

When God Stood Up
A Christian Response to AIDS in Africa

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Table of Contents



Acknowledgements	ix
Abbreviations of Biblical References	x
Introduction	1
<i>Journal: “Here I am, Lord, send me.”</i>	5
Chapter 1: Righteousness and Justice: The Foundation of Authentic Faith	11
<i>Journal: Esther’s Hymn of Salvation</i>	37
Chapter 2: HIV/AIDS: Killing the Young	43
<i>Journal: Psalm 89 and Authentic Christianity</i>	65
Chapter 3: Orphans and Widows: Heaven’s Chief Concern	69
<i>Journal: “Sound the Alarm, Donya.”</i>	95
Chapter 4: The Church Stands Up	101
<i>Journal: If someone lived to be fifty, they were old...</i>	135
Chapter 5: “Why Does He Allow a Girl Like Me to Be So Abused?”	141
<i>Journal: Bless the God of Africa</i>	157
Chapter 6: “Summon Your Might, O God, Show Me Your Strength”	159
Epilogue: “Suffer the Little Children...”	191
Appendix: The Old Testament Prophets Speak on Righteousness and Justice	195
Scripture References	205
About the Author	213
About Visionledd	214

Introduction



I've always admired the biblical Job. There he was, totally devastated by the loss of his entire family, fortune, and health; sitting on a dunghill; scraping his boils; surrounded by his best friends, all doing their best to accuse him of sin. And, as these "comforters" droned on, trying to accommodate Job's sufferings to their world view, Job looked past these space-time philosophies to the world beyond and said: "I know that my redeemer lives." He was so convinced of this savior God that he even stated: "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him."

Contrast this otherworldly detachment to that of his earth-bound wife: "Curse God and die!" Job didn't rebuke her. For all we know he took her hand, fully empathetic to her sorrow at their mutual loss, and silently comforted her. He saw what she couldn't see and had compassion. What a man! I've always wanted to be like him.

Imagine my disappointment, then, when I discovered in Africa that I'm not at all like him. Indeed, I'm not even close. I don't even have the stature of a "comforter." Bluntly and brutally put, I'm a "Job's wife."

This discovery, which has been underscored several times since, first occurred in January 2002, in a shantytown in South Africa. I was standing with a widow outside her home. "Home," by the way, needs qualification—it was a rusty tin-sheeting enclosure, with dirt for a floor, and an unstable sheet of corrugated fiberglass for a roof. It housed eighteen orphans and this bone-thin, weary, overextended woman. She was weeping.

Another orphan had been brought to her that morning. Like the others, this little one belonged to the widow's extended family; this time, a niece had died of HIV/AIDS, and the widow's home was the only option for the young child. She wept from the sorrow and the stress of it all. Compounding her anguish was the fact that the only wage-earner in her home was the fourteen-year-old boy who made

Introduction

twenty-five cents a day herding cattle. He had just died, too. HIV/AIDS is no respecter of people or of need.

“I just can’t take it anymore,” she cried, “I have nothing, no one, no hope. I just want to die.” Then she paused, as if listening to an inner conversation. She glanced at me through her tears, and then looked heavenward. Lifting her emaciated hands to the sky, she said, in a whisper, “Ah, but I do have hope. I put my trust in my heavenly Father.” I was in the presence of a modern-day Job.

The impact on me was crushing. It wasn’t the hopelessness, the despair, the abject poverty. It was the faith. Her faith, not mine. Especially not mine. Because my immediate reaction, inwardly, was, “What have you got to bless God about? Curse God and die!”

I’m not proud of this. But at that moment I realized with naked clarity that my faith was filtered by Western comfort and entitlement. I was just a visitor on her planet. I’d never seen such faith anywhere in North America or Europe. I was standing next to a saint and I felt unworthy. So utterly unworthy.

Then I felt angry. Angry at myself, at my consumer faith, at poverty, at injustice, at HIV/AIDS. A flood of passionate impulses suddenly awakened within me, all fighting for control. I wanted to lash out, weep, curse, preach, explode, repent, grovel, escape. But a cool certainty rose above my internal conflict—my earlier “calling” to fight HIV/AIDS had been real. I was going to light a candle rather than curse the darkness. The greatest challenge of my life lay ahead. I would join the army of those fighting for the greatest victims of HIV/AIDS—the orphan and the widow.

In Chapter 3 I’ll tell the story of how this “calling” came to be. I was aware from the outset that there was more to a vocation than a mere call to action. There had to be both vision and mission, strategy and action, passion and faithfulness. In other words, youthful energy had to be tempered with mature experience. There had to be initiative, follow through, accountability, and measurability. Maybe this is why the biggest chapter of my life opened at age fifty-two. The wine had to mature before being poured out.

What you’re about to read is not the work of a “do-gooder.” The scope of the horrors of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is too great for do-gooders. It eviscerates the merely idealistic. To even hope to make

a difference in fighting humankind's greatest threat in history, one must have a sense of mandate—marching orders from above. Only strength from on high can sustain an overwhelmed and overmatched soldier. My constant companion in this battle is humility. I've never felt so inadequate or dependent. Or so little.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic is beyond fearful. Language cannot convey the devastation, so I will let stories of the valiant, the suffering, and the dying speak.

In the book I'll try to describe how the Almighty sees orphans and widows. I'll explore two of the critical ingredients in understanding the DNA of authentic faith. I also have strong words for the Church and for you, the reader, and your community.

I hope this book changes your life. My life and my wife Kathy's have been changed. And isn't that what scripture does? It's a mighty transformer wrestling with our self-absorption. So, wrestle with me. As we're changed, maybe we can change the world.

Journal

“Here I am, Lord, send me.”



When I was a young boy, Africa didn't exist. Nor did Canada, America, nor the oceans for that matter. I lived in a cozy, mysterious, and exciting place called Kelvington, Saskatchewan. I didn't know it was a small town. For me it was the world.

I loved exploring that world. Just beyond the alleyway bounding our backyard was a lumber storage ground with intriguing stacks of lengths of wood arranged in rectangular piles. I spent hours climbing in, through, and over those stacks, sometimes launching myself through the air from pile to pile, sometimes landing on my stomach and getting winded as a consequence.

A little farther afield was Dempster's Pond, a slough of stagnant water that grew scummy and smelly in the heat of summer. It was a perfect destination when you were seven, especially if you had a dog. I did, and his name was Rocky. He loved water—any kind of water, anywhere, anytime. (In fact, he once jumped out of the window of our moving car when he spotted a slough, one very hot summer's day!) There were water lilies, skating spiders, bugs, tadpoles, garter snakes, snails, toads, frogs, and all of the other treasures valued by young boys. I'd make rafts out of stray pieces of wood, and pretend I was a pirate, with Rocky as first mate. We'd play all day, returning home in the late afternoon, filthy, but glowing with health. Often the first thing Mother would do was douse us both in buckets of fresh water. She said we smelled.

About a mile and a half from Dempster's, on the opposite side of town, was the town dump (or “nuisance grounds” as the locals called it).

Journal

It too was a smelly place where competing odors reached out to befoul or scorch your nostrils. Rotting food, mildewed clothing, broken glass, burning trash, dead pets(!) in various stages of wormy decay, rats, and centipedes made this place a must-visit destination for a kid. I would root about, uncovering valuables, and, even though I was young, gaining insights into the lives of the townspeople from what they had thrown away. I remember being impressed at the volume of stuff people discarded; in my home (the home of the town preacher) it seemed we threw nothing away. Making ends meet meant stretching the usefulness of seemingly every scrap.

