

**BRYAN C.
LORITTS**

Foreword by
CHARLIE DATES

**GRACE
TO
OVERCOME**

31
Devotions on
God's Work
Through
Black History



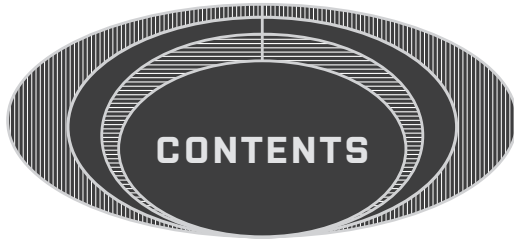
InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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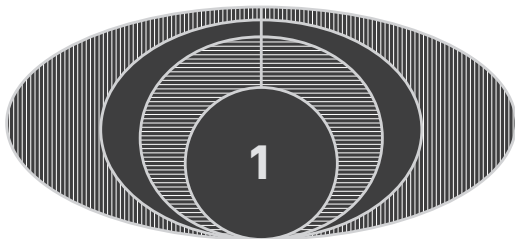
Published by InterVarsity Press,

Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com



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JESSE NEEDS A HUG

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

MATTHEW 3:17

The 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, Germany were supposed to showcase what Adolf Hitler deemed to be the superiority of the Aryan race. Jesse Owens (1913–1980), however, would frustrate those intentions; he would go on to win a record four gold medals. One of those medals was in an event Owens came dangerously close to not qualifying for—the long jump. Having missed on his first two opportunities to qualify, the pressure on Owens was obvious as he knelt in prayer for his final attempt.

As Jesse described it, it was at this moment that his German opponent, Carl Ludwig “Luz” Long (1913–1943), walked over and hugged him, while Hitler and the world watched. Jesse said that he drew calm and encouragement from Carl, that he went on to not only

win the event but gain a friend. Later, after the finals round took place, the black Jesse Owens stood with his gold medal draped around his neck, while he saluted the American flag. Behind him was Carl, donning his silver medal, giving the Nazi salute. All under the gaze of the Nazi regime.

The date was August 3, 1936.

In the years to come, their paths would go in different directions. Jesse came back to America as a celebrated hero who had to face the indignities of Jim Crow. He struggled to make ends meet, even running against horses and cars to earn income. Carl would find himself in the German army in the middle of World War II, stationed in North Africa. Yet through it all Jesse said they remained the closest of friends.

In his last letter to Jesse, Carl wrote,

My heart tells me, if I be honest with you, that this is the last letter I shall ever write. If it is so, I ask you something. It is a something so very important to me. It is you go to Germany when this war done, someday find my Karl [Kai], and tell him about his father. Tell him, Jesse, what times were like when we not separated by war. I am saying—tell him how things can be between men on this earth.¹

Not long after these words, Carl was killed in the battle of St. Pietro, on the Italian island of Sardinia, on July 14, 1943, just shy of seven years since meeting Owens.

The first time I read this story I was moved to the brink of tears. I was also filled with hope to continue the work of bridge building

across the racial divide. If God could bring together a black American and a white German who would later become a part of the Nazi regime, then surely there's hope for us. I remember reading this story and thinking, "And there's not a movie about this friendship because . . .?"

Because it's not true.

Come to find out, Jesse Owens made just about all of it up. Of the thousands of people who were at the stadium that day, not one remembered seeing a black Jesse Owens hugging a white German. Not even reporters on the field, like the famed American Grantland Rice, could recall the moment. And then there's Jesse Owens's own confession late in life of how he had constructed this lie.² So why did Jesse tell this story over and over and over again?

No one can really pinpoint the exact moment when Jesse began this fiction. But it seems to have become a part of the Jesse Owens legend in the early 1950s, when he went back to Germany to speak to audiences. By then a lot had transpired in Jesse's life, most of which was tragic. This champion was still struggling to eke out an existence and find acceptance in his own nation steeped in institutionalized racism.

How would you feel if despite your world-record-breaking performances, you were still barred from sleeping in certain hotels, couldn't earn any mainstream endorsement deals, and you were forced to race animals and cars just to put food on the table, all because you were black? And how would you feel when just weeks after the 1936 Olympic Games, you were banned for life by the widely-regarded-as-racist Avery Brundage, president of the US Olympic Committee?

The way I see it, Jesse was slowly coming to terms with the fact that no amount of performance could truly give him the acceptance he wanted. None of his gold medals could give him a sense of belonging. So some years after the Games, he began to tell this tall tale of a German man helping him out at the Olympics. He probably didn't mean it as some tear-jerker story but more as a fable: "See, if the worst of the worst would accept me, then maybe people from my own country would too."

And what I think Jesse was after is what all of us are after. We all want to be valued for who we are, not our performance—no matter how great that performance may be. We long to be cherished not because of our looks, money, status, or pedigree, but just for our intrinsic worth as human beings.

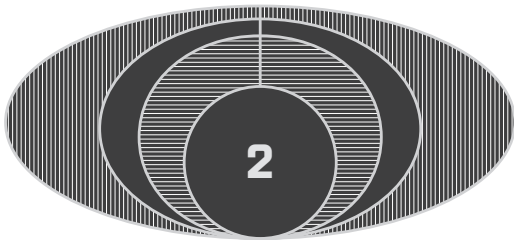
When Jesus emerges from the baptism waters in the third chapter of Matthew, we hear God say these words of him: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Keep in mind, God gives these words of acceptance and affirmation *before* Jesus performed a miracle, picked a disciple, or preached a sermon. With these words God embraces his Son and says, "You are accepted. Period. End of story."

