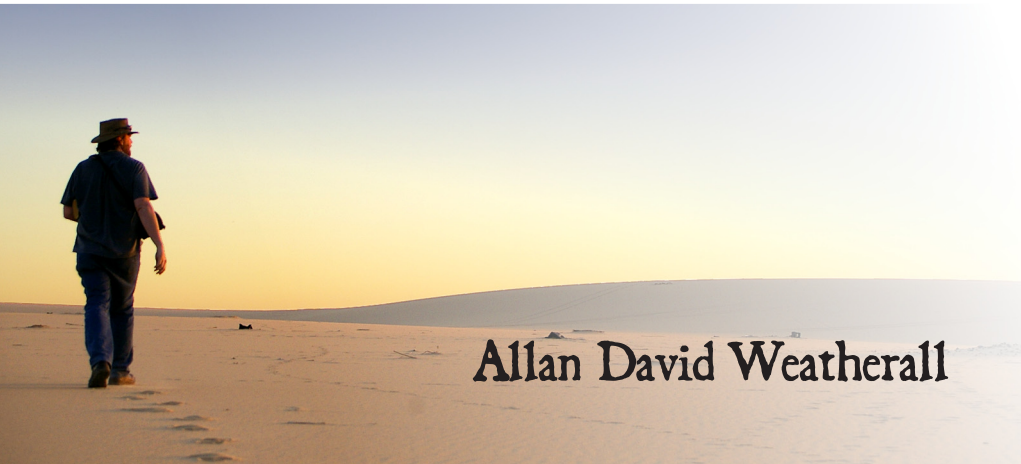


# Adventures with God

Real Life  
Inspirational  
Stories



Allan David Weatherall

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# Introduction

This book doesn't require a long introduction. It's a collection of true accounts of inspirational events from my own life and walk with God as I have travelled around the world. It is my prayer that these experiences will inspire and convict you to seek God in your own life and to share God's love with the people around you. The Lord is wonderful.

There are many other stories that I would love to tell – some of which I cannot tell because those stories would infringe upon the privacy of other people. But if you like this book, please contact my publisher and tell him! *More Adventures with God* is just waiting to be written!

- Allan David Weatherall

# Random Acts of Kindness

SOUTH MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

**April 1983:** I was driving along Clarendon Street in South Melbourne on my way to Castlemaine to visit my parents. As I stopped at a traffic light I noticed a man lying on a bench seat on the footpath beside the road. It was early evening and by his rough appearance and the fact that he was holding a bottle wrapped in newspaper confirmed my immediate suspicions — he was a drunk.

As soon as I saw him I felt a twinge of compassion towards him. But like so many other people, I had other places to be and other things to do. As I watched I saw two policemen approach and instantly I felt relieved. After all, it was their responsibility to clean up the streets and make sure men like him got a chance to be somewhere safe for the night. As I sat waiting for the traffic lights to turn green I couldn't believe what I saw. The two police strolled up and when they reached the man, both of them turned their heads the other way, as if not to see, and walked right past. I felt a sudden stab of conviction in my heart and a verse from the Bible streamed through my mind: *"If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need, but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?"*

Right then I looked up and the traffic lights turned green —

and I had a decision to make. I knew that if I drove off I would have no peace, so I turned left, drove around the block, parked the car and walked back to the man. As I approached him I felt completely inadequate... and a little foolish. What was I going to say? What was I going to do? At the very least I could drive him home — if he had a home. I found him sleeping solidly and at first he didn't respond to me at all, so I reached out and gently shook him awake. He awoke with a start, swearing and cursing at me for disturbing him. The smell of alcohol on his breath was overwhelming and I recoiled a little.

I can't remember exactly what I said to him — probably something no more profound than, *"Mate, are you OK?"* But what happened next amazed me. Still lying on the bench seat, the man went quiet, looked up and fixed his eyes on mine. Then his eyes filled with tears and he said to me, *"J.C. sent you didn't he?"*

I suspected that I knew what he meant but I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing. I asked him to clarify, *"J.C? What do you mean?"*

*"You know, Jesus Christ, He sent you didn't he?"* he said.

A little taken aback, the only reply I could think of was, *"Well... yes, I guess He did".*

As I helped the man back to my car (and tried to ignore my fear that he might throw-up in it) he wept and poured out the sorrows of his heart. This was a man who through years of pain had turned to the only source comfort he had known: the bottle. But this random act of kindness from a stranger was all it took to break him and lead him through tears of repentance to ask God for mercy and forgiveness.

From that experience I learned some valuable lessons: Charitable acts are not just the obligation and duty of all believers — they are at the very core of God's heart of mercy

and are inseparably linked to the whole message of the gospel of Christ. A gospel preached without accompanying acts of love and mercy will lack the imperative urgency which flows from the heart of God towards lost humanity. Ultimately a message without practical mercy will have no power or lasting credibility in the world at all.

# What on Earth is Eritrea?

**Asmara, Eritrea, 1996:** Well, it wasn't quite the picture I expected to see in this war-torn east African city. As I looked around I couldn't help marvelling at just how industrious and resilient these people were, given all that they had endured, and how they were managing to rebuild their nation with such scarce resources. This place was much more modern than I expected. Shops were filled with consumer goods... What a strange experience it was for me to be actually standing there after all I had been through. Who would really believe my remarkable story if I told them? But this is the truth. This is what actually happened to me.

Mysterious things happen all around the world — despite what the sceptics say. Anyone who has spent a long time in Africa will know this. Mystical experiences are part of life there. But in my own home in Melbourne all those years ago, a strange occurrence happened to me — and it sparked a chain of events that eventually led me on this very unusual safari to east Africa. To tell the full story I need to take you back to 1988 when I was spending an otherwise uneventful day at home.

As someone who had been involved in Christian work for

years I had heard of many people testify that God “spoke” to them. But it had never really happened to me. Apart from a few strong feelings, general impressions or convictions about things, I couldn’t categorically say, God “spoke” to me. But this time it was a definite word, not audible, but strongly impressed on my mind in a way that I couldn’t ignore. If you’re reading this perhaps you don’t even believe in God, much less in the idea that he speaks to people. And to be honest, this time I was having a hard time believing it myself — particularly since it was a word that I had never heard before. After all, what on earth was “Eritrea”?

I pushed the notion to the back of my mind — along with the idea that I might be going crazy. But there it was again — “Eritrea” — persistently resounding in my head. Finally I said, “OK Lord, if you are speaking to me, what is Eritrea?” Immediately the reply shot into my head — “Ethiopia”

Now I was really going crazy! Even though I had never travelled or taken an interest in Africa, I had heard of Ethiopia. So I went to my bookshelf and pulled out the atlas and turn the page to east Africa.

It is hard to describe the feeling I had when I looked down at that page and saw that word running clearly along the coastline of the red sea in north eastern Ethiopia: E R I T R E A. Shivers went up and down my spine. God was speaking to me!

It’s kind of a party joke among church people — and almost every Christian’s nightmare — to hear the booming words come from above “GO TO AFRICA!” But I had read books where things like this had happened to other people... Livingstone for example... and I was inspired by their stories. So if this was God and not just my imagination, what did he want from me? Why was he drawing my attention to this place? Since I surrendered my life to him I had always said that

I would go wherever he wanted... Was this the call? I needed more information.

At the time I had a friend who worked for World Vision, so I rang her to see if I could get some background info on that part of the world. She explained to me that the country had been embroiled in a 30 year civil war soon after 1950, when the UN ignored Eritrean calls for independence and federated it with Ethiopia. I also learned of the Ethiopian violations of human rights against Eritrea; the oppressive Soviet-backed communist regime, and the resilient and resourceful spirit of the Eritrean people who fought on in the face of terrible opposition. When I researched further I was even more amazed to find that Eritrea, despite their cruel treatment, had maintained a good human rights record and had treated their prisoners well. They also displayed amazing ingenuity by building hospitals and pharmaceutical factories into underground mountain hideaways. From what I could learn, I concluded that the Eritreans must be “the good guys”, although I’m sure in the complex arena of human conflict, things are never really that simple. But I was moved with a new compassion for these people and I couldn’t help identifying with them in their suffering. As I began to pray, I was surprised again by the certain conviction that God himself was taking a strong and active interest in these people — and even had definite plans for their future.

I found myself uncharacteristically moved to pray quite boldly for three specific things: 1. That Eritrea would win their struggle for independence and that their oppressors would be overthrown; 2. That Eritrea would be established as a separate independent nation, and; 3. That the nation would be moved to accept the gospel of Jesus Christ. Occasionally I wondered if I was letting my imagination run away from me, but during

the months that followed, I heard of other Christians who had been similarly moved to pray in this way. I also began to hear more about Eritrea on TV news reports. Professor Fred Hollows was busy creating a good name for Australia through the establishment of much needed eye clinics in Eritrea. *60 Minutes* also did a report on Eritrea describing it as “*the most inhospitable place on earth*”. And so I, along with my church (and the Eritrean people themselves), was encouraged to continue to pray for the liberation of the country. As we watched the unfolding events on television, we marvelled as we heard of the progress of the EPLF, the overthrowing of the communist regime in Ethiopia, and the eventual liberation of Eritrea in May 1991. We rejoiced with the Eritrean people when finally, in 1993, they were recognised by the United Nations as a separate, independent nation.

