



March/April Plain Truth

Walking In His Sandals

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE MARCHIANO

by Susan Stewart

Jesus wore blue jeans and drove a pickup truck. A brilliant smile flashed across his freshly shaven face as I pulled into the parking space next to him. Even without the beard, his face resurrected vivid images of the Jesus he brought to life.

As he stepped down out of the cab to offer me a hand, I noticed his feet were clad with well-worn loafers. But they were imprinted with the sandal straps of our Savior. For three long months of filming, Bruce Marchiano had walked in his sandals.

Marchiano would be the first to admit that he is nowhere close to being the sinless Savior, but his portrayal of a joyful Jesus in the video movie Matthew has brought God closer to the hearts of many believers and nonbelievers alike.

Bruce and I talked about his experiences in Hollywood and how his life has changed since coming to know Jesus in an intimate way.

The Plain Truth: Before becoming a convicted believer, you were quite active in the Hollywood community. At what age did you decide you wanted to get into acting?

Bruce Marchiano: I was on stage for the first time in my life at 13 years old, and I was hooked. I had a small part in *Oliver* in my high school play. I was part of Fagan's gang, and my lines were "What next is the question?"

The director came up to me and said: "Bruce, I wish I had a whole cast full of you. You're always in character." I can't tell you what that meant to me. That probably changed the course of my life.

There were a lot of things I loved to do, but acting was the one thing I could do 24 hours a day, 30 days a month and not get paid for it and still be the happiest guy in the world.

Q. Growing up, was your family a family of faith?

A. I grew up in the Catholic tradition. We went to church every Sunday, and we prayed. My

parents sent me to church schools, and I got a good foundation in the things of God. But the tragedy is that I knew nothing of a relationship with God. I knew nothing of his grace.

If you had asked me if I was going to go to heaven back then, I would have said, "Yeah." And if you had asked why, I would have said, "Two reasons: one, because I'm Catholic, and two, because of salvation through works." I was doing good things. I didn't know that that wasn't true. It wasn't until 1989 that I came to understand salvation through God's grace alone.

Q. How did that revelation come about?

A. My life was going very, very well. My career was beginning to really take off. Life was coming together. Money was in the bank, a beautiful girl under my arm--life was coming. And as quickly as it peaked, that's how quickly it fell apart. In that falling apart, I turned to Jesus Christ.

I think most people would say their life had to come to a point of desperation before they would turn it over to Jesus Christ. As I read the Scriptures, it's a constant theme. In times of prosperity, the Israelites weren't interested, but when their backs were against the wall, they cried out to God.

Q. Before being cast as Jesus, what roles did you play in Hollywood?

A. Because of my dark looks, I've been traditionally cast as bad guys. I make a joke that Jesus was the first nice guy I ever played.

I remember in 1992 going through a real hard time as an actor. I wasn't getting anywhere, and I couldn't figure out why. I was praying a lot about it, and I remember having a conversation with a friend who said, "Bruce, maybe the Lord wants you to quit acting and go do something else."

I'll never forget looking at her and saying: "No, I don't think it's that. I think he wants me to start playing nice guys." The next role I got was Jesus, the nicest guy in universal history.

Q. Several years ago, you heard about a drama team that was going to do mission work in Australia and Europe. Can you tell us the story of your call to the drama mission?

A. In 1991, I was sitting in my church looking at the program. It read, "His Majesty's Players Chris-tian Theater Group to tour Europe and Australia." In my ignorance of what missionary work or ministry work really was, I thought: Wow! This is a legitimate theater group that is going to go on tour, and I'm going to get paid and stay in nice hotels and tour overseas.

So, I answered the ad and got an audition appointment, but shortly thereafter the dreaded *M* word cropped up in conversation--*missionary*--and I began to quickly realize what this was.

I canceled the audition appointment. As I did so, I sensed very strongly that God was not pleased. This missionary trip was something God had for me. I couldn't pray without having the sense that

God was saying, "Go on that missionary trip!" I would literally stop in the middle of my prayer, look up and yell, "I don't want to go!" It was as if I was arguing with him.

But one Wednesday night, I went to church--I had never been to church on Wednesday night in my life--and I'm the guy who always sits in the back row. But this night, an usher grabbed ahold of me and sat me in the front row.

My pastor started telling a story about a similar conflict he had had in his life. There was something the Lord wanted him to do that he didn't want to do. This was ringing true to me, and if I wasn't sitting in the front row, I would have run out of the church. At one point, the pastor looked right at me in the front row and said, "I just didn't want to go!"

It was like God talking to me, using my own words against me. I knew my goose was cooked. But even then I went home and said: "Lord, I'm not going to call. I'm not going to make another audition appointment. If you really, really, really want me to go (as if there was any doubt at this point), then you have that guy call me."

