sure things like the stove had burn turned off when they were out of town, or let workman in during the day to work on their townhouse.)

Without fail, when this family got on the elevator by themselves, or with people who lived below them, they would get off on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. But if they got on the elevator with someone who lived above them, they would get off on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. On one occasion I saw the wife get on the elevator with several bags of groceries. As the elevator door was closing, a person got on who lived above her. And guess what? Even though her kitchen was on the 8<sup>th</sup> floor, she got off on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor! I laughed at

the thought of her carrying her groceries into her bedroom, just to impress someone else.

Jesus lived on the bottom floor. Yet He rose higher than anyone else in history. Paul wrote, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”<sup>13</sup>

I am so glad God doesn't rank us according to anything else but our faith in His Son. *God redeems our past (using it as a tool) so we can succeed in truly significant, eternal ways. God uses the weak things of the world to startle and amaze the so-called wise and qualified.*

What condition are you in? Where does society rank you? Does it seem like the whole world is against you? Do you feel like a doormat? Have you been told you will never amount to anything because of your past? Have you given up because you don't have the education, background, money, or family to “succeed”? Don't give up. God wants to use you. From God's perspective there is no right side or wrong side of the tracks. How do I know?

I know because God loves to use the ordinary to do the extraordinary. God used an ordinary shrub to convince an ordinary man (like Moses) to take his ordinary life and

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<sup>13</sup> Philippians 2:5-11

ordinary training, to go and deliver His people from slavery in an extraordinary way. God took an ordinary boy, with an ordinary sling and five ordinary rocks to bring down a not-so-ordinary giant. He took an ordinary teenage girl, born in an ordinary village, and chose her to be the extraordinary mother of Jesus. Then, God turned everything upside down by choosing to take His extraordinary Son and send Him to the most ordinary village to live an ordinary life so He could redeem us in a most extraordinary way.

Why does God enjoy using the ordinary to do the extraordinary? He enjoys it because He loves to use things (and people) that are weak to show His strength. God said, "My power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>14</sup>

God chooses the most unusual people. Jacob, was the younger brother of Esau, yet, God chose Jacob over Esau. Joseph was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, and falsely accused of sexual misconduct, yet he was chosen by God to lead Egypt through a horrible famine. There was nothing worth noting in any of the original Twelve disciples, each one was ordinarily ordinary. Even the great Apostle Paul said he was the chief of all sinners.<sup>15</sup>

God loves to use people who seem to be weak to show the world His power so there will be no doubt to His strength. This is great news because most of us are ordinary. Most of us will live our lives in anonymity. Very few people are known by anyone except their family and friends. But God knows who we are. He knows everything about us. And He wants to use us, in our weakness, to show the world His strength.

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<sup>14</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>15</sup> 1 Timothy 1:15

God loves to use the simple things in life to astound the wise. The Bible says, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom...But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise...He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are”<sup>16</sup>

One day, in a philosophy class I was teaching, the discussion turned to evolution and humanism, and how each have failed to answer the big questions in life. Questions like: *What is the meaning of life? Why am I here?*

The basic thrust behind humanism, and evolution, is that “man is the measure of all things”<sup>17</sup>; and that as man evolves things should progress and the world should get better and better. While this sounds good in theory, it is obvious from observation that the world is not getting better and better. Evolution is not working. Humanism is not solving mankind’s problems.

I went on to explain that information doubles every five years (some say every eighteen months), when it used to take generations, and sometimes even centuries, to double. We live in the most advanced technological time in human history. There seems to be an arrogance that we can accomplish whatever we put our minds to. Yet, in spite of all our wisdom and intelligence, we don’t understand how the ancient Egyptians built the pyramids; we don’t know how a bubble-bee flies; and even though the space shuttle takes off on a regular basis, if the weather is not perfect, it’s nothing more than an oversized paperweight. Furthermore, world hunger is still a problem. There are more incurable diseases than ever before. Crime is at an all time high, and

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<sup>16</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:25-28

<sup>17</sup> The philosopher, Protagoras of Abdera (490-420 B.C.) is said to have been the one to make the assertion, “man is the measure of all things.”

there are more wars now than at any time in history. We are not as great as we claim to be.

David was in my class that evening. After class he hung around, wanting to talk to me. We went to the local Starbucks for a cup of coffee and talked well into the night. David was older than the average college student and this was his second attempt at getting a degree. His first attempt ended with a stint in the military.

David told me how he had grown up in a Christian home, going to church every Sunday. While in college the first time, he lost his faith. He said the person who most influenced him to reject Christianity was his philosophy professor. He had never thought about things the way I approached them. He had been led to believe Christianity was a failure, without seriously considering the miserable failure of life without God. That night's discussion opened his eyes to the inadequacies of humanism and evolution and restored his faith in God and Christianity. That night, with the smell of coffee in the air, David recommitted himself to Christ.

What happened? Something clicked inside him, and he realized how the simple things in life astound the wise.

God also loves to use our past to show His mercy. After a laundry list of unthinkable sins, the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth, saying, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God."<sup>18</sup>

Joel was a millionaire by the time he was 35 years old, making his money playing the stock market. Everything he touched turned to gold. He had everything he ever wanted. But Joel was also a drug addict and alcoholic. He told me that he was at his

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<sup>18</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:11

best when he had Vodka for breakfast, marijuana for lunch, and cocaine as an afternoon snack. This went on for years, and no one at work knew about it. His wife knew, and prayed continuously for him. God got his attention through the birth of his daughter.

One night, while stoned, he looked into the eyes of his little girl, and knew he had to change. He prayed for help, got counseling, started attending AA meetings, and found a church that loved him to Jesus. Fifteen years later he is still sober, and now his passion is giving to various ministries, and helping people get out of debt so they can invest in the kingdom of God. Everyday, he is reminded of his past, not in a guilty way, but in a thankful way. Thankful for the mercy of God.

## **CONCLUSION**

From society's point of view, Jesus was born on the wrong side of the tracks. But he beats the odds. He overcame all obstacles. He proved everyone wrong. And He wants you to be like Him. God doesn't care where you lived as a child, or where you live now. God doesn't think a degree from one university is better than a degree from another, or that a college degree is better than no college degree. He doesn't rank us, and so there is no need to feel the need to impress Him. God loves to use people that society has written off. He loves to take the ordinary and do something extraordinary. God wants to redeem your past so He can use you in truly significant, eternal ways. He wants to use your weakness to startle and amaze the so-called wise and qualified.