Now I was really stirred up to go to Africa. I had no plans of becoming a “missionary” as such. In fact I had some serious misgivings about methods I had seen employed by some organisations. I had always felt the gospel was a vital message for all people, regardless of race or colour, but I felt that taking that message across cultural boundaries required a great deal of wisdom and sensitivity so that western cultural values are not transplanted in the place of spiritual truth. Finally the day came when I concluded, “*I think I’m supposed to go to Africa*”. But there was nothing more that I could do — after all, the whole thing seemed pretty sketchy to me as well! A few days later, however, I got some confirmation that was hard to ignore.

Unexpectedly I received a letter from a young lady who had been reading an article I had written in a small religious publication. Although the article mentioned nothing of Africa, or my conviction to go there, she was moved to write to me

and report an extraordinary occurrence. She said that whilst reading my article, she had a vision of me in a place “like Somalia”, and was compelled to write and tell me. I was amazed.

It was some time before the door finally open for me to travel to Africa. After another unexpected letter, I was invited to Africa to do some itinerant ministry with a Ugandan evangelist from Kampala. After a brief visit to Zimbabwe on my way to Uganda, and spending most of my time ministering in remote regions of that beautiful country, I felt it would be unbearable to be so close to Eritrea without going to have a look. As providence had its way, I had only been in Asmara for a couple of hours when I was introduced to a leader from one of the largest churches in Eritrea. In the following days was able to travel with him as he visited many newly planted indigenous churches throughout the country. I was amazed by the many stories of the faith and endurance of Christians under communist oppression and how their zeal was not extinguished by their suffering. I was also impressed by how the church was thriving and seemed free of dependence to western missionary organisations and how they were successfully communicating their love and faith in Christ in the language and style of their own culture.

As I sat with these delightful people and exchanged views, I heard reports of many remarkable turning points in the war that eventually led to the Eritrean victory. Many Eritreans will openly confess to you that God must have had a hand in it. They were up against impossible odds. The powerful Soviet-backed Ethiopian forces had superiority both in the air and on the ground. One amazing story is particularly worth mentioning and points to divine deliverance of biblical proportions. I was told that there were approximately 100,000

Ethiopian soldiers in one place surrounding some key Eritrean cities that were held by EPLF forces. Whilst the EPLF forces were vastly outnumbered, and could have been captured with relative ease, the Ethiopian forces somehow received a report that they were outnumbered and fled in confusion. Even during my visit the road heading towards Sudan was still littered with Soviet tanks, trucks, and other military hardware which was abandoned in their hasty retreat. Unfortunately for those retreating Ethiopian soldiers who were attempting to make it across the desert to Sudan, the elements proved too much for many of them. 50,000 of them were reported to have perished in the attempt. The EPLF, greatly encouraged by this victory found new strength, and the rest is history — 30 years of Ethiopian oppression came to an abrupt end.

Many of us in the developed world see Africa as a place of continual strife and conflict. Attempts to help by western aid agencies have been clumsy and have, unfortunately served to cultivate a passive dependence on foreign aid. Recognising this problem, Eritrea has limited the activities of foreign aid agencies and are determined to rebuild their nation without dependence upon foreign powers.

But whilst the years of strife and conflict has been the crucible for refining a strong and resolute Eritrean people, that very self-sufficiency and suspicion of outsiders today presents a whole new threat to Eritrea's internal peace. The challenge for Eritrea is now to find a way to transition from a warfaring nation to a nation of peace — and achieve prosperity and freedom for all of it's people. Unfortunately the current government appears intent upon making war against it's own people. Eritrean Christians are currently facing severe persecution and harsh imprisonment from a government that treats them as if they are enemies of the State. Today unless

Christians are members of government approved churches — Orthodox, Catholic or Lutheran — they cannot even gather together without the possibility of arrest and imprisonment.

But regardless of the current situation, we should never underestimate the power of God to change the course of nations. If there is anything that Eritrea's recent history has taught us, it is that it is God who sets up kings and God who removes them. Despite the plans and schemes of men, God has His own plan for the nations and when God's time for change arrives no man can stand in His way. What God shuts no man can open, and what God opens no man can shut. For those who are seeking to fulfil the Lord's purposes in Eritrea there are many open doors for ministry that no man can shut.

# The Power of Faith and Hope

UGANDA

When we found Nakato in the village near Jinja in Eastern Uganda, she was in advanced stages of sickness due to HIV/AIDS. Nakato was a Muslim and married to a Muslim man when she contracted the disease. Unable to care for herself, her husband or her children, Nakato returned home to her mother where she could be cared for, and to get help caring for her children. As the AIDS related symptoms increased, Nakato realised that death was approaching. In desperation she surrender her life to Christ, fully expecting to die.

When the our team arrived in her village, we had intentions of sharing words of encouragement and praying for the sick. But Nakato was already in the advanced stages of the illness. She was immobilised, lying on a mat in the shade outside the mud hut, extremely weak, unable to move and dehydrated, unable to drink or keep anything down. She had lost her ability to hear. In hushed tones, between forced breaths she told us that she was dying. Having seen death like this before, her family believed her. So did we.

We had come to the village with the intention of bringing hope and encouragement, but what do you do when faced with situations like this? What hope is there? How could we even encourage her faith when she couldn't even hear what we were saying? But since God had sent us, and since we were there, we refused to believe that God would not want us to speak to her, so we laid hands on her and prayed that God would at least restore her hearing so that we could at least leave her with a message of eternal hope.

After we prayed we began to converse with the other family members and about 5 minutes later Nakato spoke and declared that her hearing had returned!

As she lay there on the mat, the team gathered around her again and began to pray. I felt strongly that this should not be her time to die, although she was obviously in a terrible state of health. As we prayed we asked God to heal her and I felt the Lord impress on my spirit something like this: *"This girl needs to have something to hope for. She believes that she is dying and is unable to imagine or believe that the future holds anything for her other than death... give her something to look forward to!"*

As we prayed and looked at her we all felt terribly helpless, but I wanted to leave her with something to look forward to, but what could I tell her that would not be a false hope? I called my friend Liz over and asked her to translate for me. I told Nakato that if I came back to that village and found her in good health then I would buy her a new dress. It was a clumsy and awkward attempt at encouragement, but it was the best that I could do. Later on David, the local project co-ordinator, told me that it was likely that the Lord himself would give her a new dress in heaven before I saw her again. We continued to pray.

It took weeks for the news to filter back to us in Australia that there had been a remarkable change in Nakato's state of health.

On the evening of the day that we had visited her, Nakato gained the strength to get up and bathe herself — something that she had not been able to do for some time. Four days later her strength began to return and she started to put on weight. In fact, her recovery was so remarkable that Nakato resumed her daily chores and returned to her hairdressing business. Despite her remarkable recovery she remains with her mother because her Muslim husband doesn't want a Christian wife.

After hearing of Nakato's amazing return from the brink of death and knowing that I was scheduled to return to Uganda, I knew that I had a promise to keep. On February 7 I returned to Nakato's village to keep my promise — to take her into town and buy her that new dress. The act of actually buying the dress I entrusted to an African female friend (women's clothing and African fashion are not my area of expertise). I left the girls to shop and took Asman, Nakato's son, to a small local restaurant in Jinja — Ossies — which is run by Judy, a fellow Australian with a big heart and a huge love for the Ugandan people.

Two hours later Nakato and my friend returned from their shopping safari with a new dress, matching shoes and oil for her hair. From my perspective it wasn't the most fashionable choice of dress, but one well suited to the local culture — and possibly the most extravagant gift that Nakato had ever received. As we sat in the restaurant we talked about God's extravagant grace and how necessary it is for all those who come to God to believe that He exists and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Nakato has also been blessed with a Bible and a pair of breeding pigs as part of the project work in the area.

# Hey, Chuck Norris!

## KENYA, EAST AFRICA

This chapter must begin with an admission of my own ignorance. After all, how was I supposed to know who Chuck Norris even was? But wherever I went in East Africa small children would wave to me, calling “*Hey, Chuck Norris!*”

Most people in Australia might know Chuck Norris as *Walker, Texas Ranger*, but throughout East Africa he is the American tough-guy action hero of numerous movies that might currently be classified as b-grade today. And whilst I feel that I bear little resemblance to the popular actor, it would appear that to many people throughout East Africa, I *am* actually Chuck Norris!

Maybe it’s the way I dress when I am travelling... I wear my favourite leather hat to protect me from the sun, a pair of sunglasses for equally practical reasons, and my Aussie *Blundstone* hiking boots — simply the best boots in the world. I like shirts with double pockets and blue jeans. I also have a beard and shoulder length light-brown hair. So I guess to African eyes (maybe we all look the same to them) I might very well look like *Walker, Texas Ranger!*

In the beginning I assumed that this association with Chuck Norris was limited to small children. I initially became aware of it in an African town where I rode a motorcycle past a group

of children playing soccer. Simultaneously they all forgot about the ball and came running after me calling, “Hey, Chuck Norris! Chuck Norris! Chuck Norris!” But that cry was to be echoed again and again in the streets, marketplaces and bus stops throughout east Africa — sometimes in jest and sometimes in all seriousness. And it made much more sense to me when I finally discovered who Chuck Norris actually was — and understood how popular his movies are throughout Africa!

It didn’t know it at the time but I eventually learned that Chuck Norris’s on-screen heroism pretty much focuses on dispatching bad-guys with his flying fists and feet — a martial arts skill which has earned him a reputation both on and off the screen. I also learned that Chuck Norris is also a believer.

