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FROM DAREDEVIL TO DISCIPLE 1916 TO 1937

The giant wave was bigger than anything he'd ever seen. The teenager catapulted end over end, helpless as a rag doll in the wall of water that hit him and swirled him through the surf. Scraping across the sand or flung toward the surface he felt his lungs would burst. Lights seemed to flash behind his eyes and imminent death was only an agonized gulp of salt water away.

Sixteen-year-old Jack and his friends had biked about ten miles to a California beach that was known for its good surfing. This was 1932 and surfboards were mostly found in Hawaii. Jack and his buddies "body-surfed" by catching the edge of the wave on their chests and holding one foot up as a rudder. Their theory was that every seventh wave was the biggest and best, so they'd wait for it, then swim madly to catch the breaker at its peak.

This time on arrival they had stood on the beach gazing at gigantic waves pounding the beach, not realizing there had been a storm or maybe even an earthquake somewhere far out in the Pacific. Being adolescent boys there was some posturing and boasting—"Not any waves I'd be afraid of!" Jack, though, was the only one that actually approached the surf, eyeing the ever-rising ridges of water. He had twinges of doubt, but it was too late to turn back—not with his buddies waiting to see

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what he would do. So he swam out to meet the next monster wave.

Now he was being helplessly tossed around by waves more powerful than he'd ever faced. Just as he was about to lapse into unconsciousness Jack frantically prayed, "God! If you get me out of this alive I'll serve you for the rest of my days!"

Gasping for air as his head finally broke through the surface, Jack saw to his horror that he was on the crest of an enormous swell, looking down probably fifteen feet at what appeared to be merely wet sand. Fortunately, a few feet of water swept in as he was smashed downward, but he knew he would be dragged out to face the whole ordeal once more. He dug his fingers into the sand in a futile attempt to keep from being pulled back out to sea.

His terrified friends on the beach were sure Jack was a "goner." He was sucked into the surf again with just enough time to take a deep breath before suffering through another pounding. However, this time the wave threw him further onto the sand and he was able to crawl upward to safety, much to the relief of his friends and gathering spectators.

Jack may have soon forgotten his desperate prayer in the midst of his watery crisis, but God did not forget. Nor had He forgotten those other times of dire straits when Jack had cried out with that same entreaty.



Jack Rutherford Schisler—his middle name was his mother's surname, she a descendant of Samuel Rutherford, Scottish Reformer—was born in 1916, fourth child of James and Lillie. The first were twins and died at birth. Jack's father was descended from Nicholus Schuessler (Anglicized in both

spelling and pronunciation from the German to be pronounced “Sisler”) who arrived in the United States in 1837.

James and Lillie were attempting to start a ranch in the desert northeast of Los Angeles. The setting was the tiny hamlet of Pear Blossom near Littlerock where Jack was born. The government would give five-hundred acres of desert property to a homesteader, the stipulation being that it must be developed within five years. James had built a small cabin with an outhouse and tried planting a peanut crop. If James had been able to develop it, he could have made considerable money, since that area later became part of Edwards Air Force Base. Unfortunately, the ranch was not a success and they soon moved back to the Los Angeles area where they lived in several different communities as James tried his hand at other occupations.

From his early childhood Jack seemed determined to “live on the edge.” This early “Indiana Jones” was eager for adventure—anything that was at least slightly dangerous and caused his blood to race captured his imagination. He occasionally wondered if he would live past the age of twenty-five, though that likely was his mother’s constant concern. Grandstanding in front of his friends, on a dare he jumped off a high railroad bridge into the Los Angeles River. He could not resist taking on a bet and recalls a friend’s nickel wager that he wouldn’t eat a hot chili pepper—one of the most powerful available! With his mouth, throat and stomach on fire, Jack had to throw himself under a faucet, hoping the water would douse the heat!

He and his friends placed fire crackers under tin cans to see how high they could blast them. Things weren’t exciting enough, so Jack put two under a can and lit the fuse. When it seemed to be taking too long to explode, he bent down to

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investigate. The explosion of particles, dirt, and hot powder hit him right in the face and eyes and he staggered back, blinded and in shock. "God, if you allow me to see again, I'll serve you for the rest of my life!" He splashed water into his eyes and, avoiding his parents in order to not have to explain what happened, he waited out the rest of the day to find his eyesight gradually returning.

Besides his own innate thirst for adventure and seeming bent toward self-destruction, Jack's life appeared to hang by a thread from his infancy. He inhaled a green peanut into his trachea as a toddler. The rural doctor was not able to help, and little Jack developed croup or asthma-like symptoms. Lillie tenderly nursed him with hot steam, with creosote fumes—anything that might open up his airways. After coughing for several months, he eventually recovered.