When I walked in the door that night, my answering machine light was blinking. There was one message from this guy. He said, "Bruce, I don't know, the Lord just put it on my heart to call you." That was it. I cried uncle and went on the trip, kicking and screaming.

The punch line to this whole thing is that it was this same guy, the director of the missionary trip who called me a year and a half later and said: "They're making a new Jesus movie out of South Africa. They're looking for a more down-to-earth, real-looking Jesus. I think you might be the guy." If I hadn't gone on that missionary trip, I wouldn't be here right now.

What a lesson. When God says do, do. When God says don't, don't. He knows what he's doing.

Q. What was it like when you did your first readings for the Matthew film?

A. The director would tell you that the second we shook hands, the Lord whispered, "That's the guy." He would tell you that.

It was a "God" thing. He knew it, and I knew it. We sat down and literally chatted for about an hour. He told me his story about how he had come to know Jesus as his Savior, and I told him my story.

After about an hour he said, "Well, let's get around to reading a little bit of the script." The piece of script was Jesus speaking some very hard line words, "Woe to you, you hypocrites," stuff like that. The words sound very angry, and as I was praying about the audition, I felt strongly that Jesus would not have been so angry with these guys as he would have been heartbroken over their rejection of him.

Some people reading this scene will picture Jesus as a thundering wrath. Sadly, I think many in the body of Christ picture him that way--undoubtedly the world pictures him that way. That's why people don't come to him.

The relationship I discovered is like a parent to a child. He loves them as a parent loves a child. And it would kill a parent to see his or her own child doing something detrimental to himself.

So, with a lump in my throat, I shared that with the director. He sat there with a poker face. Then he said, "Well, that's interesting, let's see what you've got."

I did these hard words with as much compassion as I could muster up. Again, he sat there with a poker face. An actor doesn't like to see a poker face on a director's face. He said: "OK, that was great. But now I want to see a little righteous indignation." I thought: Oh, I blew it. Well, I've got nothing to lose. If it's righteous indignation that you want, it's righteous indignation you're going to get.

And, I'll tell you, I unloaded on this guy. I blasted him. He literally fell back in his chair. I scared him to death. I thought that after I got done he was trying to hide a smile. I knew it was time for me to leave the room. I walked out the door, closed the door behind me and put my ear to the door. All I heard was the director go, "Whew!" At that point I knew that was it.

Little did I know that when I was telling him about the compassionate characterization of Jesus, six or seven months before the Lord had showed him the exact same things.

The righteous indignation scene was just a director's trick to see if I could swing the pendulum.

Q. Then you had to get ready to play Jesus in six weeks?

A. It was a formidable task, but where the Lord guides, he provides. There was a sense of this being an appointment from God as opposed to some acting job I had won through my skills. I knew that as he had appointed me, he would give me what I needed to get it done. The real trick was not for me to go off on some artistic binge and become the greatest actor in the world and create this characterization of Jesus. I knew that was a bunch of hogwash.

As an actor, your job is to get attention, but in this I had to give attention. I had to become less so that he could become more. Ninety percent of my preparation was diving on my face before God and begging him to work in me his personality, his compassion, his love, his goodness.

These were prayers I had never prayed. Little did I know they were prayers he'd been dying for me to pray. To become more Christlike. I knew that was the only thing that was going to work.

I also had to memorize all the words--word for word. The whole concept was the power of the word of God in its entirety. Every "if, and or but." If I made one little mistake, they would cut, and we'd redo the scene.

I praise God because he gave me tremendous grace. I worked on the memorization seven or eight hours a day. I also had to do my research. It was quite a task.

Something I rarely talk about is that I had to get in great shape. The director felt strongly that Jesus was not a skinny, wimpy guy but a very physical human being.

It's obvious that he led a very physical life. So, I worked out like I've never worked out in my life, and we did a couple scenes, one with Jesus working in a field with his shirt off and another where he's playing with his disciples in a waterfall. We did that on purpose to show the physicality.

It's been a tremendous thing because you have a whole world--especially young people--out there who have role models like Jean- Claude Van Damme, and they think of Jesus as this wimp. I've seen young people turn their heads: "Wow! I never thought of Jesus like that. That's cool. I dig this

guy." I've seen that change their lives.

Q. What was it like working with a converted director--Reghardt van den Bergh?

A. Reg is the greatest director I've ever worked with. It would be my heart's desire to work with him the rest of my life. He's a giving, humble man and a director who doesn't make a move without going to his knees. He directed the whole picture on his knees.

He would do his homework and plan everything out. But when he would show up on the set, nine times out of 10, the Lord would completely change everything, and he would go with it. That's why we got what we got. He was not clinging to his ego. He was constantly giving over to the things the Lord wanted him to do.