Perhaps my favorite place to explore was the three grain elevators situated at the train station on the edge of town. The massive steam locomotives used to chug right up to these leviathans and car after car of golden grain poured down the chutes from above, as lines of wagons and trucks full of grain waited their turn to empty their cargo into the bins. What magic! The puffing and steaming of the locomotives, the colorful train engineers, the squealing of brakes laboring under the weight of tons of steel and grain, the wooden elevators—"prairie skyscrapers"—with their distinct odors of wheat and birds, the farmers with their wagons, the kids, the dogs, the transients "ridin' the rails," the bakery next to the station, the smell of freshly baked bread, coffee ... I loved it.

What I loved most was the "forbidden fruit" of climbing up inside the elevators, where a whole universe of adventure awaited. Essentially an elevator was a granary on steroids. About 60 by 60 feet square, they extended anywhere from 80 to 100 feet upwards, capped with sloping "shoulders" and a small peaked "head." Sometimes on a rainy day that head was lost in the clouds. Constructed of wood, they had a sweet-smelling presence that cracked and groaned with the wind. They sounded and felt alive.

Inside were vertical swimming-pool-sized storage bins that were accessed by baffled portals on the outside (for the grain chutes and augers) and by ladders on the inside (for men to open and close internal chutes for mixing the grain, clear stuck portals, and deal with birds' nests and rodents). The ladders were attached to the walls and

climbing them was an effort physically and psychologically. Occasionally a worker would slip, or have a sudden case of vertigo, and fall into one of the bins. This would sometimes precipitate a “grain slide” and the worker would be smothered. This was why “unofficial” visits to the interior were frowned upon. The elevator manager and his employees were the only ones allowed in. Everyone else, especially seven-year-old boys, were strictly forbidden entry.

There was, however, a weak link in this impermeable fence; his name was Gus Johnson. He was a shoveler, standing in the wagons shoveling grain into buckets attached to ropes and pulleys that carried the harvest up to various levels of the elevator. He was thin, sinewy, and could work nonstop for hours at a time. It didn't seem to bother him when his sweaty body became caked with detritus, or his eyes encrusted with grain dust. I'm sure his lungs were coated too; indeed, the interior of an elevator was always dusty. Light streaming through cracks and knotholes could be seen clearly like laser-beams illuminating the polluted air. Gus was simple, toothless, and kind. And he had a soft spot for adventurers. Every time I wanted to explore, he managed to create a diversion while I crawled in through the “secret passageway” created by a few broken boards at the back. As soon as I was in, I felt the hush of another world.

I say “hush” because sometimes the diesel engine powering the rope and pulley system would be silent, the workers quietly eating in their lunchroom, the train and trucks still, and all you could hear was the twittering of the swallows and the groaning aches and pains of a large wooden building suffering the internal pressure of tons of grain testing its structural integrity. The dusty air made no sound, but in the streams of light filtering through from outside, you could see it pulsating, as if the elevator were breathing. Not far from my secret passageway the first ladder ascended. Standing at its foot I could look up, up, up through the shimmering air, all the way to the headhouse or cupola at the top. Often, as I looked up in the stillness, I would have a sense of the holy. It was as though I had entered a cathedral.

Interestingly, at other times, in the bowels of this behemoth, with ropes whizzing, pulleys screeching, tons of grain being dumped, chutes

Journal

singing, dust exploding, I still felt the spiritual quality it possessed. The headhouse was always my goal. Up there, even when the elevator was in full operation, I felt removed from the life below. I had a favorite spot, a massive beam of timber, where I could sit and think. The wonder of the machinery was eclipsed by wonder itself. As I looked out through a knothole to the whitened harvest fields stretching to the horizon, I wondered what was beyond. And what was beyond the beyond. My childish soul was beginning to stretch. Sometimes I felt like I was on the threshold of heaven.

One early September morning I had a lot to think and wonder about. A missionary from Africa had spoken at our church the day previous, and had stayed with us that night. He had shown us a movie at service that he had taken and I had watched in total fascination. It had seemed as if I were looking at life on another planet—mud huts, dark-skinned people, strange costumes, wild dancing, exuberant church services, weird-looking food, and strange language. I had been entranced by this. When we got home from the service the missionary set up his projector and showed the movie again, this time to Mom, Dad, my brother, and me. I found it just as intoxicating the second time. And it scared me. This was a world I didn't know existed, and I felt inextricably drawn to it. It was more than Africa, it was the draw of the far horizon. That movie marked the birth of a world view, one that has continued to grow to this day.

I sat on my perch in the headhouse, pondering. Who were these people in the movie? How could they live that way? How could they be so hungry and yet so happy? And those sick kids, don't they have doctors? That kid with malaria, sweating and trembling, the missionary enters the hut, prays for him, and the next day he's well—what is healing? Does this mean they don't need doctors because God is their doctor? What about that food? Yucky-looking stuff. Gross. Does God love them like he loves us? What do they smell like? This country, Africa, must be far, far away. Must be exciting riding in that ship. What does seasick feel like? I think I'd like to go there some day. When I grow up maybe I will.

My headhouse reverie was cut short by the clanging of a bell far below. I jumped to my feet, thinking it was a fire alarm. Trapped in

the immediate conflict of wanting to escape but also not wanting to be caught I began to quickly, but cautiously, descend. As I got to the third storey I heard loud voices and a desperate cry from the second-storey bin. I looked down between my feet and caught sight of two men throwing a rope.

“Hang on to this Emmitt, quick! Emmitt! Emmitt! Here! Grab this!”

Emmitt, one of the workers, had gone up to the second-storey bin for some reason, and had slipped and fallen into the grain. Like quicksand, it had engulfed him. Now, only his head and one arm were visible. He was in big trouble.

Hooking an arm through one of the rungs, I watched in horror as Emmitt was suddenly covered with a slide of unstable grain. One of the men, a rope tied around his waist, jumped in after him, while the other held both ropes and called loudly for help. I could hear, and then saw, two more men scrabbling up the ladder. In a moment three of them were shouting instructions and hauling on the ropes. An eternal minute later, a bedraggled and coughing Emmitt emerged, his rescuers clapping him on the back and congratulating one another on their success. They all descended to the ground floor while I remained, unseen and rooted to the spot.

After gathering myself, I silently descended to my secret passageway and crawled out into the sunshine. I was shaken. I sat for an hour or so, my back against the wall of the elevator, my head beneath the level of the long grass around me. I had seen a man almost die. And, in a heart-pounding sequence, I'd seen him rescued by his friends. My mind went back to the hymn we had sung after the missionary's film, “Rescue the Perishing.” He'd said the Africans were “perishing” and we needed to “save” them. God needed laborers for the harvest field of lost people. “Would you go?” the missionary had asked.

I was only a prairie preacher's boy, seven years of age. I had only heard the “call” to Africa yesterday. I'd just seen a perishing man rescued today. Suddenly I wanted to be a rescuer. Looking up past the headhouse, way, way above me, I breathed a prayer to heaven

Journal

that I imagined was spiraling up in the thermals like the swallows wheeling overhead. I remembered my dad's sermon the week previous, and prayed, "Here I am, Lord, send me."