At the age of twelve he drank contaminated water on a hike through one of the Los Angeles river-drain culverts and developed pneumonia. Again he came down to death's door but finally pulled through.

Jack had three sisters: Rosemary, the oldest of the children, then Helen and Betty following him—and he delighted in teasing them. Antics such as shinnying up his dad's radio aerial post, forty feet in the air, to spread-eagle himself on his stomach across its six-inch diameter top would get the desired reaction out of them. Besides showing off, his goal was to make his sisters scream. When his mother came out to investigate, she threw her hands up in resignation and went back into the house, shaking her head.

Jack's only brother, Bob, was four years younger. Bob viewed his brother with something bordering on hero-worship and Jack took full advantage of it. Bragging to his friends that Bob would "do anything I tell him," Jack created a spider

sandwich which Bob ate on command. Jack would use Bob to test out his jerry-rigged experiments, such as the airplane he made out of a wooden crate with a board across for wings and some kind of propeller. Jack convinced Bob to sit in it and coast off the galvanized roof of the garage while he “watched to tell him where to land, of course.” He had to bribe his disgruntled, wailing younger brother not to tell their parents about the incident. (Crashing the “plane” notwithstanding, Bob grew up to be a World War II pilot, serving in active duty in the European theater. A fine Christian, after the war Bob was a flight engineer for United Airlines for forty years on the San Francisco-Japan route.)

Jack remembers, with both mirth and some remorse, a friend whom he managed to trick by tucking a string of “baby-finger” firecrackers into his back pocket. After lighting the fuse, Jack and gang rolled on the ground in high glee while the hapless young man ran in circles, trying to get rid of the exploding fireworks. Each time he put his hand on his pocket another one would explode and burn his fingers. Eventually, his entire back pocket blew off—much to the delight of the onlookers. Many years later when raising his own three rambunctious sons, Jack discovered that life had come full circle.

In spite of his fearless, daredevil disposition Jack did develop a deeply-rooted claustrophobia related to an incident in his childhood. Boasting to his friends that he could escape from a rope coiled around him “like Houdini,” they wrapped him against a telephone pole with the rope winding higher and higher. As it reached his chest his panic level rose. In spite of his vocal protests, young Jack’s buddies continued, and he describes what happened, “Something inside me broke loose and a horrible, mind-distorting fear invaded my being.” His

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terrified screams brought his mother to the rescue and though he was quickly untied, the deeply hidden but very real fear continued for many years. Jack recalls an event much later when a similar claustrophobia claimed him. Trying to fix a furnace in the first church he pastored, Jack had to crawl into a small space. The old feeling of panic gripped him, but he took a deep breath and quoted confidently from II Timothy 1, "*God has not given us a spirit of fear...*" Thankfully, he conquered this phobia.

For the 1932 Summer Olympics held in Los Angeles, Jack was chosen along with fourteen other adolescent boys to kick off the American Swim Team event. The leader of the team swam around the Olympic pool with a gigantic American flag on a pole strapped to a belt. Dressed in green frog outfits, the boys one by one popped out of an underwater pipe up to the surface and swam the breast-stroke behind the leader. Jack recalled that one young man lost one of his frog legs, but the presentation was well-received by the wildly enthusiastic audience. Despite the Americans' impressive "frog" demonstration, it was the Japanese Swim Team that came away with most of the gold medals that year.

Lillie, Jack's mother, talented and capable, had been reared in the Methodist church and was a woman of faith and prayer. Jack's father, James, was a stern disciplinarian almost to the point of harshness. A hard-working entrepreneur, for whom success often seemed just out of reach, he had a quick temper and his children were frequently on the receiving end of it.

During Jack's adolescence James and he were walking down a Los Angeles street and came across a street meeting. As they approached they heard a young woman preaching a powerful message. Brother Clarkson, her father had started a

mission near the corner of Fifth and Main streets, reaching out to drunks, communists, and others on the fringes of society. James, who had made a profession of faith as a child at an old fashioned Methodist brush-arbor meeting in Arkansas, came under heavy conviction because of his backslidden state. He fell to his knees there on the street, surrendering his life to the Lord. Utterly transformed, he became a humble, compassionate lay-minister who reached out especially to discouraged preachers. Later, at a service in the basement of the mission, Brother Clarkson prayed over Jack, who tended to be small for his age, that God would “heal his body and make a preacher out of him.” (Jack, though, did not want to hear the preacher part!)