Have you ever had a strange strange experience that left you a little puzzled? That’s what it was like for me on my first night in Nairobi, Kenya, a few years ago. I had arrived late in the afternoon and was very tired after the long, backside-numbing, bus ride through the Rift Valley from neighbouring Uganda. I found the nearest cheap hotel, went into my room and crashed onto the bed, completely exhausted. By the time I woke it was about 10pm and I was hungry and thirsty, so I shook myself awake and ventured out onto the street to look for a place to eat.

I don’t mind *roughing it* when it comes to accommodation and transport, but I’m very fussy about what I eat. Experience has taught me that it’s not fun being sick when you travel and simply watching what you eat and drink can avert a lot of disaster. As I stepped out on the street I realised that I was in a seedy part of town because before I had taken 10 steps I’d had three offers from local prostitutes hoping to secure my business. They presented no temptation at all and I wondered how anyone could be tempted. Even if the fear of the Lord weren’t enough to keep a young man on the straight and narrow, the fear of HIV infection certainly

was, and this part of the world was HIV central.

As I walked along the street I didn't have to walk far to find something I *could* eat, but I must have walked for more than a kilometre before I found something that I was *willing* to eat. As a man of slightly above-average height, I've never had cause to feel unsafe at night in any city that I've been to. I'd always assumed that I just didn't fit the common demographic of people who get into trouble... I don't drink, I don't attend night-clubs, and I don't go looking for fights. And to cowardly robbers, maybe my size and stature has served as a natural deterrent to some degree. But here in Nairobi (*Nairobi*, as many travellers have come to call it) maybe I actually should have felt unsafe. After all, here was I, a comparatively wealthy westerner, all alone at night on the crowded streets with no-one to watch my back — except for Jesus and his angels. Whether it was faith or ignorance, or a bit of both, I was under the impression that I was safe.

But as the night progressed I began to realise that getting back to my hotel would probably be the wisest course of action, so I headed back in that direction. As I walked along the crowded streets, past hotels and noisy night-clubs, I found myself approaching a gang of very big, very tall, very well-built African men who were standing in my path. They looked me up and down as I approached, not giving any sign of their willingness to step aside for me. I maintained eye-contact with them, just in case I needed to take some kind of defensive action, whilst at the same time not really knowing what I might do if they decided to attack me to relieve me of my wallet — or perhaps something worse.

I as got nearer they all watched me intently and then, amazingly, all stepped aside and let me walk through their midst. I gave them a nod of thanks and kept walking, and as

I walked away one of them called, *"Hey... Chuck Norris!"* I just waved and didn't look back. It wasn't until much later that I realised that Chuck Norris, through the providence of God, may have also played a key role in my deliverance that night!

On a later trip to East Africa I was reminded again of the Chuck Norris connection whilst walking on the street. So I mischievously ventured into a video store where I perused the action movie titles as they shopkeeper watched me in disbelief. After seeing that there were no Chuck Norris movies available to rent I told the attendant, *"I'm disappointed that you don't have any of my movies..."*, to which he replied, without asking for any clarification, *"I am sorry... we will get some more!"* Nothing more was said and I walked out with the sneaking suspicion that he'd soon be on the phone telling all of his friends that the movie star had just visited his store.

If you ever read this Chuck... please don't worry, I haven't done any more masquerading as you. But after my experiences in Nairobi that night, I do want to say, *"Thanks Lord for Chuck Norris!"* I might even get around to watching one of his movies one day.

# “We’ve Been Expecting You”

CENTRAL WESTERN KENYA,  
NEAR NYAHURURU

Things were supposed to go well. I had planned ahead, sent the plans and instructions from Australia. I even had soil tests done and all was looking good — except nothing... and I mean *nothing*... went according to plan. Ahh... Africa!

With all of the preliminary work done in advance, and if all did go well, we should have been able to get the new school’s rammed earth walls up within the three weeks that we had estimated, leaving the other volunteers to finish the roof structure. But our plans hit an immediate snag when I got to the site and found that the soil had virtually no clay content at all — despite the report to the contrary. Just a few kilometres away I was able to see the characteristic rich red loamy soil that is so typical throughout much of East Africa. But right here, on this building site, it was another story altogether. Just dark humus soil and rocks. Lots of rocks. How could they get the soil tests so wrong? That didn’t really matter anymore, but I was deflated. I had planned the trip, taken time off work, donated my time, all apparently for nothing.

I had been called in as an ‘expert adviser’ because I had built

a wonderful two-story rammed earth house up in Belgrave, in the hills east of Melbourne (Australia). The Kenyan project manager had been to my house and had become excited about the prospect of alternative building in Africa. Not only would it produce a strong, enduring and cost-effective structure, but it would also give some of the local lads some building experience and introduce the local community to a wonderful simple technology. It seemed like a very good idea.

Rammed earth building had been done for centuries further north in Africa. In fact there are some structures still in use today that are purported to be up to four thousand years old. Admittedly it is much drier further north and little danger of erosion due to heavy rain, but with the correct site preparation, roofing, eaves and termite protection, such buildings are possible everywhere. All you need is sandy gravel with about 15 to 30 per cent stable clay, some form-work, some shovels, some cement, some compacting tools and lots of willing workers.

In the end we were able to work out a solution. We gathered up all of the stones into heaps where we were working, then we used to formwork to build formed stone walls. It was the only solution and it began to work well, albeit at the expense of the extra sand and cement that was needed. After two weeks we were behind schedule but making progress, and I began to feel that my presence was no longer critical. But I had not just come to Africa to work on this building... as with previous trips, I had come to Africa prepared to share the gospel and teach if the opportunity presented itself. As the weekend approached I was told there would be an opportunity for me to speak at a local church and as evening approached I went off to my room to seek the Lord.

My room, as it were, was a small dark tool shed. My bed was some iron sheets laid over bags of cement, over which a sheet

of foam rubber was placed for a mattress. On this was stretched my sleeping bag and my pillow was a pillow case stuffed with some of my clothes. In one corner of my room was the all of the picks and shovels... in the opposite corner was a large pile of onions and potatoes. Ahh... Africa!

*Little did I know at the time that a few weeks later a strange twist of providence would find me staying in a five-star hotel in North Carolina that is usually frequented by presidents & celebrities — and dining at the Biltmore Estate (the mansion made famous by the movie, Richie Rich). That's yet another story... my digression serves only to illustrate that God does have a sense of humour!*

Regardless of my iron sheet bed and my potato/onion/toolshed lodgings, I slept well, and a very interesting sleep it was! During the night, amidst all of my thoughts about what I should present to the church the next day, I had an educational dream.

I say *educational* because in my dream all of my thoughts and research into church history came together and succinctly distilled down into a series of simple images that I could use as a teaching tool. When I awoke I immediately saw how these images had the potential to become a poster to aid a teaching series on the essence of the New Covenant — particularly in the context of understanding the progressive history of the Church and the state of the Church today. *(I apologise how dry this sounds as I write it here, but please trust me when I say that it is very revelatory and particularly important to the Church in Africa!).*

However, the beginning of the next day met me with yet another surprise. The project director, Geoffrey, met me as I immersed from the shed in the morning and informed me that he would not be attending church with me, but instead was about to go to catch a bus to take him to Kampala, the capital city of the neighbouring country of Uganda. And he wasn't planning to return for several days. But what Geoffrey failed to

realise at the time was that his departure had some fairly serious implications for me. Firstly, it meant that I would be the only supervisor for a group of workers who could not speak English, nor could I speak any Swahili! Furthermore, one glance in the direction of the project vehicle revealed that it had three flat tyres and only one spare. So to summarise: I could not work, I could not go anywhere and, I could not communicate with anyone. My response? *“Geoffrey... actually I think I’ll be coming with you!”*

Thirty minutes later we were at the bus stop catching a bus and I was out there! And to be completely honest, I was glad to be leaving Kenya behind me.

An overnight stop near the Kenya/Uganda border meant that I did not arrive in Kampala until the next afternoon, at which time I immediately began to seek out my Ugandan colleagues. I was quite familiar with Kampala by this time, having travelled there many times in my role with *Friends of Uganda Worldwide*, a project that I had co-founded in 1996 with some Ugandan nationals. So it was quite a natural thing for me to seek out my colleagues, although my arrival was quite unexpected (even for me) and definitely unannounced. When I arrived at Timothy’s house in Wandagere I was met with the usual hospitable greeting, although I was surprised to find a contingent of men there who had come down from the northern Ugandan city of Lira. They were all very serious, fasting and in prayer, kneeling on the floor around Timothy’s lounge room. As I walked in none of them expressed any surprise, but stood and greeted me, still looking all very serious. Then they informed me, *“We’ve been expecting you brother. What do you have to share with us?”*

After I had recovered from my initial reaction of disbelief, they sat and told me the story of how they had come to be in Kampala.

As it happened, they had been praying back in Lira when a

prophetess — an elderly respected woman in the church — had come to them to tell them that the Lord had spoken to her. They were instructed to go and catch a bus to Kampala and then to wait at Timothy's house until a man of God arrived with a message to share with them. Even though they had no money to get a bus to Kampala, they prayed and somehow the Lord had provided the money. Then they travelled to Timothy's house, just as they had been instructed.

How they knew the messenger they were sent to meet was actually me, I do not know, but when they asked me again, *"What has God given you to share with us?"* I thought of my dream and asked, *"Do you have any paper?"*

A boy had been sent off to fetch some butcher's paper and when he returned I attached the large sheets to the wall. I then began to draw each of the images that God had given me in the dream, explaining and teaching the underlying principles that each of those images represented. Each of the men sat and weighed carefully all that I had to share and occasionally nodded in agreement.