Chapter 1

Righteousness and Justice: The Foundation of Authentic Faith



It's a long flight from New York to Johannesburg. For seventeen hours you hunker down in your assigned space, armrests digging into your hips, knees bumped intermittently by the person in front of you who has to get the angle of his seatback just right, flight attendants, passengers, and serving carts colliding with your over-broad shoulders jutting out into the aisle, the child behind you coughing constantly with the occasional bits of phlegmy detritus hitting your head, and ... well, you get the picture. It's a very long flight.

Kathy and I have often thought that perhaps it's good that the flight is long. Long means distance. And distance—the more of it the better—seems to justify the jolt when the very next day you find yourself in a totally foreign culture, surrounded by poverty, disease, and death. Somehow the distance, the dislocation, even the jetlag, provide the buffer you need so that the culture shock doesn't paralyze you. If it weren't for the distance, you'd feel you'd been transported to another world, a parallel universe, blind-sided by a bad dream. Those seventeen hours give you time to take some deep breaths before plunging into the deep, dark waters of Africa.

As we took the plunge for the first time (how it came to be I'll describe in a later chapter), we had no idea what lay in store. We had been to Africa before, but for a different purpose. Then it had been to speak at conferences, to inspire preachers and pastors, to share what we had learned about church ministry. Now, instead of dealing from a position of strength as veterans, my wife and I were total rookies, knowing nothing of substance about HIV/AIDS or of its victims, pursuing a vision we had for the churches of Africa, becoming Mother Teresas in the cold, black night that the pandemic had unleashed upon the continent. We had never seen an HIV-positive African. We had

never held a diseased baby in our arms. We had never entered a *ron-davaal*, or bathed the fevered head of someone dying a horrible death. We were just plain folk—middle-income North Americans, shaped by our culture, living with an unconscious sense of entitlement, relatively free from the sorrows that plague two-thirds of our world. We had come to do good, but had no idea what that good would be. We were in way over our heads.

Just hours after touchdown at the ultra-modern Johannesburg International Airport, we were in a rental car driving to White River in northeastern South Africa. It had been years since I'd driven on the left side of the road while on holiday in the UK, and I'd learned a valuable mantra then, one I muttered continually to myself as we drove, "Stay left, look right—stay left, look right—stay left, look right." The problem all of us North Americans have, both driving and walking, in countries with left-side driving is that we automatically look left when we stop at an intersection. Seeing all clear, we confidently step or drive out only to get clobbered by a car approaching us from the right. This is why you often see "Look Right" written into the pavement at intersections in the UK. They don't want to see their visitors t-boned.

So, staying left and looking right, Kathy and I drove a beautiful highway bounded by sweeping fields of corn, grain, and sugar cane; and, as we got closer to White River, the majestic Drakensburg mountains. In contrast to what we would see in later travels to other African countries, the vehicles on the highway were generally late models and well maintained. There were occasional "beaters" on the road belching black smoke; and, if they happened to be trucks, severely overloaded with cargo, poorly secured and out-of-plumb. Many times I held my breath passing trucks whose trailer loads were in imminent danger of falling onto the road. But overall the trip was uneventful. We stopped a couple of times at roadside service centers and were amazed at how clean and modern they were—pristine even, compared to some of their counterparts in North America. We relaxed and enjoyed the ride, unaware of the world we would enter just a few hours down the road.

Masoyi Home-Based Care

Our destination was a rural area outside of White River called Masoyi. A former “homeland” (from the apartheid era), it’s a large settlement of humble homes situated on the rolling and sometimes dramatic hill country between White River and the Mozambique border. It also butts onto the southern edge of Kruger National Park, one of the most impressive game reserves in the world. About 250,000 people live in Masoyi, and, we were to learn later, 90 percent of the children there don’t know who their fathers are. HIV/AIDS is running rampant in the area, and almost every one of those little hovels houses a victim of the pandemic.

Lions Head, a massive hill that looks like a male lion gazing out to the horizon, dominates Masoyi. Right at the foot of this imposing sight is a small ministry training center and state-of-the-art HIV/AIDS clinic. It was here that our hosts awaited us. The gentle volunteers of Masoyi Home-Based Care were about to introduce us to their world.

“Pasta Jim! Welcome!” exclaimed Ma Glo (Mother Gloria), the leader of the volunteers. “We’re so pleased to meet you! This is your wife?”

“Yes,” I answered. “This is Kathy.”

“Kati!” Giving her a huge hug she took Kathy by the arm and led us into the small building where the volunteers were preparing for that day’s home visits. Ma Glo introduced us to the seven women and two men. The women shyly curtsied and the men bowed as we shook hands. The African way of shaking hands is a three-part ritual: firm clasp and shake, unclasp and join hands in what I refer to as a modified arm-wrestle and shake, unclasp and clasp again in the conventional way and shake. Sometimes I forget about the three steps, withdrawing my hand after the first clasp and shake, leaving my African friends with their hands poised for clasp two. When my hand is not forthcoming, their faces betray a touch of surprise and disappointment, but they quickly recover, observing to themselves, no doubt, that we Westerners have a different handshaking protocol. Generally, though, I remember, and the three-part shake does its work; you feel like you’ve physically connected and the welcome is always warm.

The founder of Masoyi Home-Based Care and I had met about ten months previously in Johannesburg. He and I had started our charities at

about the same time. In that first meeting we marveled at the similarity in the core values of our vision, especially the commitment to engaging local churches in the battle against HIV/AIDS and the care of its victims. We found ourselves to be kindred spirits and expected that one day we would work together. So, here we were, at his base in Masoyi, about to begin a path that would lead eventually to a strategic partnership.

Ma Glo gave us a brief orientation. She showed us the supplies stockpiled in the building. There were several piles of bagged cornmeal, about a dozen baskets of root vegetables, cans of cooking oil, and about ten shelves of rudimentary pharmaceuticals, bandages, and rubber gloves.

“This is about five days’ supply,” she said. “The local churches with whom we work and a few international donors make sure we’re at least five days ahead of the need. Sometimes, however, we run short...” and her voice trailed off. Recovering quickly she went on.

“The cornmeal and the oil are for the homes we visit, the root vegetables are for the volunteers.”

“Do you pay them anything?” Kathy asked.

“No, we don’t. We can’t. But we do give them enough food to keep their strength up. Home-based care is strenuous work, and most of these women are widows themselves with very small incomes. They’re helping the helpless. The least we can do is help them eat.”

Taking us into a small room next to the main entry, she showed us their administration setup.

“That computer is old, but it works,” she said brightly. “We keep updated records of every home visit we make, and the condition of the people we care for. We also have a fax machine, as you can see, and that helps us connect with our overseas donors. We hope to have e-mail soon. That will be a real blessing.”

Turning to a list on the wall she showed us the names and phone numbers of the local social services, hospitals, and related NGOs. “We keep in touch with all of these,” she said. “We don’t want to work in isolation. Plus, there are times when the social services must be informed of what we encounter, and many times we have to transport people to the hospital in Nelspruit.”

“Are they cooperative?” I asked.

“Who? The hospitals?”

“Yeah. And the others. Do they respond quickly to your calls?”

“Usually. But they’re understaffed, underfunded, and frankly envy our ability to recruit volunteers. Nothing like followers of Jesus responding to the broken, you know,” her face beamed. “We feel the responsibility is ours to help everyone. It’s just that we’re a bit stretched at times.”

