

## A Journey from Hopelessness to Life in Jesus

By Rev. Edward J. Balfour

I was born into orthodox Judaism 52 years ago in New Orleans, La. Until the time of my bar-mitzvah, my youth was spent attending public school and communal Hebrew school. As a Jewish child attending public school, I quickly learned that I was different. I remember being placed in special classes. Classes that my parents said were "better suited for the talents and intellects of Jews." As a result, we, who were set apart, studied together, ate together and played together. But many times we wished we were not set apart ... we wanted to be part of *those* who had set us apart.

In public school I learned to read, write, add and subtract, and to not pay attention to those who shunned me because of my *Jewishness*. In Hebrew school, I studied my portion of Torah and the proper portion of *The Five Books of Moses* which I would read when I became a man in the eyes of God. I learned many things about becoming a man in Hebrew school. I learned that I did not have to forgive the *goyim* who hated me because as a Jew I had been chosen by God. I was not only set apart ... I was special in God's eyes.

We were God's *chosen people*. Chosen by God to be recipients of His commandments. Chosen to be His blessing on earth. Chosen to forgive other Jews and to tolerate the Gentiles' ignorance toward us. So what if the neighbor kids shouted at me and the other Jewish children, "Christ killer! Christ killer! You Jews killed Jesus Christ!" Their epitaphs were the death warrants of empty souls. They couldn't hurt us from the environs of *Scheol*. God knew that Gentiles were lawless people who would die without conscious or soul.

As practicing Jews, we kept kosher and attended synagogue three times a year on Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). As a child, I remember going to synagogue on Yom Kippur with my grandfather. I remember the sacrifices we made that day hoping that God would notice that we went without food or water from sundown to sundown. I remember being afraid that God would not accept my apologies to others, and therefore would reject mine to Him. I recall crying and then whispering to my grandfather, "He'll know that I am lying. I wasn't good and I couldn't do it and I still can't. He's not going to write my name in the Book ever! I'm afraid, but I'm not sorry."

The ten days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are days of reconciliation for Jews. These are days to make amends for the offenses that you precipitated. On these days Jews are to seek forgiveness from those Jews they have offended before God considers giving an ear to them. This brings an urgency in every Jew's heart that they must make amends now, this year, before they die.

I'll always remember my mother's calls to those relations that she had not spoken to the rest of the year. She would call and wish them good fortune in the new year and all of God's blessings. Then she would hang up the phone, turn to my father, and say, "They

should only drop dead. That's what they wish for me. God will understand. They're not really good Jews. I hear that somewhere along the line there was an intermarriage."

The journey from the hopelessness of Judaism (a hope based on self-worth) to Christianity (a life based on Jesus' worth) ended when I turned 20 and was baptized. Looking back, I believe now that my entire life was an apprenticeship to becoming one of God's called under-shepherds of His Christ. God knew that my time spent among those who chose to deny Him would not be without pain, but He also knew what was necessary for me to fully comprehend the grace that He bought for me through His suffering and death.

In declaring the old man dead in baptism, I am now one with the Lord. Like Him who forgave even His worst tormentors, I have forgiven those who have called me a Christ killer. I have forgiven the Jews who have threatened me and my family with bodily harm if I continue to preach Jesus as the Messiah and I have forgiven the professed Christians who refuse to accept that a Jew can preach Christ crucified.

There are days when I need to be reminded of Jesus' suffering for me. I need to be reminded that He gave His life for those who reviled Him, called Him names, beat Him, and then nailed Him to a cross. I need to be reminded that even though I was not worthy, Christ out of His love for me died and rose from the dead so that all His children could have eternal life in Him.

There are also dark days when I wish that I could deny what Christ has done for me because I long to be reunited with those who deny my existence because I confess that Jesus is Lord. There are times when I think of how much easier it would be to return to a set of rules and regulations and not suffer people's resentment toward a Jew preaching the Gospel. It is on these days that I thank God. Thank Him for forgiving me and understand that I must forgive those who reject Christ in me. I am, after all, one who formerly persecuted Him.

I now believe that there are only two ways that life can be lived... with God or without Him. I realize that it was my life that was meaningless... a life lived only for the goodness of self. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ has allowed me to preach and teach His Word. He has forgiven me, washed me clean of my former life, and made me a witness to all who have rejected me. One who formerly kept the kosher law is now kosher in His sight. It was by His grace that I have been saved.

*The Rev. Edward J. Balfour is pastor at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Cape Elizabeth, Maine.*

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