Just to provide a bit of additional background information, these brothers were not from what you or I might call a conventional or normal church at all. They were, in fact, an indigenous fellowship that had begun without any help or assistance from western missionaries. In fact, they were very cautious of missionaries and westerners in general, because from what they knew about the western Church, with all of its hierarchy, tradition, legalism and materialism, that didn't fit with their understanding of the Bible at all. In fact, their fellowships had no professional pastor, no church buildings, no formal membership — and very little of the religious baggage that we have come to accept as 'normal'. Instead, they would meet in each other's homes, share their resources, pray for each

other and help those in need. The elders of the community would also teach and exercise pastoral oversight as it was needed. In fact, they operated pretty much like the 1st Century Church.

After I had spoken to them, one of them came to see me with a confession. He said, *“Brother, I have to ask your forgiveness. When I saw that you were a white man I didn’t want to hear what you had to say. We have heard about Christians in the west and how they are always concerned about money and how they come to introduce their unbiblical traditions to Africa. Our people are always being led astray by that, so when I saw you were white I didn’t want to listen to you. But now that I have heard what you have shared, I am very much at peace and I am glad that God sent you to us.”*

Many of the other men expressed similar sentiments and made it clear that I was welcome to come and minister among them anytime.

And go to them I did — several times on my later trips. I participated in late-night worship times around the camp fire and I saw miracles of healing among them as they prayed for God’s intervention in the name of Jesus. And I witnessed some things that are so special that I would prefer not to write about, but to treasure in my heart forever.

Ahh... Africa!

# On the Road to Jerusalem

## JORDAN

After departing Kenya a week early and spending a few days in Uganda, I was eager to move on to the next stage of my itinerary. My plan was to visit Jerusalem for the second time, having only spent 3 days there previously on an earlier trip. But since I was in the vicinity I thought it would be a great opportunity to fly into Jordan, visit with some missionary friends, and then proceed down to the ancient city of Petra before returning to Amman and crossing the border into Israel. Everything went according to plan except for the small fact that my missionary friends were actually back home in Australia at the time. So I was on my own again.

I hired a car and drove down to Petra and spent a couple of nights there. Perhaps without being aware, many people will be familiar with Petra from the Indiana Jones movie, *The Last Crusade*, which featured the grand sandstone-carved treasury as the place where the cup of Christ was purportedly guarded by the legendary Knights Templar. This is all fiction of course, but it is no surprise that such an amazing location should give such flight to the imagination.

Petra (meaning rock) is aptly named because the city itself

is literally made of rock — both grand and simple dwellings carved directly into towering sandstone rock faces. In Biblical times it was apparently home to the Edomites and was heavily fortified, accessible only by the long, winding narrow towering corridor through the rock, wide enough for a horse and cart but narrow enough to easily defend against would-be invaders. The city's water was supplied by condensation and seepage from the cliff faces along that path. Water flowed down the cliff walls and into carved channels that ran along the walls into the city.

Despite Petra's natural defences, the city was overthrown and abandoned long ago, some say as judgement from God for their cruelty to the people of Israel when they were fleeing from their enemies. Petra was 'discovered' again by the outside world only in fairly recent history — but obviously the locals knew it was there all along.

After exploring that amazing city, I went in search of Mount Nebo — the mountain in Jordan from which Moses viewed the promised land before he died. But given that my hire car had no maps, it wasn't long before I was lost. This was my first brief trip to an Arab country and I was a little apprehensive about how the local [Muslim] population might treat a lone Christian traveller if I stopped in a remote place to ask directions. But my fears were soon to be revealed as unfounded.

I stopped to ask directions from a group of young men standing idly at the intersection of two major roads. Among them were a few who understood enough English by which to have a broken conversation with me. When they discovered that I needed directions, instead of directing me, they enthusiastically squeezed into my small car to personally escort me to the next road. As we drove, each of them tried their limited English with me — and were even more friendly toward me when it was clearly established that I was *not*, in fact, an

American. Inevitably the question of religion came up and I had opportunity to put into practice some advice that had been given to me years earlier by my old boss at World Vision.

My former boss had spent a lot of time in the Middle East and explained that in the Arab world the term 'Christian' does not have the same associations for Muslims that it does for us. He explained that many Muslim people still associate the term '*Christian*' with the history of the Crusades — and with American Foreign Policy and... perhaps most surprisingly... with current-day Hollywood immorality.

He explained that many Muslims see everything western as representing Christianity, just as many westerners make the huge mistake of assuming that all things Arab are Islamic. It should come as no surprise that ignorance exists on both sides of the cultural divide — after all, many western Christians are unaware of the fact that many Arabs are actually Christians and many of the world's Muslims are not Arabs at all. I digress, so back to the main point: My old boss advised me that if I truly wanted to represent Christ in the Arab world, it may be helpful to avoid the use of the word 'Christian' because it may lead to misunderstandings. Instead, he wisely advised, I could substitute the word '*Christian*' for '*Believer*' (which they take to mean a truly 'devout' or 'holy' person) or better still, '*Follower of Jesus*' — especially since the Koran instructs Muslims to treat followers of Jesus with great respect.

So with that advice in mind, that is exactly what I did.

When I explained to this car full of young men that I was a follower of Jesus, they began to treat me as if I was a holy man and asked lots of questions. I had opportunity to share some of my spiritual journey with them as we drove, with each of them pooling their limited knowledge of English to translate to each other what I was saying. When we finally arrived at the

intersection that marked our parting, I felt that I should offer them some money to catch a bus home, but they refused to accept anything, citing the Koran's teaching that they should freely give assistance to strangers. God bless those young men for helping me.

Just to illustrate that this was not an isolated incident, my experience was repeated half an hour later when I found myself lost again! Once again I stopped to ask directions — this time from an elderly man with a small boy and, once again, he insisted on getting into the car to personally escort me to the next road. And, once again, he refused any financial reward for his trouble.

Eventually I found Mount Nebo, where Moses gazed into the promised land. Then I went to the Jordan River, where Jesus was baptised, before heading back to spend one night in Amman. I took in as many of the sights and sounds of Jordan as I could during my short stay, but once again I found that the people I encountered along the way left much more of a lasting impression than any monument or cathedral ever could. And the holy encounters that I had so hoped to find, came not through gazing back into history, but through the people living in the here and now.

Jerusalem still lay ahead on my journey but I did not know that on the road ahead nothing would go according to plan, nor was I aware that another chance encounter with a stranger would eventually propel me into another chapter of discovery and adventure with God.

# Jerusalem

## THE OLD CITY

The border crossing from Jordan into Israel was a difficult one with long delays and security checks. As soon as I had crossed into Israel I managed to find a taxi with a few people going the same way and it dropped me off close to where I wanted to go in the Old City. I was about a week ahead of my schedule so assuming that the hotel I had booked in East Jerusalem might not have a vacancy, I walked along the narrow streets looking for alternative and cheap accommodation.

The Old City is a fascinating part of Jerusalem with its narrow stone alleyways and busy street vendors. The city is divided into four quarters (although not equal in size) perhaps formulated as a solution to minimise ethnic and sectarian tension: the Jewish Quarter, the Armenian Quarter, the Muslim Quarter and the Christian Quarter. The city is alive with religious activity and commerce — most of the commerce being focused on exploiting the religious sentimentality of foreign pilgrims and tourists. Yet regardless of this commercialisation, you still get the clear impression that you have walked into the centre stage of world history — and that significant things are playing out in the unseen realm just as much today as at any

time in in the past.

It's difficult to tell what part of the city would have existed as it was at the time of Christ, but as you walk up the narrow streets it's not difficult to imagine that you are walking in the footsteps of Jesus — possibly even walking on the very stones that he walked on. As I walked I was scanning for a place to stay and my back-pack was getting heavier with every step. I was eager to find a quiet, peaceful place to rest and as I looked up I saw a sign, "El Arab Youth Hostel" and speculated that this might be a cheap place to stay until I found more appropriate lodgings.

All I wanted to do was sit down, get a drink and wash my bag of dirty clothes, so the standard of accommodation wasn't going to fuss me much. I ascended the narrow flight of stairs to the reception and found that \$5 per night was quite acceptable, so my first port of call was the laundry, where I placed 2 weeks worth of dirty clothes into the machines.

As I sat in the foyer and waited for my clothes to go through the process of washing and drying, I noticed that the female receptionist was reading a book. Partly motivated by boredom, partly by curiosity — and partly due to the fact that I had been travelling alone for the last 3 days and really just wanted to talk to another person — I decided that I would try and make conversation.

*"What are you reading?"* I enquired. The girl on reception, Alessandra, I estimated to be in her early 20's, a beautiful Italian girl from Milan who spoke reasonably good English. She was working part-time at the Hostel to support her exploration of the Holy Land. *"Oh, it's the Bible"* she replied. I had assumed that she was reading a novel so it wasn't the answer I expected to hear, so I asked the next obvious question: *"Are you a believer?"*

Her reply was very honest. *"Well, I don't know. I see so much*

*religion here in Jerusalem that I just want to understand it more”.*

Such clear opportunities to share your faith don't often come so directly and I took her frank openness regarding her spiritual search as an invitation for me to engage in a conversation.