“So, how is the day to unfold?” I asked, perhaps a bit presumptuously.

“Well, normally we’re out by ten in the morning. But, we waited for you today so we’ll leave at about eleven. While we waited we divided the group into pairs and have assigned each pair four homes in different parts of Masoyi. Their bags are packed with the medical supplies they’ll need, and they’re ready to go after we pray.”

“What about the sacks of cornmeal?” Kathy asked.

“Oh, those go out in a truck once a week. They’re too heavy to carry ourselves. In fact, the medical bags are heavy enough. We walk, you know.”

“How far?”

“About six miles each time, but it’s no problem. Everyone walks in Masoyi.”

After a time of glorious singing and powerful praying (welcome to Africa!), the entire group with their heavy bags crowded with us into a van and two small pickup trucks called *bakkies*. We drove about 6 miles into the central part of Masoyi where we met up with ten more volunteers who had assembled and prepared for the day at another Masoyi Home-Based Care base. More singing. More praying. And we’re off—Kathy walking with one pair of Home-Based caregivers, I with another.

Into the Fire

It’s high noon, hot and dusty. We’ve hardly walked a mile and I’m already plodding. My head hurts. Jetlag is doing its foul work. When you’re jetlagged, you feel like you did as a teenager after you’d stayed up all night on New Year’s Eve. During the all-nighter you thrived on adrenaline. On the way home about sunrise, you felt a dullness coming

on. About ten or eleven that morning, your head felt like it weighed 30 pounds, your chest and shoulders ached, and your feet felt glued to the ground. You crashed. Went to bed and slept for ten hours, wide-awake at midnight, about to go through another cycle of dislocation. Even your eyes hurt.

Well, combine all of the above with heat, dirt, and total foreignness. I'm walking roads that most White people, let alone Westerners, have never seen. They're narrow, rough-hewn, more like riverbeds than roads, leading like alleyways through a disordered jumble of makeshift homes. Little children in oversized hand-me-down clothing watch me from the darkened doorways, caught between fascination and flight. They've been told about the White bogeymen who come to steal children away at night. I see five- and six-year-old girls with babies on their backs, and loads of water or wood on their heads, their eyes curious, their faces blank. Thin, gaunt women, bent at the waist sweeping the sandy ground in front of their houses with a short-handled broom, freeze, eyeing me with a sort of benign suspicion. One or two straighten up and wave. We wave back. African dogs are everywhere. In the West we're used to various breeds. Here only one breed prevails—it looks like a cross between a wild dog and a rat. Short, tan-colored fur, large ears, pointy face, pointy tail, thin, really thin, always hungry, never playing, avoiding people like they're avoiding a kick, never friendly, looking like canine wraiths.

“What do they eat?” I ask my companions.

“Rats, snakes, garbage, whatever they can steal.”

“Do you like dogs?”

“No.”

“Do they have names?”

“No. Maybe. Sometimes.”

“So why do you have them?”

“Because they're there. Like trees or weeds. Plus they keep the rats out of our homes.”

My companions are Marcus and Naomi. Marcus is a student at the college, and has qualifications as a nurse's aide. Naomi wants to be a nurse. She just doesn't have the money for university. They're both young and sweet and care a lot about the victims of HIV/AIDS. They

may not be able to give expert care, but they're very able and willing to give their hearts. In them I see hope for the future of home-based care. There will always be widows willing to volunteer, but these two will be able one day, in the prime of their lives, to train and supervise volunteers. We've just got to get Naomi and others like her the training she needs now. A few dollars invested in her university education will bear huge dividends in the future.

Our first stop. We walk down a steep hill to a cement-block structure with rusty tin secured to the flat roof with large stones, one or two cement blocks, and an old car tire. An elderly woman is bent over an open fire, stirring something in a charcoal-black pot. She looks up, acknowledging us with a faint nod of her head, and motions us over to the door. This cool welcome, if welcome at all, is something I see over and over again as the years pass. I still can't figure it out. Why would you not receive someone warmly who has come to help you care for your dying loved one? My only thought is that it's because they're so worn out. Caring for someone who is dying is a relentless task. There's no relief. There's no hope. There's no thanks. So maybe the granny has no energy left. Not even enough to crack a smile. Maybe she's more dead than alive.

The patient is her twenty-seven-year-old son. He lies in the kitchen of the two-room house, his bed the back seat taken from an abandoned car. His head and his feet extend over the ends of the car seat. His face is gaunt, cheekbones and eyes protruding, ribs prominent, legs as thin as sticks. He wears only the bottoms of undersized, striped pajamas. His lips are cracked, and his skin is covered with sores. He lifts his head momentarily as we enter, then with a sigh lowers it again. His name is Nathan, and he looks like a very old, sick man.

Naomi sees the cracked lips and immediately goes outside to get water. Marcus begins to apply topical cream to his sores. As he does so, he talks with Nathan in a quiet, affirming manner. Nathan responds weakly, but at least he responds. Marcus questions him about his aches, pains, and fever, making notes in the log as Nathan painfully answers. The granny stays outside. I hear Naomi calmly but strongly urging her to keep Nathan hydrated. Marcus introduces me to Nathan. I take his hand—probably the hottest hand I've ever touched.

“He’s burning up!” I remark to Marcus.

“Yeah, I know. He needs some *panado* (South African aspirin).” “Here, Nathan, take this.” Nathan lifts his head with effort and swallows the pills with a cup of water that Naomi has just brought in. He swallows with excruciating difficulty, choking and coughing, bloody phlegm emerging from the corners of his mouth. While Marcus deals with this, Naomi calls the granny in, and kindly lectures her about Nathan’s need for water, *panado*, and topical relief of his sores. She gives her the pills and the cream, and sternly says, “We’ll be back next week. I hope I don’t find him thirsty again.” (Maybe this is why she gave us no welcome, I think.) They ask me to pray. I pray for comfort, for relief, for faith. The words come from my mouth. My heart is empty. I feel like a phony. I’m overcome with sorrow. What if this boy was one of my own two sons?

Over the next few hours I see sorrow on sorrow. Gladys, seventeen years old, hollow-cheeked and thin, sits in the doorway of her one-room cement shack, a plastic bag of breadcrumbs at her side, her only food for the day, too weak to do anything but shuffle over to the thorn tree to relieve herself. Dorcas, twenty, lies on her plastic-covered mattress, ugly bed sores on her bony hips, her one-year-old son crying for food. Emmanuel, all by himself, a thirty-year-old skeleton, walks slowly to the toilet, stopping to throw up on the way. We return to base. I’m destroyed.

Kathy returns a few minutes later. She’s distraught. We silently move to the shade of a two-barreled water tower and she says, “Jim, there’s this young mother, three kids, lying on her bed, unable to get up. I’m sure she’ll die tonight. Her kids are so little, so helpless, sitting there with her, crying. Ma Glo has got to get her to the clinic. Now!”

With that, she half-runs over to Ma Glo, who has just returned from her rounds. I see Kathy urgently speaking to her, her face lined with concern, her hands gesticulating, her body taut with focus and determination. Ma Glo takes out her cellphone. I see her talking for a minute or two. She turns to Kathy, says something, and Kathy returns to me.

“They’re sending a truck. Ma Glo is going to get her to the clinic. I hope it’s not too late.”

