

Interview with Rebecca St James

November 2006

Phil Callaway: Tell me a bit of your background, Rebecca. You are living in Nashville? Are you married?

Yes, I live here and no, I'm not married.

I understand you're a native Australian.

Yes. I'm part of a really strong Christian family, which was quite rare because there are not that many Christians there. I've heard statistics as low as 5 to 7 percent of the 20 million people. It's a very secular world so having that Christian heritage was amazing. I had really strong parents who showed me God's love from an early age. Then when I was 14 my dad really felt God calling the family to America so we moved to Nashville, Tennessee where he had been offered a job. About two months after we moved, his job fell through when his boss just ran out of money for the work my dad was doing. So we were now on the other side of the world from all our family and friends and we had no car, no furniture, we were sleeping on the floor, six kids in the family at the time and my mom was pregnant with my sister. We had never been through anything like this before and didn't know what the next step was. So we just sat on the floor and prayed and we asked God to provide for our needs, everything from money and food to a car. We often saw miracles happen. Sometimes on the same day we prayed for something an answer would be given, things like a random check coming in the mail that would just cover our bills by a couple of dollars or groceries would get dropped on the doorstep. A Sunday school class found out we had no furniture and they delivered truckloads of it. A home-schooling family let us use their car for as long as we needed it. Somebody paid so that my little sister could be born in a hospital. We never knew who that was. When these amazing things happened that really gave me as a fourteen-year-old something to think about and by the time I was signed to a record label at 16 I had a very strong testimony.

How did it happen?

I'd done a lot of singing back in Australia in a Christian rock band at my school and had also recorded a demo tape when I was 13. A Christian artist named Carmen heard it and asked me to tour with him. My dad was his concert promoter so I'd known him from other tours as well. Dad wasn't so sure about his little girl going on the road but he was the promoter of that tour so we went. After that I did a little praise and worship album in Australia and when we moved to Nashville I sang some of those songs at youth groups. A man who was working at a record label came and saw me sing at my church.

What surprises you most about some of the things that have happened?

It's all pretty surprising to me. I think at 15 you only have the capacity to understand so much about what signing a contract might mean, though I did grow up around the whole music scene. I've never felt like I'm the best singer in the world. There are far more talented people out there. But it was a situation where I'd said to God at about 12, "I don't know exactly what I have to give you, but here's my talent. Here's me and I want you to use my life." It was around that time that he started to lead me into music. Everything in this huge journey has had an element of surprise. Probably the challenges of life in the spotlight have definitely surprised me. The glamour that some people picture when they think of somebody in music was definitely removed from my thinking before I

even started because I'd been around the scene. But at the same time I don't think I knew it would be quite as challenging as it's been at certain times.

What has been one of the most rewarding things about all this?

Probably looking out on crowds and really seeing people connect with God, being lost in worship. Hearing stories about how people are now in ministry because they responded to an altar call at one of my shows. People who several years ago gave their lives to God and now they're following him or they're in ministry—that's really cool. Or I hear about people who saved sex for marriage because they heard me talking about it or they heard my song *Wait for Me* and now they're married and they're so glad they waited. It's those stories of lives changed that are really very, very powerful things.

When I was a teenager I had a few records by a lady by the name of Evie. Do you know what happened to her?

She became a wife and mom and after her kids grew up she became involved in a Christian television ministry. I'd met Evie in Australia when I was about 2 when she was packing out the Sidney opera house. Then about six or seven years ago she waltzed back into my life when she came to one of my shows in Florida because she lives there now. She has since become my mentor and she is an amazing woman of God. I love her so much. She's been so life-giving to me. God has really used her to bring encouragement and renewal. She's one of those people who are just so full of joy and love, she's a gem. So actually we've been doing some shows together recently, mother/daughter events where we both sing and share from our hearts about certain topics that are in my books. Topics that women are wrestling with today. We talk about the hope that we have in God, the beauty of his way. It's been pretty sweet.

What is your message to teen girls?

The biggest think I'm focusing on right now is God's love for them and for all of us because everything else in the Christian life comes from that. We can get into a very legalistic place where we're just doing it out of almost religiosity but the essence of the Christian life needs to be lived, if it's going to be true, from the knowledge of God's extravagant love. There are other huge messages that I'm speaking to girls about like purity and modesty and finding that inner beauty that comes from time with God. But if these things are going to be lived out in the truest way, they come from knowing that we're loved. Then you will honor your body enough to live in a way that glorifies God and you'll honor God with your actions in things like modesty. That's probably my big thing right now.

The evangelical world recently saw another leader fall. What steps do you take to guard your heart?

I like that question. I think it needs to be asked more of leaders. For me there are a couple of things that have really helped in this purity stand. I travel with my family and that's always been the case. My dad's always been my manager. My entire family used to come on the road and fulfill different roles. Now consistently my dad and at least two brothers come and when we're on a full tour probably 3 or 4 siblings and my mom as well, so there's always major accountability with family being right there. They know me and I'm the kind of person who has a hard time hiding the truth. I love living honestly and being straight up with close friends and family about what's going on in my life. I think it's the most free and joyful way and leads to strength when you're vulnerable and you're willing to be open and weak before close people in your life. So I've been intentional about that,

being honest with Evie, my mentor and a couple of close friends and family. I live with my brother when I'm back here in Nashville. So there's a lot of built-in accountability there as well as just having daily time with God. Prayer is a part of my life, also reading books that are challenging me so that I'm getting good teaching, I'm also at church whenever I'm home. Those books and that right teaching prick your heart if you're not in the right place. I really want to honor God with my life. That is so my heart and that's why I invite this kind of accountability. I really don't want to go down a path that is not towards God. And also I don't want to cause all the people watching me to grieve and to hurt because of my actions but I want to point them toward God by the way that I'm living.