*“I've had many experiences with God... would you be like to hear about some of them?”*, I offered. Her response was immediate. *“Yes”*, she said, putting the Bible down and giving me her undivided attention.

Over the next couple of hours I shared with her some of the many miracles that the Lord has done in my life and she sat listening to every detail and asking questions. Occasionally our conversation was interrupted by people coming to book in and check out, but after each interruption our discussion resumed where it had left off. Rarely had I seen such spiritual hunger in a young person and I sensed that if I were able to talk more with her privately without interruption, that she may be soon ready to believe and surrender her life to the Lord.

Amidst the various noisy interruptions, which often consisted of loud, alcohol crazed, chain-smoking youths running past, I began to feel like a fish out of water. I was very tired and just wanted a quiet place. I decided that I would call the original hotel in East Jerusalem and see if they had a room available, which thankfully they did. So when my clothes were all clean and dry and got ready to leave. I asked Alessandra if she might be willing to continue our conversation when her shift was over and she enthusiastically agreed.

By the time we continued our conversation it was getting late, nevertheless it was apparent to us both that God was doing something special. I could see that Alessandra was being driven by a personal need to find a peace that had eluded her. I also saw that the devil had been pursuing her in a very specific way, which gave us something else to pray about. Eventually, we

had covered every relevant issue and it came down to a choice... was she ready to follow Jesus? Her answer was a definite “yes”, so we prayed together, confessing things to God, asking for forgiveness and asking Jesus to come into her life and to fill her with the Holy Spirit. That night God welcomed another daughter into his family and I am absolutely sure that angels rejoiced that night!

After escorting Alessandra safely back to the hostel, I returned to my hotel feeling that the whole purpose for which I had come to Israel had been fulfilled. I was lonely and missing my family with a long journey to America still ahead of me. I had lost all desire to spend time exploring biblical sites and compared to the holy event that had just taken place, there was nothing more holy that I could do or see but to get on with my journey and get back to my family as soon as possible. I left for America the next day.

By the time I did get back to Australia a letter from Italy was waiting for me. Expecting it to be from Alessandra, I was surprised to discover that it was actually from her mother, who shared the full story of God’s gracious intervention in their lives. I learned that at the time I met Alessandra her parents didn’t actually know where she was. She had travelled abroad like a prodigal daughter and her parents were distraught with worry and concern. Being part of a catholic charismatic community in Milan, the believers had upheld Alessandra in prayer the whole time, praying that God would send someone into her path to help her find the way home. After Alessandra’s encounter with God she contacted her parents and returned home to Italy, where she gave a full account of our encounter with me. Alessandra’s parents, full of thanks to God and gratitude to me, invited me to come to Italy — an invitation that I did accept the following year.

# But, I'm Not a Catholic...

MILAN, ITALY

*'Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime'.*

*~ Mark Twain*

Travelling to Africa had become an almost yearly event and I was fully aware what a privilege it was. Not only was it exciting and eye-opening to see Africa, but I was also beginning to understand how culturally miopic I had become living in my own small, affluent and self-sufficient corner of the world 'downunder' in Australia.

It was Lord Byron who famously said, *"I am so convinced of the advantages of looking at mankind instead of reading about them, and of the bitter effects of staying at home with all the narrow prejudices of an Islander, that I think there should be a law amongst us to set our young men abroad for a term among the few allies our wars have left us."*

This was a wonderful opportunity to travel and broaden my view of the world, so I decided to accept an invitation from the parents of the young Italian woman I had previously met in Jerusalem, and partake of their hospitality for a few days before

proceeding on to Africa.

Up until that time most of my ventures outside of Australia had been to various African countries. But this trip to Italy was my first opportunity to see many of the sights that I had grown up seeing in magazines and on TV. I have never wanted to be a tourist, but Europe is, after all, the heart of western civilisation. And to gain a balanced and objective look at the culture that had historically shaped my own philosophical worldview, going there and seeing it up-close was almost a necessity.

I was happy to meet Alessandra's parents, Paulo and Dayna, at Milan airport and be escorted back to their home. I felt like a VIP as they began to express again their gratitude for the way that God had used me in their daughter's life and how that had been such an answer to their prayers. Alessandra herself was not at home — she had sensed to call to go off to South America to do some missionary work, but I was able to meet her younger sister and grandmother and spend some wonderful time with the family.

Paulo and Dayna were members of a charismatic catholic fellowship in Milan and I was surprised to find that such an ancient place of worship, the Basilica of Saint Estorgio, would be the home of such a progressive movement within the Catholic church. Perhaps I should qualify my use of the word 'progressive' with an explanation: What I mean is that the open use of the *charismatic gifts* of the Holy Spirit: *speaking in tongues, prophecy* and *healing* — are at least viewed as progressive signs within my own religious tradition. Apart from that, everything else about the Basilica of Saint Estorgio was confrontingly formalistic for this Aussie protestant!

As I walked into the cathedral I was confronted by things that I had never seen before: glass cases displaying the centuries-old bones of past 'saints' lined each side of the cathedral; at the

front a fully robed priest swung bowls of incense which filled the air with a smokey mist; a towering statue of Mary looked down over the congregation from the front, and in the back corner was the large stone tomb — purported to be the resting place of one of the wise men who had actually attended the birth of Christ. This place was also said to be one of the places where Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225—1274 BC) had preached. Later I was led out the back to see the foundations of the original building that were purported to have been actually laid by Emperor Constantine himself.

Having seen this place with my own eyes, all of the church history that I had gleaned from reading books, and from my time at bible college, was beginning to come alive and informing my developing convictions about all that was right and all that is wrong with western Christianity. Not only was I standing in the very place where so many of our pre-reformation western traditions had begun, but I felt that God Himself had arranged this guided tour with my education in mind. Not only were many of my protestant beliefs being confirmed in all that I was witnessing but, surprisingly, many of my protestant prejudices were also being challenged in a way that I did not expect. Up until that time, all that I had encountered of Australian catholicism was a rigid dogmatism that seemed to actually oppose the precious and sacred gospel truths that had so informed and transformed my life. Up until that time I had been tempted, like so many other protestants, to approach catholics with cautious suspicion and to view their faith as suspect. But here were sincere catholic believers, fully immersed in this ancient historical tradition, opening their hearts to me and actually inviting me to speak in this place — to testify about what the Lord Jesus has done in my life and how he had used me to answer their prayers.

As I stood there awaiting my opportunity to speak, I thought back on how I, on many occasions, had repeatedly admonished my various friends and ministry associates about the failures and shortcomings of religious tradition and formalism. I thought about what is written in the book of Hebrews, chapter 12, verse one, about the 'great cloud of witnesses' who have gone before us, having each fought, in their own time, the various tests of faith that accompany serving the living God, and how those verses admonish us to 'run with perseverance the race set before us'. As I pondered the meaning of those verses an amusing thought sprung to mind: I imagined looking up and seeing the faces of all my friends and ministry associates back in Australia, as if they were among the great cloud of witnesses looking down at me, and imagined their surprise to see me here, about to speak in this most ancient, most formalistic, most catholic of places. I could only shake my head in amazement at how the Lord had brought me to this place, and how wonderful it is to walk with the living God.

As I stood up to speak it was with a measure of apprehension. Whilst Paulo and Dayna had been expemplary in their expression of generous, charitable, Christian hospitality, how would these other people receive me? Speaking through an interpreter (I don't speak Italian) my first thought was to explain that I was not, in fact, a catholic, whilst chancing a glance in the direction of the priest to see if this admission might be met with any disapproving looks. I cautiously proceeded to explain that even though I did not understand many of the catholic traditions, nor found it necessary to pray to Mary, I did actually love the Lord Jesus very much. I then proceeded to tell my own story of how I had come to be a believer, and of the glorious things that the Lord had done in my life. I then went on to tell the congregation what they had been so eagerly waiting to

hear: How I met Alessandra in Jerusalem, how we had prayed together, and the events that had led to her safe homecoming. After I finished speaking many people came forward to greet me, kiss me and to express their appreciation for all that I had shared.

What more can be said? God moves in mysterious ways. My remaining time in Italy was spent with the Corrias family, and walking around and taking in the sights of the beautiful city of Milan: the sculptures, the architecture, the galleries and museums, not to mention the contemporary fashion and design which makes Milan the fashion capital of the world. I found my interest and passion for design being rekindled as I saw that thoughtful and intentional design touches on every aspect of life in this part of the world. But once again, as I have found in all of my journeys abroad, it is the people themselves that make places so compelling. And it is God's love for the people that causes him still to send his special envoys on missions all around the world.

# America... here I come.

ATLANTA, GEORGIA, USA

I've never had such a vivid and realistic dream. I was somewhere in the United States, walking down a quiet residential street with trees lining each side of the road. It was a fine sunny day and people were going about their business. Children were riding bikes, people walking dogs, and mothers pushing strollers. But when I looked up I saw the most terrible sight – a huge swirling wall of destruction bearing down upon the town. It was a twister of massive proportions with wide destructive base that ripped at the ground and caused the heart to panic as the debris of broken buildings, trees and vehicles could be seen swirling within its hungry bowels. We were clearly within its path and it was virtually upon us.

Immediately I attempted to draw people's attention to it, yelling to passer's by at the top of my voice, trying to warn them to take cover. But most people continued on with their activities, oblivious to the danger. Those who did look up indicated that they couldn't actually see anything at all and shrugged off my concerns as they resumed their activities. In a blind panic I gathered up the few people who did believe me, and we took refuge in the basement of a nearby building just as the destruction hit.