We drive back to base number one. Ma Glo rides with us. We talk about the day. She tells us this is just another of an endless day of sorrows. “We do what we can,” she sighs, “for Jesus’s sake.” We drop her and the others off and drive to our country guesthouse. We eat in silence, the food wooden and tasteless. *What have we gotten ourselves into?*



The Televangelist and the Teddy Bear

A fourteen-year-old girl in Lusaka, Zambia is talking to a journalist about HIV/AIDS.

“My girlfriends and I have discovered how to avoid HIV/AIDS,” she says.

“Really?” says the journalist. “How?”

“Don’t sleep with the pastor,” she replies.

What! Don’t sleep with the pastor? The man who “shepherds” the flock? The man of God? The man who above all men should be trusted, with whom all little girls should feel safe? Don’t sleep with the pastor? Where’s the righteousness?

And where’s the justice? The pastor as predator? The pastor as transmitter of death? The pastor as abuser? When and how did the confession “I am a Christian” lose its meaning? And where is the heavenly father and judge in all of this? Has he somehow vanished from the landscape?

I first heard this story when we started our work with HIV/AIDS in January 2000. It troubled me deeply then; it troubles me now. And it evokes a memory of similar disquiet back in the 1980s when the Israeli press asked me to give them a press conference on the American televangelist scandals.

“Mr. Swaggart” and “Mr. Bakker” were mentioned by name only once—and with respect. The Israelis seemed more tuned to human frailty and compassion in their coverage of the scandals than were the North American press. What intrigued them was Americans’ shock at the behavior of these televangelists. When I observed that we expect preachers specifically and all Christians generally to practise what they preach, one of the reporters said, “Yes, but men, be they

preachers or no, need sex, right?” When I responded, “Your own scriptures teach that sex is exclusively for marriage,” they laughed. Politely. But they laughed. As far as they were concerned, the big story wasn’t about sexual peccadilloes, but about the unreal moral code of Christians—a code that was flaunted in the pulpit, and denied in the bedroom, by preachers who showed their true colors in the dark. I think what troubled me the most about this exchange was the Israeli press’s view that a high view of sex was aberrant, and that the televangelists had done us all a favor by stripping off the veneer of moral rectitude and exposing good old-fashioned hypocrisy.

One of the reporters scored a huge point when he said, “Aren’t these televangelists the guys who manipulate our scriptures and come up with prophecies about Israel and the end of the world? You know, sometimes they make us think. Now, I don’t know what to think.”

This hit home for I’d just been dealing with “end-time” weirdness that week. A woman from Texas had dropped by my office. She had that wild look in her eye that I had seen countless times before in Jerusalem. And like so many others before her, she had had a “revelation” that God wanted her to go to the Holy City. But her “calling” had been a bit more novel than most.

“You know, Pastor, I was walking home from my church in Houston a few Sundays ago, and, just as I approached my house, I saw my daughter’s teddy bear on the sidewalk, so I bent down to pick it up, and you know what, Pastor? The teddy bear spoke to me!” I was speechless.

“And you probably want to know what it said?” she asked. I nodded dumbly.

“Get thee to Jerusalem and become a watchman on the walls,” it said.

“So here I am,” she exclaimed triumphantly. “What should I do now?”

I won’t tell you what I thought, or said (although I did wonder irreverently if the teddy bear had spoken with a Texan accent). But it was one of those “watchman-on-the-walls,” wide-eyed, out-of-focus, glazed, true-believer conversations that I never invited but often fell into because of my position as pastor of the largest Protestant evangelical church in Israel. Jerusalem as a mecca attracts “flakes” like

food attracts flies, and I've had more than my share land on me. People call this weirdness "The Jerusalem Syndrome." Call it what you will, religious zealotry knows no bounds. It seems there are no theological checks and balances to rein it in.

So the Texas teddy bear and the televangelist fiasco pushed me over the edge. I called in my staff after that and declared that I didn't care how long it would take, or how hard I would have to work, I was going to study every prophetic passage in the Old Testament. I wanted to see if there was a crystalized message, a common theme or denominator, a recurring thread that would bring some sanity, some consistency, some integrity to the interpretation of biblical writings about the "end of days." I'd had it with boneheads.

Distilling the Message

It took a year, but I discovered that there is a common message in Old Testament prophetic passages. (Before I tell you what it is, you should know that prophecy in the Bible is more about "forth-telling" than "fore-telling." There are occasional future themes in Old Testament prophecy, but generally a prophecy is given by a "prophet" concerned with a present-day issue. He or she speaks, usually to the national leadership, about a value, circumstance, cultural trend, or political/religious tendency that has gone missing or is in need of correction. The "word" is often like a fist to the jaw, but always ends on a positive note.) That message is a call to Israel to return to the right relationship with God and the right relationship with neighbor. Or, to put it succinctly, the Old Testament prophets want us to be righteous and just.

The prophetic passages of the Old Testament are many and varied. There are the "major" prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel; the "minor" works like Amos, Hosea, and Habakkuk (to name a few), and then there are sporadic prophetic words—sometimes a paragraph or two, sometimes a sentence—that occur in "non-prophetic" books like Genesis or Deuteronomy, and even in the Psalms. The core concerns of most prophetic messages generally refer to one of four "sins": idolatry (a low view of God), adultery (a low view of neighbor), neglect of the poor (again, a low view of neighbor), and the shedding of innocent blood (once more, a low view of neighbor). The sin of idolatry

is usually seen as a process. Israel “forgets” the name of the Lord and then replaces him with someone or something else. They settle for a dumb idol, and in so doing are guilty of a low view of God (the sin of unrighteousness). The sins of adultery, neglect of the poor, and shedding innocent blood put self before other, and betray a low view of neighbor (the sin of injustice). The call of scripture is that Israel return to a “high view of God” (righteousness) and a “high view of neighbor” (justice). The focus of righteousness is love for God. The focus of justice is love for neighbor. And if someone in Old Testament times were to ask the question, “Who is my neighbor?,” the answer would be, “start with the alien, the orphan, and the widow.”

Jesus himself captured the prophetic call of the Old Testament when he responded to a young lawyer seeking to know what it was that God expected of him. “What’s the bottom line of God’s expectation?” was the essential question. Jesus’s answer? It’s recorded three times in the gospels, and here it is in summary: “Israel has one God, and he is one. Love him with everything you are and have. Love your neighbor the same way—and, yes, love yourself that way too.” And, to emphasize the point, he goes on to say, “There is no law of God greater than righteousness [love for God] and justice [love for neighbor]. All of God’s expectations of you are there. Be righteous and just and you will live both now and in the everlasting world that awaits” (see Mk. 12:28–31; Mt. 22:34–40; Lk. 10:25–28). Notice there’s no call to religiosity or dogma here. It is purely a call to love of God and neighbor. Static compliance to the letter of the law gives way to a fluid pursuit of the spirit of the law where righteousness and justice are the fuel of freedom.

Here is just a taste of those Old Testament prophetic words: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you” (Ps. 89:14). “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line...” (Isa. 28:17). Everything that God builds (in this case, “Zion,” v. 16), he builds on the foundation and through the lens of righteousness and justice. None of us would ever enter a building or cross a bridge if we didn’t believe that the builders knew and practised proper measurement and plumb. Without these skills the building collapses and people inside die; the bridge gives way

and cars plunge into the canyon. So too righteousness and justice are critical to sustainability.