James, distressed and convicted about how he had been living, was very concerned about Jack because of his teenage rebellion. James, as his father felt responsible, and took the biblical model seriously. He spent three days under a bridge in the dry Los Angeles river bed, fasting literally in sack-cloth and ashes, while interceding for his family—especially Jack. It was shortly after that in the tiny Quaker church they attended that the pastor laid aside his customary practice of reading his sermon and gave his one-and only altar call for salvation. Jack, seated on the back row with other unruly teens, including the pastor’s son, responded by going forward with three others.

In the days and weeks following this first personal encounter with the Lord, Jack felt an impulse to pray. “I stepped into the only place I knew where no one would find me: a small closet for the hot water heater,” he recalls. “The old heater had coils that became red-hot. The space was barely large enough for me—a wiry, skinny thirteen-year-old—to squeeze into. Shutting the small door carefully, I had to keep my body from touching the hot heater. I was aware of the Lord’s Presence. I

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do not recall a specific prayer, but it was intense, real and short. A whole new world began to be opened to me. I remember thinking, 'How can someone pray for an *hour*?' Later on, in one of my times in the hiding place I took a small clock with me. I prayed all that I could think of—for a total of six minutes. Yet it was real."

Still, Jack's life did not make an immediate turn-around at that time. He fell in with some wrong influences, and being a natural leader, often got his friends and himself into trouble. God took his response seriously though, and he was eternally marked for divine purposes. Many years later, Jack, now with his wife and children, had occasion to visit that little Quaker church with its handful of people and related to the new pastor how God had led him to many countries, ministering to thousands of people. It was a great encouragement to the pastor to know this kind of fruit had come out of their tiny congregation. One of the original members was still there, an aged man who wept as he heard Jack's testimony.

Jack's passion in his teen years was football. He played running-back in a neighborhood junior high team, was extremely agile and quick on his feet, good at catching a pass, and an excellent runner. Two college students from Stanford and UCLA saw the boys playing their sandlot football and took them on, to improve their skills. Their coaches also instilled rigorous discipline and team precision, resulting in their team even beating high school teams. "Our coaches taught us a lot of plays and the finer arts of football," Jack says. "They were also good disciplinarians. I was chosen as captain of the team as well as quarterback. The day came for a showdown with another team. They all looked super-good and bigger! We had butterflies and dry mouths. As we watched their kicker drop-kicking the extra point in practice, we were sure we were

doomed. After they quickly made a touchdown and converted the extra point, our coach said, ‘Look, you guys are better than they are! You can beat ‘em!’ We won 26 to 7. We played against older boys, but always won by a wide margin—once even 56 to 0.”

Because of the Great Depression, though, Jack had to get a job before and after school to help the family. Delivering the Glendale News he at times rode his bike daily on a fifteen mile route. Consequently, he was unable to pursue further his love of football.

With finances always tight, Jack had big plans to make a lot of money—either as a football player or maybe in engineering. God’s will did not figure very much, if at all in his goals for the future.

Besides the economic hardship, certainly not unique during the era of the 30’s, a shadow of sadness covered them as a family because of the eldest daughter, Rosemary. An attractive, popular girl in high school, she had many friends and male admirers. Because of her choices and continuing insubordination, tension grew with her parents. Following graduation, Rosemary developed a romantic relationship with a divorced man and eloped with him. The family had no contact with her for nineteen long years, though James had hired a detective to try to find her.

Rosemary, whether because of fear or shame, never made any attempt to reconnect with her family—not even a letter. Years later, her sisters, Betty and Helen, asked a friend who worked in a government office of vital statistics to help them locate her. To their amazement, they eventually discovered she was living in the San Francisco area, very close to them, and they went to see her. Even more astounding was their discovery that the three of them had shared the same

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dentist for many years!

When arrangements were made for the Schislars to gather that Christmas, James and Lillie were gently informed that their long-lost daughter had been found. In the midst of their joy was grief, hurt and shock. One family member recalls Lillie's reaction when she saw Rosemary for the first time: "A sound like a stifled moan or sob escaped her, though Lillie maintained her composure." It was difficult to compress nineteen painful years into one tearful, as well as awkward embrace.

Following his high school graduation, Jack, with the help of his Sunday school teacher who had a position in the Glendale City Office, was able to get a job with the Metropolitan Water District building an aqueduct. A huge project involving thousands of men, the company was building an aqueduct to bring water from the Colorado River over 350 miles through desert and mountains into the burgeoning Los Angeles metropolis. One of the enormous engineering and man-power feats was constructing a sixteen-foot diameter concrete tunnel eighteen miles long through San Jacinto Mountain from the Palm Springs side.