I woke with a start, my heart pounding, feeling as if I had just actually just been there in that town in the USA. But it was the middle of the night in Australia, and all was quiet in the house. As vivid and unusual as that dream was, I may have been tempted just to dismiss it as meaningless, except for what happened the following week.

An Australian friend of mine was temporarily living in the United States and had been completing a one year internship as a youth worker with a church in Michigan. I called him on the phone just for a chat, and during the course of the conversation, told him about the dream I'd had. Bevan grew silent on the other end of the phone and I knew that this was somehow significant. After a brief pause, he reported that he had actually had the same identical dream, right down to the detailed description of the street. Such a shared experience could not be co-incidental. Plus I could not help but see the obvious biblical symbolism contained within the dream: Impending judgement, a spiritually blind population going about their business, a lone prophet sounding the discordant, and much ignored, call to salvation and, a saved remnant.

The significance of the dream was clear... but what did all of this mean *for me*? Did God want me to go to America? Was I to become a prophetic preacher to warn the nation about impending destruction? Would I ultimately be ignored with only a faithful remnant believe my message? I had none of the answers... but I *did* know that I would soon be going to America.

I think it's significant that most of the ministry opportunities that the Lord has brought my way have come as a result of things that I've written. That was certainly the case with my involvement in Africa, and it would prove to be the case with America as well. I'd been publishing some things online about home fellowships and had posted some comments on someone

else's website which prompted a brother from Atlanta to contact me. We soon formed a friendship and eventually were exchanging emails almost every day. Then sometimes phone calls replaced emails, and eventually an invitation was extended to me to visit America on my next trip abroad. On my next trip to Africa I purchased an 'around the world' ticket, and included a 2 week stopover in Atlanta on my way home to Australia.

Having grown up watching American TV, it was a fascinating experience to be introduced to normal American family life and to partake of the famous southern hospitality. It was also a blessing to see how warmly Australians are received by Americans. Historically America has much in common with Australia. Both countries are of comparable size geographically and were initially formed from similar ethnic roots. Both countries inherited much of their political, religious and social values from England and fought side by side in all of the world's major conflicts, although their respective paths towards political autonomy from their colonial roots have been quite different.

Other significant differences exist as well: Whilst America was founded on principles of freedom, Australia was initially established as a penal colony for convicts who were brought to the remote island-continent against their will - mostly for petty crimes. It wasn't until 1901 that the vision for independent nationhood was finally embraced and officially established - by a vote, rather than a war of independence. Consequently Australians tend to have a deeply engrained distrust of institutional authority and tend to be less patriotic, whereas the American mindset appears to be almost fanatically patriotic by comparison. Most Australians tend to view America as the over-achieving older brother who perhaps takes himself a bit

too seriously, but who nevertheless deserves respect due of his extraordinary achievements. And Americans tend to view Australians as a kind of loveable larrikin whose company they enjoy, but don't completely understand. This loveable larrikin was epitomised by Paul Hogan's character in the movie, *Crocodile Dundee*, and this love for Australians was certainly still evident to me during my first trip to America.

I was invited to be interviewed by a Christian radio station in Atlanta and was initially told that the session would go for about 30 minutes, interspersed with music and news items. But an hour later I was still on the air, and the producer later admitted off-air that he wanted to make the session go longer because he really loved my Australian accent. I also got opportunities to speak in churches and schools and was received warmly wherever I went.

But there was no tornadoes in Atlanta during my visit. Nevertheless I could not help but feel a sense of uneasiness that there are unseen forces at work in the United States, ripping their destructive paths through communities in ways that many people remain unaware of. By the time those destructive forces have run their course, perhaps only a faithful and discerning minority will be left untouched. Whilst I make no claim to be an expert in anything to do with America, I am left with that uneasy sense that the combined consequences of affluence, unbelief, a trust in worldly weaponry for security, spiritual complacency, and misplaced hope in the actions of government and political leaders, leave America very vulnerable in ways that even most Christian people are yet to fully comprehend.

# My Friend, John

MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

It was late evening when the knock came at my door and I was surprised to find my Christian taxi-driver friend on my doorstep. He'd picked up a passenger and had been doing his best to share the gospel with him but felt that he'd got out of his depth. Sensing the man's openness to talk more he asked his passenger if he would like to come and talk to me, which John, the passenger, was actually eager to do. So I invited them in and we began to talk over cups of coffee and tea.

John, a big man in his late 40s, had very recently suffered multiple tragedies in his life. His elderly mother had just died, his wife and daughter had been in a car accident and, although they were unhurt, he was met with the news that she was leaving him and taking his only daughter, which broke his heart. In the midst of all this his business had gone bankrupt and the bank had just notified him that it was repossessing his house. Then, as if all of this weren't enough, John had just received the news that he had a brain tumour and it was estimated that he had only six months to live.

They say that most people are most open to the gospel during times of transition in their lives, or during times of tragedy. Needless to say, John was in one of those situations and was

desperately looking for answers. So we talked, and talked, and talked and talked. And then, after much talk, eventually, we prayed. John confessed his sins and asked Jesus Christ to come into his life and to be his saviour. Heaven rejoiced and we received this big man into *The Refuge* - our home fellowship. Not long after that, we took John down to Mentone beach and baptised him, and John began the process of more deeply evaluating his life as he fully expected that he would be soon going to meet his maker.

The biggest problem that John had, by his own admission, was that he was a proud man. And a racist. In his own words he had been raised "*like the Queen's corgis*" - believing himself to be intrinsically better than everyone else by virtue of his privileged birth. According to John, he had been a highly awarded wine salesman and had prided himself on being able to read people and outsell all the other salesmen. He told me that he could sell anything to anyone. He'd been a manipulator of people, but had inevitably found that whilst those techniques gave him some short-term success in business, in the rest of his life, and particularly in his closer relationships, those methods led only to heartache and grief.

I would like to say that John's pride and arrogance was all washed away in the waters of baptism, but I would be lying if I made that claim. For some time John's ego remained as enormous as his physical stature and often his needs would dominate the meetings of our small fellowship in very testing ways. Whilst many people struggled with John, I learned how to handle him, realising that subtle suggestions often wouldn't penetrate his seemingly thick outer skin. I learned the art of being compassionately blunt with John and in turn he slowly learned to pick more appropriate times to interject with his questions, understanding that other people also had important needs.

I was a young and inexperienced pastor, but I did realise that God had sent John to us as one of his special projects. John would often call me during the day and late at night, and I realised that whilst I had to set clear boundaries, that the Lord also wanted me to give time to this man. John would often call me to confess something that he had become convicted about, or to share a doubt or an anxiety, or ask questions. I would listen and try to ask him questions that would lead him on his own path of discovery. He made slow progress, but it was progress and I saw the gentle side of John, and his generosity of spirit emerge. I also realised that some of John's social behavioural problems might also be due to the tumour growing inside his brain.

As John's medical treatment progressed, he suffered all the ups and downs associated with a terminal illness. We prayed for him during his operations and recovery, and prayed for him as the medication he was on would cause him to be tired, drowsy, nauseated and disoriented. We prayed for him when he was heart-broken about losing his wife and daughter, and we prayed for him as he suffered the indignity of bankruptcy and losing his house. There were times of reconciliation with his wife, and times when his daughter would come with him to church. And there were times when it was all too much for him. But the six months came and went, and John was still alive. Nor did his illness show any signs of progressing. In fact, it seemed for a time that John was getting better. I discovered later that John had specifically asked the Lord that he might live long enough to come to some kind of reconciliation with his wife and also to see his daughter come to the Lord.

John's doctors started to treat him like a curiosity, not understanding why his condition hadn't worsened. One of his specialists started inviting him to dinner each Christmas and

marvelled at John's state of health, and John used to tell him that it was because of what Jesus had done for him. I believe that as time progressed, John understood that the biggest challenge in his life was not the illness alone, but that he had lived in a selfish way. In the end, God extended John's life by seven years, and although I was not with him when he passed, I am told that I went peacefully with his wife at his bedside. John also got to see his daughter come to the Lord. God had answered his prayer.

I believe that the Lord often entrusts fellowships with people such as John. Not only are they God's special projects that He longs to lavish with His love, they are also a blessing to the church, and even though they may at times test our patience and endurance, they nevertheless bring out the best in us as we dig deep to find the grace of God to accommodate them.

I am proud to have known John as my friend. The challenge of his life's circumstances were enormous, and despite the roughness of his character, he approached the ultimate challenge with faith and hope. I hope that when my time inevitably comes, I might be as resolute.

# Finding God in the Storm

MOUNT DANDENONG.

VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

In my heart I have felt betrayed by God. like he called me out on a limb to take steps of faith, only to abandon me and let me fall, to feel the pain of isolation and the loneliness of defeat. God has been silent, and as one who has known the sound of His voice in the past and as one who understands that true life only comes from every word which proceeds from His mouth, that silence has been a burden too heavy to bear.

But after a long silence, God showed up in Melbourne — in the form of a huge thunderstorm.

It was Wednesday September 3, 2003, and I was awoken in the middle of the night by our dog scratching at our bedroom door. For some reason dogs don't like thunder and lightning. Personally I find them exhilarating but my dog needed the comfort of being near her master when the floor began to tremble and flashes of light lit up the house. In the distance I could hear the rumblings of the storm drawing closer so I let her settle on the end of the bed. She seemed content just to be near someone, but her ears remained pricked and her body tense with anticipation of the storm that was approaching.