By the way, Isaiah also presents the obverse: when referring to God's coming judgment of the nation of Edom, Isaiah says, "God will stretch out over Edom the measuring line of chaos and the plumb line of desolation" (34:11b). So we choose: will it be righteousness or desolation, justice or chaos? Two of the "classic" prophetic words come from the "minor" prophets Amos and Micah: "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Am. 5:24)! "He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Mic. 6:8). In the materialism of Amos's and Micah's day, Israel had forgotten their God, were arrogant, and abusive of their neighbors, who "trample the needy ... buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals" (Am. 8:1-6). God was so angry with them that he threatened to send the worst famine possible, "a famine of hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11). As for their religion? "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies..." (5:21). Religious devotion without righteousness and justice is a mockery. Only those who "seek me" will "live," declares the Lord (5:4b). There are no short-cuts to divine favor.

I was powerfully reminded of this symbiotic relationship between righteousness and justice in a conversation with a young widow in Kabwe, Zambia. We met when my wife, Kathy, and I were visiting one of our Home-Based Care volunteer groups in an outlying area called Makululu. Her name was Victoria. She had three young children of her own. She was twenty-six years old.

"So why are you here?" I asked. "I mean, you're a widow yourself, yet you're helping other widows."

"They need help," she answered shyly.

"Do you need help too?"

"Yes."

"For your kids?"

"Yes."

"Are they sick?"

"No."

“Are they hungry?”

“Yes.”

“So where do you get food?”

Looking away, then slowly upward, she responded quietly, but with strength, “The Lord looks after us.”

And, after a long silence, she said, “He is so faithful. I must be too.”

“That’s why you’re here as a volunteer?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I was in the presence of a modern-day Job. And Job’s wife was present within me. I was from the planet where self-indulgence and individualism ruled. She was from the planet where self-love was abhorrent if it had no counterbalance in love for God and neighbor. She knew *Yahweh Yireh* (“God will provide”). She also knew her neighbor. And she loved both.

Victoria was righteous and just. Living on less than a dollar a day, she was nonetheless fully alive. Adversity had fine-tuned her intuitive knowledge of God and she had hit the sweet spot of the prophetic call. Without theological training she had discovered what one old theologian identified as “the transitive holiness of God.”

Holy and Unholy

Before God is anything, he is holy. Spiritually and morally, he is perfect. There is no flaw, no imperfection in him, nor is his holiness ever whimsical or lacking integrity. Eternally he is God, eternally he is holy, eternally he lives apart from his creation, even while he is present everywhere in his love and care.

We, on the other hand, are anything but holy. Spiritually and morally imperfect, we are consistently inconsistent, driven and distracted, dominated by relentless appetites.

For many of us “dysfunction” is our middle name. We spend most of our energies living for ourselves. Captive in space and time we are able, in our best moments, to temporarily approach the outskirts of the heavenlies, but usually we plod about here on earth, our feet not only made of, but weighted down with, great globs of clay. Any connection with God or neighbor seems to be subject to some sort of short-circuit, which presents a problem.

How does our eternal Creator, who “loves us with an everlasting love,” relate to us space/timers when we’re so unholy? How does “holy” commune with “unholy”? Is there a mechanism, a process, a system? If so, what does it look like? What are its constituent ingredients? How does he “transition” his holiness?

To answer these questions requires another book. But, the two essential ingredients you can guess: they are righteousness and justice.

God has got to do what God has got to do. And he has got to be what he is, not what he’s not. He cannot act outside of or beyond his nature. For instance, he cannot lie. He cannot pretend to be what he isn’t. He cannot turn a blind eye to sin. He cannot say, “Well, boys will be boys,” and let the sinner off the hook without punishing him. His relentless holiness drives everything that he is and does. Yet, even while his holiness requires retribution, his love for us calls for mercy. So, what does he do?

He reveals himself as righteous and just. In righteousness he uncovers his love of holiness; in justice his hatred of sin and its byproducts (broken lives). And as for us, he makes it clear that when we aspire to relate to him, we must embrace the moral expectation of righteousness and accept the judicial consequences of failure. When we look to our neighbor, we must do the same. To be righteous and just, we must fulfill the requirements of relationship with heaven and earth. Otherwise, our Maker must pass us by.

This is more than a touch onerous, we may think; indeed, it appears grossly unfair. God doesn’t require these exacting standards of dogs or horses. Why is he picking on us? Because, unlike the rest of creation, we have been created “in His image” (Gen. 1:27). He expects and demands more of us because we’re the only ones who are like him. And he intends to see us holy when we reach “the other side.” To that end, he insists that we possess the DNA of righteousness and justice in space and time, so that we can truly be “the planting of the Lord” when we see and fellowship with him “face to face.”

“Yes, but,” we stammer. “We try to be righteous and just, but we never succeed. We don’t have what it takes.” Like Isaiah we see ourselves as inexpressibly unclean, leprous even. With him we cry, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (6:5). Righteousness is beyond us. Retribution awaits.

But God, who “is rich in mercy,” says, “Yes, you are unclean. Yes, you deserve death for your sin. But here’s the deal. Let me become sin for you, even though I know no sin. Let me take your punishment for you. Let me become your righteousness.” Enter Jesus, the Lamb of God, stage right. Redeemed, we exit, stage left. In Christ we are made new creatures. In him we “live and move and have our being” (Acts. 17:28). Because of him we’re able to live the only kind of “religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless” (Jas. 1:27). We “look after orphans and widows in their distress” (justice) and “keep [ourselves] from being polluted by the world” (righteousness). In Christ we are declared righteous. Empowered by Christ, we are able to act justly. In Christ, and only in him, we are “perfect ... as [our] heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48). Thus, Africa has a Victoria who knows “the Name” and the names of the poor. And, North America has me, who is only beginning to get acquainted with both. That’s why I’m praying that I will “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).



James, Job, and John Milton

If the righteous are not just, they’re not righteous at all. James, Jesus’s half-brother, put it well: “What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (Jas. 2:14–17).

My hero, Job, is a great example of a *zadik* (“a righteous man”). He was a man who “rescued the poor” and the “fatherless,” who cared for the “dying,” assisted the “blind” and the “lame,” and was a “father” or “provider” for the needy. He made “the widows’ hearts to sing for joy.” He rescued “victims” from the “fangs of the wicked.” In summary, he says, “I put on righteousness as my clothing; justice was my robe and my turban” (Job 29:12–17). He was the kind of man who “exalts a

nation” (Prov. 14:34). He was righteous both in word and in deed. He practised what he preached.

Job’s mantle was justice, or *zadkah* in Hebrew. Here’s a second word, *shefet*. Whereas *zadkah* (the noun for *zedek*) has a dual meaning (“righteousness, justice”), *mishpat* (the noun for *shefet*) means basically one thing: justice (although there are nuances of “ordinance, custom, manner”). It is a powerful word, especially when you realize that it describes Israel’s messiah’s mandate: “I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1). And the integrity of the Almighty’s judgments resonates with unassailable purity. “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (“Will not the ‘Shofet’ of all the earth do ‘mishpat?’” Gen. 18:25). Won’t the judge do justice? Of course he will, for he is “*elohe mishpat Yahweh*,” the “God of justice” (Isa. 30:18b). He “loves the just” (Ps. 37:28), or as the New Living Translation puts it, “the Lord loves justice.”