With his lean, muscular build, Jack reveled in the often dangerous physical work. At times he worked all three eight-hour shifts, starting out in the lowest position digging dirt and filling gondolas on the trains. Later, he became a brakeman and then motorman on the five-ton battery operated motors for the trains. As an electrician's helper, then himself an electrician, he was working with 220, 440 and 1,200 volts under wet conditions. He survived a near-electrocution during one of his many close calls.

Jack wrote in his journal: "July 11, 1936—some might call it luck, others chance, but Jack knows that God watches

over His children! Referring to an incident that occurred today, we were moving [heavy equipment] on the truck, sliding them across two rails to place against the rocky side of the tunnel. Just three of us out of the fifteen or more happened to be pushing at the time. In sliding them, a wire in the 2300 blocks on one end of the transformer pulled loose and touched the steel cover, and immediately the current struck us. All happened to be braced against a rail of the track and it didn't make a good ground, being laid on wooden ties. But I was knocked down like a log and reacted like one. Stunned, I couldn't begin to describe the jolt I received. It hurt! The fellows said I was walking in circles for several minutes after I managed to regain my feet. One man had gloves on and it didn't hurt him much. But Red Parrish, received the terrific impact also. Sparks flew out of his shoes and left the marks of the nails in his shoes on his bare feet, and even colored his nails. If, and again I say, *if* we had been standing on the ground—well, they electrocuted men in Sing Sing with 2,300 volts. Again, I thank the Lord not only for myself but also for the rest of the crew who do not know the power of the resurrected Christ.”

Ever frugal, he saved money by bunking with three other men in a rough cabin up Whitewater Canyon, eventually moving to a small tent by himself near one of the aqueduct tunnel entrances. “I liked the solitude,” Jack says, and though his main reason was thrift, it was preferable to living in the stifling-hot company-provided bunk houses with thousands of men. A photograph from that era shows a handsome, athletic-looking young man (with a full head of hair!) and a smile that would have captured the interest of many a young woman. An inventory of possible girls appears in his journal, but he points out the details of their “missing the mark” of his tastes and preferences.

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“Young women!” he noted, “I haven’t had much to do with girls and consequently have received but few letters from them. Yet the silly talk they are capable of, and the fools they can make of themselves, makes a fellow shun any close ties with one. Still, I was snowed under a few times before coming to my senses. There was Louise, Myrtle, Jeanne, and Evelyn, who at one time supposedly held sway in my life. It makes me laugh now, but at that time, you couldn’t have told me it was a joke.

“Rachel isn’t that what one would call a beautiful girl, nor could the meaningless word, ‘pretty’ be tacked to her. Yet she has a nobility, carriage and winsome smile that makes her pretty. She is a Christian girl that most anyone would be proud to receive a letter from and call their friend.” Some seventy years later when reminded of these comments, with surprising detail Jack recalled that he did not pursue a friendship with this young lady either, saying something about her “overbearing, controlling mother.”

With his love of the outdoors, Jack enjoyed the desert and described the blending of the myriad colors and rock formations in poetic terms. Nicknamed by his companions, “the Desert Rat,” he spent his off hours exploring the wilderness with his twenty-two rifle slung across his back. Besides target practice, the rifle was useful for hunting some of the wild game that appeared on occasion: coyotes, rabbits and once—an unsuccessful shot at a bighorn sheep. After gazing, unharmed, at Jack for an instant, the animal amazingly disappeared up a rock wall.

He wrote: “[A friend] had related to me many times of the unsearched upper regions of Long Canyon, so Paul and I left early in the morning off of graveyard shift for the enticing mystery of the unknown. You can drive six miles up the

canyon from the long bridge. From that point, we hiked about two miles until we reached Chucka Walla Slim's old cabin, hidden in the rocky recesses of a narrow canyon. The date on the hearth was 1933, but the cabin itself could have been dated 1903. Violent storms and strong winds had contributed to its dilapidated condition. There were hundreds of old books and papers scattered here and there waiting for an old book worm like me. I promised myself I'd be back to browse through them.

"After an hour of exploring around I came upon an old trail leading to a small mine. The main part of it looked like quartz and limestone to me. But what attracted my attention the most was a box of dynamite as well as .22 cartridges. I figured the ends would be best to hit so I shot at one stick of dynamite placed in a niche in a mammoth rock. The ensuing explosion, nearly shaking my teeth loose after detonating and reverberating back and forth for a long minute, must have worked in like manner on one of the numerous bighorn. Paul spotted one making off over a ridge a half a mile away. After spending a good two hours, climbing over a mountain trail, we didn't catch sight of one again. Found plenty of their trails and droppings though, and even sighted some lion tracks.