As the storm grew closer the fireworks began. Night

seemed to momentarily turn to day as one flash of lightning followed immediately upon another. The floor shook and the walls quaked. My heart revived. God was here and He was demonstrating His power. Amidst the thunder and lightning something happened to me. A surge of confidence... and revival of hope. Amidst the flashing light and peels of thunder I felt that I could, at long last, pour out my heart to God who had too long seemed too distant. To me God was revealing his awesome power, majesty and presence through the storm — and He was as close as our back door.

With each rumble and crash of thunder my heart responded with words that came to mind from the Psalms, *“Rend the heavens and come down, oh God! Let the mountains quake at your presence! Let your glory be revealed throughout the earth. Overthrow the powers of injustice, send forth your might to save the afflicted. Establish you power and glory upon the earth on behalf of those who are true and righteous — on behalf of those whose hope is in you! Have mercy upon your servants, oh God, and hear their desperate prayer! Vindicate your chosen ones!”*

For some unknown reason, in the midst of the storm, my heart felt free to carry to God in prayer many burdens that I have felt that I’ve carried alone for some time. Up until that time, somehow God had seemed too distant, my heart too unsettled and my prayers too ineffective. But with such a demonstration of power and glory lighting up the sky around our home and the floor trembling with each peel of thunder, I felt that God was accessible at last. I asked him to step in and put right what has been wrong — to see all that I had endured and to answer.

Then came the downpour. Heavy rain with hail. The gutters of our house overflowed with rain and our driveway turned into a river. The forest behind our house seemed to gladly receive the

rain as if the trees were receiving the quenching of a long thirst. *“From your lofty abode you water the mountains oh God; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth fruit from the earth!”*

By this time the whole house was awake to the spectacle of light and quaking thunder. The flashes of light continued and the hills and valley below seemed to echo with the thunder of His commands — God was on His throne and all the earth was subject to His awesome power!

After some time the storm moved on into the distance and the night again grew silent and perfectly still. I pondered in my heart all that I have sacrificed to God, for God, and for His cause on earth. Amidst the silence I felt the word of the Lord came to me through the Holy Spirit... *“sacrifice and offerings I have not desired... to obey is better than sacrifice”*. And *“The sacrifices acceptable to God are a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, these things God will not despise”*.

As I considered these words, it dawned upon me that at the heart of my disappointment with God was the belief that God hadn't played by the rules. I had given so much to him, so why had He remained so silent? Why had He not chosen to bless all my plans with success? Why had my sacrifices not been acceptable on His altar? Then I realised that “the rules” that God had not played by were, in fact, our own rules, and that God has no intention of ever playing by our rules. He is God and he needs nothing from us... none of our time, our money, our efforts, our talents — nothing at all. In fact, there is NOTHING that we could ever do for Him or offer to Him to ever commend ourselves to God. We are nothing and we have nothing that he needs!! Of all the things that we hope for and desire, of all the things that we would like to accomplish,

it all rests with Him. We have nothing to offer Him that He did not first freely give to us.

Perhaps as you read this you are also struggling with some sense of disappointment with God. There seems to be a lot of that going around right now — you are not alone! My experience of God in the storm left me exhilarated, humbled, rebuked, as well as comforted by those corrective words the Holy Spirit spoke to me. The precious Spirit of God also left me with a renewed sense of promise... that God WILL do that which He has purposed in the earth, that He WILL establish His plans and WILL deal with His enemies and that He WILL accomplish His plans for our lives. But of all the things that our hearts desire and wait for, the day of His appearing promises to bring everything and more than we could ever hope for... the day when we see His glory, when it is fully revealed on earth — that day when we ourselves are transformed by His appearing and His glory shines out brightly from us and all who have fixed their hope on Him!

*“As lightning strikes in the east, and shines to the west, so will the coming of the Son of man be...”*

Amen! Come Lord Jesus, we long for that day of your appearing.

# Jahzal

MELBOURNE AIRPORT,  
AUSTRALIA

There were no other available seats left for me when I arrived at the departure lounge at Melbourne airport, other than one next to a girl that whom I assumed at the time to be about 14 years old. I must have got that impression because Jahzal was small, slumped low in her seat (as teenagers often do) and was hugging a huge stuffed toy. As I sat down I looked at the toy thinking how much some children I knew would like it, then I looked at her and we exchanged smiles. I truthfully can't remember how we started talking... I probably asked her where she was heading. But I was soon surprised to find that Jahzal was actually 23 years old, was a Muslim and was returning to Iran to visit her parents during her break from University. Yes, first impressions can be very misleading!

Our initial encounter was brief and we soon parted company to board the plane which was headed for Dubai via Singapore, where we had a refuelling stop for about an hour. On the way to Singapore I began to pray for Jahzal and wondered what my life might be like as a Muslim living in Australia. How would Australian people treat me in a post-9/11, post-Bali-Bombing

world? What would it be like to not have Jesus with me as my friend in a foreign and alien culture? What would it be like for an Iranian girl to live in permissive Australia among both Christians and heathens and then go back to religiously conservative Iran with all of its dress codes and traditions? What cultural adjustment issues would she face?

In fact at that point I actually prayed and said, *“Lord, if you want me to talk to Jahzal, please give me another opportunity to speak with her.”* When we arrived at Singapore people disembarked to stretch their legs and to look through the duty-free stores for about 30 minutes before entering the departure lounge again. As we waited to board the plane Jahzal came and sat next to me again, which I took as a clear confirmation from the Lord. We began talking again and I raised some of those issues that I had been thinking about. I also explained that I was a publisher of a magazine that examined these kinds of issues and gave her a copy of my magazine to read and invited her to have a think about whether she would like to talk more when we arrived at Dubai. When we arrived in Dubai, some 7 hours later, I found that Jahzal had read the magazine and was eager to talk.

Jahzal emerged from the airport restroom looking more like a traditional Iranian woman. She had changed from her western clothes in preparation to re-enter the Middle Eastern world and to meet her family. The more I talked to her the more I began to see her in a much different light. In fact, I wondered how I could ever have assumed that she was 14 years old! She was mature, attractive, intelligent, thoughtful and articulate — not at all the little girl that I had first assumed her to be hiding behind that giant stuffed toy (which was, by the way, a gift for her younger sister). It was a lesson for me in how certain key elements can so easily trigger our prejudicial assumptions — and how we can so easily be blinded and not see the real things that are right in

front of our eyes. Perhaps it is not as difficult as I had thought to fall victim to certain kinds of prejudices.

I was surprised to find that Jahzal was not only much older than I had assumed, but that she had also been married in Australia to an Iranian man and had also been through a divorce. She had certainly been through a lot of pain for someone so young. And although Jahzal was a Muslim, she came from a non-religious family. Apart from a general belief in God they were not devout or practising Muslims. Her family were the Islamic equivalent of what we might call 'nominal' believers.

'Nominal believers' are those who may pray occasionally and derive a basic sense of morality and God-consciousness from their belief. But they usually have no serious expectation that God will reveal himself or personally or make any specific demands on them other than to live as 'good people'. Australia is full of such people.

### **Jahzal's View of the World**

According to Jahzal, Australian's are generally very ignorant of the Middle East and do not realise how modern and advanced Iran is. In her experience we are not open or friendly to Muslims. In fact, she said that many Australians are cold and unwelcoming towards them. We do not make an effort to include them or to introduce them into our circle of friends and she told a story about a Christian who very obviously excluded her from a gathering of friends. She also observed that older Australians seem to be much more informed about Middle Eastern culture than younger people.

According to Jahzal, Christians seem to believe in Jesus more than God, which confused her.

In her experience up until that time, Christians had not been very friendly to her. According to Jahzal, Muslim women are not treated as equal to men. She felt that religion

was responsible for war and separation, that religious people were harsh and judgemental — perhaps because the Iranian community in Australia had cut her off after her divorce. Nevertheless she continued to believe that God was merciful, powerful, and that he understood joy and humour and that he must be great.

The thing that impressed me about Jahzal was that whilst she had major doubts and reservations about religion (both Christianity and Islam) she was well on her way to developing strong personal beliefs based on an understanding of the character and nature of God that was actually quite Biblical. Her belief in God had grown stronger during hard times and she experienced peace when she prayed and had even seen some answered prayers.

After she had finished answering all of my questions, Jahzal was quite interested to know what I believed. I usually find that if you listen to someone respectfully for long enough they will eventually want to know what your views are too. So I shared with her about some of the things that God had done in my life and explained why Jesus is so central in the faith of Christians. ie: That Jesus, the son of God, was pre-existent with God, involved in creation, and was appointed by Him to be the Saviour of the world... and that it is only through Christ that we can fully come to know God.

After I had finished talking I asked Jahzal if I could pray for her and surprisingly, she eagerly accepted. By this time she was already feeling something stirring in her heart. Right there in Dubai airport, in full view of anyone who cared to look, we held hands and prayed. I asked God to continue to bless her and reveal Himself to her on her journey of discovery. I also asked God to reveal to her, through the Holy Spirit, the central importance of Jesus Christ in God's plan in bringing salvation

to mankind. At that point she was overwhelmed by a sense of the presence of God and, struggling to find words for what she was feeling, said that she had never felt anything like it in her life. I encouraged her to get a Bible and read it, starting with the gospels.