Just as justice is an attribute of God, and all true justice (like all true creativity) finds its source in him, we, who have been created “in his image,” are to be just in our relationships and in our judicial processes. We are to be just in our speaking, our thinking, and in our doing: “The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just” (Ps. 37:30); “The plans of the righteous are just...” (Prov. 12:5); “And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Mic. 6:8). When we act justly and do justice, “it brings joy to the righteous but terror to evildoers” (Prov. 21:15). Justice is more than a byproduct of righteousness, it is what the *zadikim* do, much to the discomfort of the unrighteous. John Milton, that great poet, put it this way: “Truth and justice are all one; for truth is but justice in our knowledge, and justice is but truth in our practice. ... For truth is properly no more than contemplation, and her utmost efficiency is but teaching; but justice in her very essence is all strength and activity, and hath a sword put into her hand to use against all violence and oppression on earth” (John Milton, *Eikonoklastes*, quoted in *Systematic Theology* by A.G. Strong, Judson Press, p. 292). So, when “the alien, the orphan, and the widow” cry for justice, the righteous

had better respond, quickly, consistently, and with strength—if there’s any justice. Otherwise, all is lost.



Bright Light in a Dark Nation

As I implied in recounting my conversation with Victoria, I see myself as an underachiever regarding righteousness and justice. There’s not much “light” in me. Theologically I know that “Christ is our righteousness” and I accept that truth wholeheartedly. But it’s the outworking in space and time of that heavenly reality that is my Achilles’ heel. If I’m not focused, and intentional in my actions, justice can very easily disappear from my radar screen. And often it’s the very people who should be objects of justice who model just behavior. For instance, I’ll never forget an amazing example of “light” my wife and I witnessed in central Zimbabwe.

Brutal political repression, drought, and famine had paralyzed the nation. Everywhere we looked we saw long queues for petrol (which is rarely available), for cash (people stand for hours waiting to withdraw a maximum \$3 per day), and for bread. Entire communities had been razed by government bulldozers. People slept in the street, under trees, in the parks. And this was just Harare!

Throughout the nation, people were living like stray dogs. I’ll never be able to erase the image of several displaced Zimbabwean families living in a church-owned chicken coop in Mutare. And, in central Zimbabwe, people were literally starving to death.

A newly planted church in Harare, of about one hundred people, decided they had to do something about these starving folk. Even though they were small and poor themselves, they felt that their faith required them to reach out to “the least of these, their brethren.” As city folk they were heavily burdened with life, but the country people were about to lose theirs, so they connected with a veteran missionary who had access to the Canadian Food Grains Bank. Through a lot of procedural diligence and coordinated effort on the part of several volunteers, they managed to arrange for a major shipment of cornmeal to be sent to the severely afflicted area. Kathy and I were

driven for four hours to the country church where the food was to be delivered that day.

As we turned off the main highway onto what was no more than a dirt cart path, our driver (and distribution coordinator) told us there would be 1,000 people coming for food. "In fact they're already here," he said. We looked around and saw no one. "Keep looking," he said.

We were bumping up and down the heavily rutted road as we descended into a valley surrounded by low-lying hills. These kopjes were topped with a Zimbabwean natural wonder: random piles of massive rocks and boulders that look like the artwork of a giant sculptor. There in the shadows of these humongous works, on almost every hill, sat groups of thin, patient people, waiting for the delivery truck to arrive. Seeing us, many broke into huge smiles and waved enthusiastically. But no one ran out of the shadows to our vehicles. Everyone stayed in place.

"They're very disciplined," the driver answered our unasked question. "No food riots here."

"No kidding!" I responded. "We've heard of and seen a few scenes of complete confusion and violence, especially when food arrives among starving people."

"True, but these folk are aware that if there's a food fight, the truck driver may simply leave. And there'll be no more food from Canada."

"So, how have they managed this?" Kathy asked.

"Each group is from a village. Each village has a headman. Each headman has a list of names. If your name is not on the list, you get no food. If you jump the queue, you get no food. No order, no food."

"So what's going to happen?" I asked.

"See that building at the bottom of the valley? That's the church. The truck will arrive soon. When it does, the various groups will come down from the hills in a prearranged order. The headman will read their names one by one, the food will be given, they'll move on, and the next group will do the same. When everyone has their food, the leftover bags will be stored in the church."

"Just like that?"

"Yep."

And that's how it happened. Just like that. The big tractor-trailer lurched over the uneven ground and arrived at the humble church building three hours late (flat tire). There was no rush of humanity from the hills. The truck driver and his assistant climbed up onto the trailer, removed the tarpaulin, then gave the signal to the nearest hill. Slowly but surely, their grim, thin faces near bursting with muted excitement, a line of walking skeletons came down from the kopje. Quietly and in order, they sat on the ground, the headman read their names, they walked over to the truck, strong young men lowered heavy bags of cornmeal to their bony shoulders, and, their faces now wreathed in smiles, they began the slow trek back to their villages. Just like that.

One small group of women, bowed under the weight of this food from heaven, burst into a hymn of thanksgiving as they walked away. "God is so good, he's so good to me!" they sang. I watched them for a long time as they slowly disappeared up into the hills. The music faded with them as they passed from view.

The headman of the headmen, the "chief," came over to me. Knowing that Kathy and I were Canadians, he thanked us for sending the food from 8,700 miles away to their impoverished villages.

"It wasn't us," I replied quickly, "it was the church in Harare who sent it."

"I know, I know," he said, "but if it weren't for you Christians in Canada, we would have no one to turn to."

"Well, it was a joint effort," I said. "We care about you."

"Thank you, man of God," he gripped my hand, his clear eyes moist, "you've saved our lives."

"No, not me," I mumbled, barely able to speak. "It was those dear brothers and sisters of yours in Harare who did this."

"Then I'll take it as from the Lord," he whispered.

"Exactly," I whispered back. "It's from the Lord."

Yahweh Yireh. Right belief, right action. Once again I had to find a private place to weep. I'd been blinded by the light.



Faithfulness and Unfailing Love

This book is subtitled, “A Christian Response to AIDS in Africa.” It might just as easily read, “A Christian Response to the Victims of AIDS in Africa: The Orphans and Widows.” But this latter subtitle is a touch too long and ungainly. Nevertheless, the Christian response must be to the orphans and widows. HIV is the enemy; it is creating the greatest wave of orphans and widows in history, but our response must start with the victims, even as we pray for and donate monies to a search for a vaccine to destroy this vile threat. We’re in a war, a tiring and eviscerating war. It’s hard to keep going. It’s tough staying faithful.

Moses had a word for us when we feel like quitting, when our hearts and minds have gone dry with sustained effort, as though we have sweated the very essence of our vision out of our pores. We’re disheartened by death, overcome with the sadness that surrounds, beaten down by pursuing justice, broken just like the broken ones we’re trying to heal. “Look to the Lord,” he says.

³Oh, praise the greatness of our God! He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. (Deut. 32:3, 4)

“First of all,” he says, “remember your foundation.” “He is the Rock” on which your life is built. The superstructure may get beaten down sometimes, the walls may need repair, the roof may leak, and a window or two may be cracked and broken, but the foundation is solid! So deal with the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” remember that “man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward,” and get on with it. You may be shuddering but you’re unshakable, you may be stressed but you’re unmovable, you may be flawed but your life is built on the “perfect” and “just” greatness of “our God” the “Rock.” He is righteous (*zedek*) and just (*yashar*). And, so important this one—he is faithful.