If you are in Christ, you need to know that what God said of Jesus, he says of you and me. We are his sons and daughters, with whom he is well pleased. God can say this with integrity not because we earned his hug, but because when we surrendered to Christ, the righteousness of his son Jesus was transferred to our lives (Romans 5). Before we performed that act of generosity, or led someone to Christ,

or made the right choice, God hugged us, saying we are accepted in him. We don't need to tell any tall tales in search of someone's embrace or approval. No need to set any world records of good deeds in the hopes that someone will invite us into their group, because we are already in the group that really matters—the family of God. We are loved as is.

And if you do not call yourself a Christian, you can, right now, experience the embrace of Father God, who loves you so much he sent his only son to die for you.

Receiving God's hug is ground zero of the Christian life. Everything we do flows from a posture of either acceptance by God or attempts to perform. I can tell you that going down the performance road is an exercise in exhaustion. I have a friend who begins every day by extending her arms outward, imagining herself feeling the embrace of God. She whispers to God that she will live out of a posture of acceptance and love. This frees her, she says, from not only the applause of others, but to really love people well. I like that, and so should you. You may want to make my friend's daily habit your own. Go ahead, drink it in: God says to you, "You are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased."



MILES'S BACK

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

MATTHEW 10:34-39

Artists in a capitalist society live in the tension between the freedom of expression and the necessity to eat. There is the pull to be “me,” but what happens when being “me” doesn’t sell enough to pay the rent? When the art overpowers the business, we get the

phrase “starving artists.” And when the business becomes greater than the artist, we get expressions like “sellout.” Every artist feels this twoness, this push and pull. And the situation was even more extreme for black artists back in the era of Jim Crow.

Take Louis Armstrong (1901–1971), who for much of his career played with the business in mind. Armstrong was determined to not rock the boat. He’d play nice, flash his teeth and slap his leg, and howl with his trademark gravelly voice in order to ingratiate himself to his audience, all in the hopes they would buy his records and extend more invitations. His antics grated on the younger generation of blacks, and especially Miles Davis (1926–1991).

Miles was the antithesis of Louis. One rarely saw his teeth, because Miles was not known to smile. Promoters found him to be a pain in their backside. Musicians were regularly the object of his outbursts. And while Miles played to mostly white crowds, it was common to see this world-famous trumpeter play with his back to them, sending the abrasive message that he was no Louis Armstrong. While you saw Armstrong’s teeth, you were likely to get Davis’s back. Davis was so bent on being respected as a black man that he used disrespect as a sort of currency to get what he wanted.

With all of this, you would think Miles’s career would be short-lived. Not even close. His music was so good, people were willing to look past his behavior to hear his trumpet. Miles would be nominated for over thirty Grammys and win eight of them. He would also be the lead musician in what would become the bestselling jazz album of all time—*Kind of Blue*.

There's something to be said of a man who is so secure, so free in what he has and who he is, he's not afraid to offend paying customers.

And I think that's the allure of Jesus. Our Savior was no Louis Armstrong—flashing a smile while he sequestered his real thoughts, all in an effort to gain a large following. In fact, there were many times when Jesus was more than comfortable with offending people, playing with his proverbial back to the audience. In a very direct moment, Jesus said explicitly that he had come to bring division among families (Matthew 10:34-37). In a Middle Eastern culture like the one Jesus was talking to, family was everything. Family was what brought you security and status. You trained in the family business to one day take it over. You married with the expectation of having kids who could continue the family legacy. And you held onto and took care of the family land that had been passed to you because familial property secured your place in society.

To the Jews of Jesus' day, family wasn't just important—family was everything. For Jesus to say he had come to disrupt the family structure would have been about the most offensive thing a person could say. No, Jesus doesn't hate families. Instead, his hope is that people should so prioritize him that if they had to, they would be willing to leave their own families for Jesus.

In a weird way, what makes Jesus God is the ease in which he is okay with offending us. A God who never unsettles me, who never at times plays with his back to me, is no God. A God who always agrees with me and makes me comfortable is no God. If I believe this, God just looks like *me*; I'm crafting a deity after my image,

likeness, and likings. We need a God who is free enough and loves us enough that he challenges us out of the status quo, even risking our loyalty to him.

When Miles played with his back to the Jim Crow audiences of the mid-twentieth century, he was shaking the very structures of his society. And when Jesus spoke in Matthew 10, he was rattling the very things Jews held onto for life. Today, this same Jesus is willing to play with his back to me at times, calling out the idols of my heart so that I can experience the freedom he has come to bring. The question is, what will you do when Jesus inevitably offends you? How do you respond when he calls you to give up that possession or person? How do you handle it when it's clear he's asking you to apologize, or let go of that thing which has become an idol in your life? Will you get up from the table and leave, or will you bend to his invitation?

And when it comes to your relationships with others, how often do you play with your back to them? (I'm not talking about rejecting people, but holding a willingness to have healthy conflict.) Are you more Louis Armstrong or Miles Davis? Do you just smile all the time to others, not wanting to have hard conversations because you want to be accepted and liked by them? Or will you at times have the courage to be like Miles? To love someone is to do whatever it takes to bring out the best in them. At times this means the willingness to offend—not because you are contentious or rude, but because you love them too much to let them continue in a destructive habit. To be a good friend, to really love our neighbor as the Bible commands, means that at times they will have to see our backs.

My middle son is the most creative person I know. He couldn't care less about what you think. He wears leather jackets in the summer, has tattoos all over the place, and sports more piercings than I have bothered to count. He's also a deep lover of Jesus, outspoken about his faith, and loves to read philosophy and challenge people with his contrarian thinking. I find myself envious of his freedom. And while there are a few qualities I'm praying he doesn't emulate about the jazz musician, I am grateful to have named him Myles.



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