What books are you reading right now?

I'm about to start a book called *Life on the Vine* by Philip Kennison. We just finished *Cost of Discipleship* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and I've just started *Battlefield of the Mind* by Joyce Myer. I'm also reading *Let Go* by Fenelon. It's just changing my life.

How do you find time to be quiet with God?

There are some times in my life when I do better about having quality quiet time and there are other times when the silence is just scary and there's just too much there and I'm too tired emotionally to recognize what is happening in those silences. When I see that happening it's a warning sign that I need to start also speaking to my accountability partners. Sometimes I'm better about the disciplines and sometimes I'm not so good. The whole schedule thing, honestly I've felt out of balance for a reasonable amount of 13 years of ministry and I think any leader if they're honest would say they struggle with balance because there are huge expectations from everyone in your life, from family to people that you're leading, to your team around you or the congregation or the audience. It's just so hard to balance that and to say no when you need to. I feel like I'm still just learning about that. It's kind of a work in progress.

You were just in Rwanda. Tell us about it.

That came about with my partnership with Compassion. I love their ministry. I've been to India and Ecuador and met the children that my brother and I sponsor. So I'd seen their work before. Then I met my sponsored child in Rwanda and was just so blown away by how much it means to these kids to be sponsored. He told the film crew that meeting me was the best day of his life. It's because I'm his sponsor and he loves me so much. But Rwanda also went through genocide about 12 years ago and I expected to find a place that was broken at every level with huge emotional devastation. And obviously, when you hear people tell the stories there's a lot of brokenness but I was actually really surprised by the amount of healing that has taken place in these people's lives in such a short time. The president of Rwanda is a Christian and he's instituted this no-revenge policy and encouraging people to forgive instead of taking revenge on those who killed their families. Because of that forgiveness I believe a lot of healing has taken place in that country. It turned out to be quite an encouraging trip, not only in meeting my sponsor child but also in realizing that where there's forgiveness there's healing. The Rwandan people taught me that.

Madonna and other celebrities have adopted children from Africa. Why the recent interest?

One of the reasons I speak about Compassion in every one of my shows is because it's a real, legitimate arm of the caring love of God. It's really working. A lot of people

question sponsorship ministries because they don't know if the money is actually getting to the kids. But Compassion is so solid and has been for many, many years and I just love it. But I also think it's important for people to go and to do as well. I recently read *The Irresistible Revolution* and although I didn't agree with everything in the book, the gist of it was that we should take very seriously Jesus' call to love since the second greatest commandment is to love your neighbor as yourself. And to make it practical, not just to send money off somewhere but to actually go and do. The writer doesn't believe that on the last day Jesus will say you ministered to me personally when you sent off that money to UNICEF. He's saying when you gave me the cup of water, when you visited me in prison, when you do it for those who are hurting, you do it for me. So I think the checks to Compassion and UNICEF are important, but so is going on a missions trip. It might not be to Africa, but it will change your life and the lives of the people there. I want to step up myself and be more hands on in practical ministry and I want to encourage others to do the same.

When all is said and done, what would you like to be remembered for?

I'd like to be remembered as a woman who passionately loved God and people. If because of that love I drew people to God, I will have lived a successful life.

Where to from here?

This coming year we're touring quite a bit. I'll be doing a Christmas tour with Brian Litrell, formerly of Backstreet Boys who's got a Christian album out so we're doing a couple of weeks of Christmas touring here pretty soon. We are also touring with Delirious next year and I'm very excited about that, love their stuff. Also doing some more dates with my mentor Evie and then headed back to Australia and New Zealand for a couple of shows, so we're really touring prettily heavily. The album's been out about a year now so hopefully we'll be talking about a new album at some stage but we're not moving towards that just yet.

We're going to be offering your album through the magazine. Is there anything you want to say about it?

It is an album that really focuses on the love of God. I went to L'Abri in Switzerland a couple of years ago and God really did an awesome work in my heart during that time. I really felt him speaking to me about his love, that there's nothing I can do to make him love me more or less, just to rest in his love. I love that little community there with people from around the world. A lot of the subjects that I broach on the album are from my time at L'Abri but the biggest theme is the whole passion to share the love of God. The title *If I Had a Chance to Tell You Something* comes from a song called *You Are Loved*. Lyrically, it's biblical, it's vulnerable, it's real, and it's challenging us to live out the Christian life intentionally. There's a song about having compassion for the hurting, a song about community, a song about surrender to God, so it covers a lot of different aspects of the Christian life. Musically it's pop/rock; it's got some lighter moments, as well as a touching ballad kind of song. But I think it's very relevant to a lot of different age groups and the message is relevant to us all.

Is there anything I didn't ask you that I should have?

Maybe that I speak to teens all the time about purity. I have a song to my future husband, telling him I'm waiting for him and asking him to wait for me too. One line says, "I want to be now and always faithful to you." I think the song is not only relevant to teens and single people. I believe it's relevant to married people of all ages because there's such an

attack in this day and age on purity. It's everywhere, it's rampant. I really would love to encourage every leader to be committed to God and guard our purity. The enemy is prowling like a roaring lion to kill and destroy us. One of the biggest ways he can destroy our credibility is in the area of purity. If we're indulging in impurity he can shoot us down. Let's commit to being accountable and putting ourselves under authority so that people know what's going on in our lives.

God continue to make you an incredible blessing, Rebecca.

Same to you.