Q. How big a role did prayer play in the movie?

A. Prayer was 99 percent of it. Not just on my part, but since Reghardt was so well known in South Africa, the entire South African body of Christ was praying. This film was a big deal over there. People and entire congregations countrywide were praying and praying. Reg and I would pray every morning. If you can picture these two guys at 4:30 in the morning on their knees in a Moroccan hotel room, barely awake Prayer was 99.99 percent of the entire thing.

It's a miracle this film got done. Just the fact that we did a 412-hour film in three months is a remarkable thing. It's a miracle. My constant prayer every time the camera rolled was, "Lord, make me a puppet on your strings." Constantly. It was all prayer.

Q. When did you feel the most that God was using you as a puppet on his strings?

A. The Garden of Gethsemane scene was the last scene we shot, and the emotions were running high for everybody. Except for me. I can't tell you how exhausted I was. I had been on such an emotional roller coaster, by the time I got around to that last scene, I was dried up. I had nothing.

Besides, I couldn't imagine that level of emotion. I just couldn't. No actor could do it. I called Reghardt over and told him: "Look, I just don't have anything. I don't have it." We prayed together and then he said, "Let's give it a try." I remember just praying and praying, standing there by myself. He said, "You let us know when you're ready and we'll roll it."

You could hear a pin drop out there. And I was praying like a madman, "Lord, you've gotta do something."

I was supposed to take about 10 steps and collapse at this tree. I took about five steps, and I can't tell you the surge of emotion that just came out of nowhere to such an extent that I didn't even

know what happened. Next thing I knew, Reghardt was hugging me, crying. I looked around and everybody was crying. I asked, "What happened?" He said, "You did the scene." I asked, "Word for word." He nodded, "Word for word."

That was what Reghardt was looking for. More than anything else, he was looking for those moments when the Holy Spirit was taking command on that level. He was always in command, but that was supreme.

Q. Do you ever wonder how close you may have come to what Christ was feeling as a human being?

A. You know, that's a scary kind of thing to think about or say. First of all, for me to say, "I lived Jesus' emotions" is scary, but there's no doubt in my mind that there were some lines crossed. There's no doubt in my mind that the Lord gave me glimpses into his heart. But I would be foolishly arrogant to say I'm the only one who knows. He gave me a unique experience and glimpses into his heart, and for me there can be no turning back to life the way it was.

People ask me why I do ministry. It's a privilege to do it. Nothing can replace the experience of standing in front of people, or next to people, and watching the Lord open their hearts. Nothing can replace that in the world. I've seen someone who maybe had walked with Jesus for 30 years, for the first time in his or her life understand that he loves them. You can't put a price tag on that.

People don't understand Jesus' heart. They don't even understand he has a heart. They don't get it. I didn't get it. And I think that even what I "get" today is probably a grain of sand on the beaches of the world. We live in a world that laughs at love. We live in a world that makes a mockery of love. We live in a world that's afraid of love.

As much as we want to be loved, and it's a driving force in life, we're afraid of it. It's a vulnerable thing. And we're constantly getting the education--because people make mistakes--that sooner or later a person who says "I love you" is going to disappoint you. So, we constantly defend ourselves before it happens.

The end result is that here is this God who's just dying to love us, but we're thinking in human terms because we don't want to get hurt, and we don't want to look stupid. But he's just dying to love us.

Life is full of hard times. The dog's going to get hit by a car. The kid's going to run away from home. The doctor's going to tell you it's cancer. Tragically, that's life. But on your very, very, very worst day, the God who created you loved you enough to die for you. If we could just grasp that, who cares! What could we complain about? God died for you.

You've heard the statement, "I'm giving my life to Jesus." And, yes, there comes a moment of salvation, but giving your life to Jesus is a day in, day out, hour by hour thing. I am constantly faced with a choice. I can either do it God's way, or I can do it my way. We live in this world, but we're not of this world. Our hope is in our salvation through the blood of Jesus, not in our personal achievements as the world hopes.

Q. What's the number one goal of your ministry?

A. I think the bottom line of what I do is somehow to display the heart of God--the love of God. Introduce people to the heart of God. Introduce people to Jesus Christ. I think that's what I do.

I'll tell you a line that I heard once. Somebody walked away from a meeting I did, and she wrote a letter to the lady who was administrating my calendar. She said, "It's the first time ever that our people walked away talking about Jesus Christ instead of the speaker."

That to me is the ultimate. When people walk away talking about Jesus instead of the speaker. It's only Jesus Christ who changes people's lives. The day I become a personality is the day it's time for me to hang up my spurs.

The Lord gave me an experience that gave me a glimpse of his heart at some level. I think it's my job to share that with people.

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