In Old Testament prophetic passages, faithfulness is often tied to righteousness and justice. Israel’s future messiah is described in Isaiah, Chapter 11, as “judging the needy” with “righteousness,” and “faithfulness” is the “sash around his waist” (vv. 4, 5). Messiah’s mandate, as we’ve noted previously, is to “bring justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1), and he’ll

bring it forth “in faithfulness” (v. 3). In Habbakuk 2:4, we read that the *zadik* (the righteous or the just) “will live by His faithfulness.”

In the Hebrew language, the word for faithfulness comes from the root *a-m-n* (*aman*). It has a variety of meanings depending on how it’s used. It can mean “to confirm, support, uphold,” or it can mean “to be established, to be faithful,” and it can also mean “to be certain, to believe in.” The noun *omen* (pronounced o-mane) is the word from which the English “amen” is derived. The basic concept of the word is “to be certain” like the certainty we see in the strong arms of a father holding a helpless infant. His strong arms and hands are like pillars of support. The baby can count on them. They’ll never fail.

This fail-safe commitment reminds me of Precious, a seventeen-year-old girl we met in Tanzania. Her story is one of the most powerful examples of faithfulness I know. It moves me every time I think of it.

Kathy and I had flown across Lake Victoria that day, from Mwanza to Bukoba. Touching down on a gravel landing strip, we taxied to a little cement-block building where we were met by a local faith-based charity worker in an old four-wheel drive vehicle. From there we drove two-and-a-half hours north, up to where this Tanzanian panhandle meets the Ugandan border. (It’s called a panhandle because it is a narrow strip of land bounded by Burundi and Rwanda on the west, Lake Victoria on the east, and Uganda on the north. It is also believed that the panhandle is where HIV first entered Tanzania, from Uganda.)

The going was rough, but the scenery beautiful. As we climbed hills and descended into valleys, we were surrounded by lush banana trees. And, on both sides of the road, there were countless Tanzanians with huge loads of bananas piled on their Chinese-made bicycles heading to markets miles away. We were struck to see a man pushing a sick old woman in a wheelbarrow. “The local ambulance,” our driver said with a kind smile, “is taking her to the clinic.”

“How far is that?” I asked.

“Oh, maybe a five-hour walk.”

Five hours? Up and down those hills? How could he manage? Then again, maybe the old woman was his mother, or a dearly loved aunt, so how could he not? And how would she manage? Those old bones compressed against the confined, jarring sides of the

wheelbarrow, her shoulders and neck aching with the strain of keeping her head up, her legs numbed by dangling over the hard edge, the unsuspected frame conveying every bump, every stone, every wobble of the unshod wheel. “There’s Job again,” I thought. And even though he was taking her across the road and down a footpath to the valley below, I felt a strong urge to lend a hand, to help in some way.

“Maybe that old woman is not as old as she looks. Maybe she has AIDS. Maybe she’s his wife,” I thought. I looked back, about to say something to our driver, but the ambulance had already disappeared into the dense foliage like a mirage in a desert of human suffering. For the next forty minutes we traveled in silence. Then we reached the end of the road. It was time to get out and walk.

It was a difficult climb up the well-worn path through the banana trees to the village. As we approached, we were soon swarmed with scores of children, laughing, holding our hands (at one point I had three little hands in each of mine), and rubbing our arms (they’re not used to seeing hair on anyone’s arms). Suddenly the village appeared. There in the lush surroundings of the banana forest were several little *rondavaals* (mud-walled, thatched-roofed huts). In the excitement of our arrival, it took a few minutes before it hit us. Kathy and I looked at each other and asked the same question at the same time, “Where are the adults?”

There were none. They had all died from AIDS. This was an orphan village, one of scores in rural Africa. A community of children raising themselves.

Our host had arranged for us to meet Precious. At age seventeen, she was one of the elders in the village. She took us to her *rondavaal* where she and her brother and sister lived. Ducking our heads we entered through the tiny door into a round, bare room carpeted in sweet grass. There, against the wall on the far side her brother and sister sat, their eyes large and their expressions a mix of fear and intrigue. We sat on the floor opposite, and Precious began to tell her story.

Five years ago, when she was twelve, her father became very sick. For two years she and her mother cared for him as he slowly wasted away. They knew he was dying of AIDS, but like most other afflicted families in Africa, they feared the stigma and discrimination

associated with “the slim disease.” So they said he was sick with “pneumonia, kidney infection, boils, diarrhea,” or whatever opportunistic infection happened to be wreaking havoc with his weakened immune system at the time. When Precious was fourteen her father died.

Even as they laid his emaciated body to rest, Precious was aware that her mother had taken ill. For the next two years she cared for her dying mother. When she was sixteen, Precious buried her. Now she shifted her full-time care to her brother and sister. An orphan herself, she had sole responsibility for two other orphans. Her situation seemed beyond hope.

Fortunately, she found a job as a domestic for a small business. It was a two-and-a-half hour walk away. So every morning Precious got up at three-thirty and left at four to be at work for six-thirty. She put in an eight-hour day, then walked two-and-a-half hours back. There she was, a small teenaged Tanzanian girl, walking five hours every day, by herself, in the dark. Six days a week.

For this she earns \$60 a year. With that income she’s able to buy three outfits a year of used clothes for herself and her two siblings (yes, they wear the same clothes every day), and she’s able to feed them two meals of ground corn a day. And, most important, she’s also able to pay school fees for her brother and sister.

“I have a dream,” she said with quiet confidence. “I want my brother and sister to become schoolteachers. I want them to have respect, and to be able to care for themselves one day.”

There’s no money for anything else. No medicines. No lock on the flimsy door to protect them from drunken raids on the village by predatory males. No father. No defender.

“Do you go to church?” Kathy asked.

“Oh, yes, ma’am, every Sunday. We love Jesus. He cares for us.”

At this point I had to go outside to gather myself. Here was a young woman laying down her life for someone else. She knew that by the time her siblings were teachers she would be too old for marriage, illiterate, and of use to no one. Yet she got up in the middle of the night and walked alone in the darkness to see a dream come true that in the end would factor her out. If ever I’d seen someone whose life was an

active illustration of righteousness and justice, she was that person. And such staggering faithfulness!

Faithfulness essentially is “showing up for work.” There’s nothing romantic or appealing about it; you just grind it out, day after day, year after year. But, like building a building brick by brick, if you keep at it, you will eventually have constructed something that will last. You build a marriage that way. You build a career that way. You build a life that way. Precious is building Tanzania that way.

The prophet Hosea, no slouch himself when it came to faithfulness, said:

Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unfailing love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the Lord, until he comes and showers righteousness on you. (Hos. 10:12)

Righteousness in this passage is seen as seed, fruit, and rain. You sow it, you reap it, and it irrigates your soul. But, before any of this happens, you’ve got to “break up your unplowed ground.” We’ve all got hardened places in our lives that must be aggressively plowed into if there’s any hope of rain penetrating, seed germinating, and a harvest gathered. And it’s going to take committed, consistent effort. There will be no justice, no righteousness, no hope for orphan or widow without “unfailing love,” the love of a Precious.