"The valley below us had beautiful colors that were strewn in patches of gold, lavenders and green. Every pigment of nature has thrown in some here. Small canyons ran off the main valley floor like the inside of the Chicago switch yard. There are hundreds of unexplored game-filled regions to enjoy if one will only take the time to find them."

Climbing a rocky cliff in the California wilderness, Jack had his sights set on reaching the top and dislodging a gigantic rock. He intended to pry it loose and watch its trajectory a thousand feet to the jagged rocks below. However, at one point in the climb he had transferred his weight to a tiny ledge and

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was hanging on with his left hand to a small promontory, the rifle on his back making further progress extremely difficult. Suddenly he realized there was no way to go forward or up, nor could he get back. Aware that his hand was turning numb, he had to consciously look at it and command it to hold on. A rock came loose from somewhere nearby and seemed to take forever to hit the canyon far below. The question flashed across his mind, *"How long before anyone will find my skeleton?"* Again, Jack prayed his desperate prayer, "God, if you'll get me out of this alive I'll serve you for the rest of my days." Trying not to look down at the sharp rocks below he finally was able to transfer his right hand to where his left hand clung to the rock, and somehow, managed to move back to a previous hold. Not to be deterred, however, he then found another way to continue his climb to the top and dislodge the boulder.

Once more God had Jack in a "fix"—another crisis point that was intended to pressure him into a place of surrender—of fully yielding his life, plans and future to the Lord.

His journal entries of those days reveal the youthful angst and ambiguities of a twenty year old. Referring often to deep spiritual longings, musings on the depravity of the men he worked with, a love of the picturesque desert environment, and his unfulfilled dream of playing football, Jack struggled with all these at times warring factions. Did he want to follow his own ideas, or did he truly want to follow God?

Every two weeks Jack traveled in from the desert to his parents' home in Glendale and attended church with them. On January 31, 1937 when he was twenty-one, he went to the evening service with his family. It was a good church, active in missionary outreach as part of the Christian and Missionary Alliance denomination, but with no particular evidence of strong spiritual fervency. That night, Harold, the pastor's

rebellious, twenty-four year old son, walked down the aisle and up onto the platform to his father and stood next to him. "I have a word from God," the young man said. The pastor gave him a questioning look but stepped aside. "God has come into my life. Jesus is now my Owner, Savior and Lord. If you want what I have, come up here." Forty young people went forward, most from the back row, including Jack, his sister and her boyfriend. Flat on his face in a flood of tears of repentance, Jack surrendered his life, his ambitions, goals and dreams to the Lord.

A true revival started that night. The next Wednesday night prayer meeting was packed out, as hungry people gathered to meet with God. During one of these meetings someone gave a message in tongues—the first Jack and probably almost everyone there had ever heard in a spiritual prayer language.

Harold, the young man God had used, encouraged Jack to go to Bible School. "You should apply to BIOLA," He suggested. Jack sent in his application to this well-known school, the Bible Institute of Los Angeles, but they responded that their student roster was filled up for that year— much to his enormous relief! Then a visiting missionary suggested that he apply to Simpson Bible Institute in Seattle, Washington. Secretly hoping they also would turn him down, Jack applied. They informed him that there was an opening for the fall term. God did have a plan for this earnest young man and things began unfolding.

With the aqueduct project completed, Jack's job also concluded. He had saved up some money and hitched a ride with three other fellows to Detroit, Michigan, where he bought a second-hand 1934 Ford with a V-eight engine for two-hundred dollars. On the way back, Jack picked up a hitch-hiker who paid him ten dollars to "drop him off in San

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Francisco" en route to Glendale.

At the end of the summer, Jack loaded all his earthly belongings into the Ford and headed north on the old highway 99 to Seattle. The future lay ahead—unknown and unexpected like the shadowed curves, hills, and mountains through which he was driving—yet cloaked in God's sovereign will. Ever receding behind him were the football dreams and ambitions for wealth and worldly acclaim.

Jack had written in his journal, "To hear the crowd yell as the running-back elusively slips away from would-be tacklers; to swing up to a supposedly solid line of determined faces and then have a hole open for you, sending you spinning, sidestepping, swerving to a substantial gain—now that's living!" Jack remembered and grinned wryly as the miles rolled by. No longer would he live according to his own goals and plans. He was intent on following God's blueprint for his life. A new adventure had begun with more thrills, danger, excitement and challenges than his football dreams ever could have provided.