I may never see Jahzal again, but I learned a valuable lesson from that encounter. Sometimes our own prejudices and assumptions keep us from seeing people as they truly are. And sometimes the people that we don't think would be interested in hearing our story are actively involved in praying and seeking God. I wonder how many more Muslims living in Australia and other parts of the world might also be willing to respond to the good news if only Christians could exhibit some genuine love and acceptance, taking time to welcome them, listen to them, and in turn eventually earn the right to speak.

# Trusting God in the War Zone

LIRA, NORTHERN UGANDA  
THE WAR DRAGS ON.

Not very far from this village, 5 kms from Lira, Uganda, some of the worst atrocities of war have been committed. The cruelty and murderous barbarity of the LRA rebels defies belief, and yet here among these villagers we find genuine warmth, hospitality, generosity, gentleness, joy and faith. One can't help but think that these people are victims of a great evil that has conspired against them — as if an evil spiritual force, perhaps further incited to hatred by the very purity and vulnerability of these people, has amassed forces from hell bent on their destruction.

When one looks at the political circumstances that surround this war additional layers of complexity emerge. Many believe that the LRA rebels have been supported by the northern Sudanese government in retaliation for Uganda's support for the SPLA forces in Southern Sudan. Others believe that the Ugandan government's resolve to end the conflict has not been genuine because of northern Uganda's poor electoral support for President Museveni — that northern Uganda is being permitted

to suffer as punishment for not supporting the President. Whatever the case, after 17 years of heartless terrorism we are left to wonder why the Ugandan government and the International Community seem to have done so very little to hasten a final resolution to this conflict. Conservative estimates put the number of children kidnapped by the LRA during this period of conflict as high as 40,000. Children are kidnapped and forced at gunpoint to commit unspeakable atrocities, sometimes even to murder their own parents or siblings. Boys are forcibly taken as soldiers and girls as young wives for the rebels. The majority of schools in the northern region have been burned, along with tens of thousands of homes, the result being that the war will have a long term effect on the education of children in the region — the effects of which will be felt for generations.

Over a million people have been displaced from their homes and villages, either due to direct attack or the threat of it, and have been forced to live under pressure in IDP (Internally Displaced People) Camps. In the camps life is very difficult and the people suffer from malnutrition and disease. Inside the IDP Camps social diseases also thrive. Children growing up in these camps are deprived of the healthy life they would normally enjoy at home. Instead of learning how to cultivate their fields and harvest their crops, they are learning how to survive on handouts. Where hope is scarce and poverty rampant, prostitution and sexual immorality also abound. Incidents of HIV and other STDs are on the rise. Ironically the surrounding land is extremely fertile and productive and the only thing preventing the people from returning to their homes and producing their own food is the lack of security. This is a crisis not due to drought, flooding or any other natural cause — this humanitarian crisis can be attributed entirely to the governance (or lack thereof) of the region.

Despite all these depressing factors, rays of faith and hope shine through. One group of believers in this area have responded creatively to this crisis by opening their homes to their fellow believers coming from other regions so that they don't have to live in the squalid and confined conditions of the IDP camps or the overcrowding of the nearby town. Together they have constructed accommodation for incoming families and they communally work the surrounding fields to produce and abundance of food. They gather for prayer and worship and explore ways that they can minister to the people around them who are living in fear. Many gave testimonies of how God has protected and provided for them during this difficult time and have been looking with faith at how God is at work redemptively in these terrible circumstances.

Upon our arrival we visited a brother whose home was the location for a large gathering while we were there. He told us how God had told him ahead of time that the rebels were coming and that he should sell his home and relocate closer to Lira. Even though the rebels have ventured closer to Lira, he says that God has promised him that he doesn't need to move again and the he and his family will be safe. And safe they have been. I guess that's a good illustration of what the Bible talks about when it says, "*The righteous shall live by faith*".

# The Steadfast Faithfulness of God

KAMPALA. UGANDA

My mind was overwhelmed with questions: Why had God let it come to this? Where was He? Had He forgotten to be faithful? Had He forgotten that the whole reason that I was in Uganda was because He had so clearly called me? Had He forgotten that I loved Him and wanted to serve Him? What about His promises? How did I get into this situation? How could I be here in Africa to serve Him and completely run out of money? Where was all of this abundant provision that I hear so much about?

“Where God guides, He provides!” is a phrase that I myself had used on so many occasions, but where was God’s provision and guidance now? A week or so earlier I had borrowed a 4WD vehicle on a “break it, you fix it — wreck it, you buy it” basis and after driving for days all over Eastern Uganda, I was driving through Kampala near the end of my trip when there was suddenly a big ‘clunk’ as the drive gear disengaged and I coasted to a stop right into the driveway of a Service Station. At least the timing was providential. As I rolled to a stop a mechanic walked over and asked me if I needed assistance.

In actual fact, what we discovered was needed was a new component in the automatic transmission — and quite an expensive one at that! That's where all my travel budget had disappeared to and how I found myself in this predicament. I was only half way through a mission trip to Africa and after paying for repairs I had no money at all except for about \$50 in Ugandan Shillings. Not enough money for the rest of my trip, not enough for accommodation, nor for food... and no money to pay my faithful African co-worker. *"What Lord..."* I prayed with a mixture of desperate faith and growing anxiety, *"... do you expect me to do now?"* I was seriously deflated. It was in a tough spot and it was time to get serious. I determined that what was really needed was "an honesty session" with God, so I walked out of the place where I was staying and walked up a lonely road to find a place where I could get loud and "have it out" with God in private.

It was late afternoon and the clouds that had gathered in the west were spectacular against the late afternoon sun. That vision of majesty helped me to imagine that I was talking directly to heaven. I walked back and forth on the fresh tarmac of a new but unopened road. As I watched African children playing in the distance, I began to pour out my heart to God. *"Lord, the Bible says that no soldier should serve at his own expense... but Lord, I am in your army and you know that I have paid my own way to get here... I have made sacrifices and taken steps of faith because I believed that YOU had called me here and that YOU would provide for me! I have laboured, and trusted, and believed and given and served in so many ways... but here I am... alone... broke... and I feel forsaken! What did I do to deserve this? Was I not committed enough to you? Not devoted enough to you in leaving my home, my business and family and coming here for no pay and to travel and teach and help these people?"*

I looked up at the sky and wasn't hearing any response, so I got louder... just so I could be absolutely sure that God would hear me. I paced back and forth, accusing God of overlooking my needs. Anyone who might have been watching me from a distance may have wondered what was going on as I pointed into the sky and punched the air, kicked the dirt and paced back and forth. I didn't care what anyone else thought — I just needed a breakthrough. At one point I think I even accused God of not knowing how to manage the world properly! I am so glad that God is not swayed by such silly accusations. He was very loving and patient with me as I made complaint to Him about all of the people that I knew that were trying to serve Him but who were not, in my view, adequately provided for. I complained to Him about all of the complacent people back home who sat comfortably in their luxuriously furnished homes and who cared nothing for the homeless poor. I thought of the many Christians I know who devoted themselves to their high-paying jobs and who felt that their only obligations to the Kingdom of God was to put 10% of their income into the offering plate at their churches, and then spend the rest on large-screen TVs, golf clubs, new cars and jet skis. I wasn't happy being in this situation. I felt betrayed, I felt forsaken, I felt that no-one back home fully understood why I kept coming back to Africa and no-one had committed to partnering with me in my work. Some people believed in what I was doing enough to contribute money for the orphan project, but no-one had committed to seriously supporting *me*. I poured out all of my complaints right there under the open heaven of that glorious African sky. I also asked God lots of questions... none of which He chose to answer at the time. But this wasn't about really getting answers... this was about me getting honest and real with God.

I can't actually recall now how long this discourse with heaven went on for, but it was quite a long time. It went long enough for me to vent and empty myself of all my doubts, fears, concerns and express all of my hopes, needs, aspirations and desires. I put my petitions before God and clearly told Him what I needed and wanted and what I thought was fair. And after it was all over I realised that I really had no alternative. I had to go into town and use my credit card in the ATM to pull some money out of the bank — even if it meant going into debt. Whatever the financial consequences would be, I would have to face them later. But in the short term I had clear and unavoidable obligations to my African co-workers to meet their needs and fulfil my promises, and it was only right that I face up to that. So I got on a Boda (motor-cycle taxi) and took the hair-raising ride into town and withdrew enough money on my Credit Card to meet my immediate obligations. That evening I paid my co-worker and the next day I drove to Jinga to return the 4WD to its owner (all fixed and in good condition) and met up with a missionary friend from Mbale.

On the way to Jinga I got a call from some Ugandan brothers from Lira, in northern Uganda, who had heard that I was in the country and wanted to see me. To be honest, I was a bit reluctant to meet those guys. Why? Because as much as I loved them, it seemed like whenever I met with them it would end up costing me money. A few years earlier I had been put on the spot to lend them some money and had loaned them \$500 which I never really expected to see again. After what I had been through I didn't feel like going through that again on this trip. Plus, my remaining days in Uganda were pretty much all accounted for, so I declined their invitation to go to Lira. But I told them where I would be and if they wanted to catch a bus and meet them in Jinga then I would be happy to see them.

I returned the 4WD to David at the Father's Divine Love Mission orphanage in Jinga, then met up with my friends. My UK missionary mate from Mbale was always an encouragement to me. We sat and talked and joked and prayed, and finally he handed me an envelope, along with an apology. God, he reported, had put it on his heart to give me a gift a few weeks earlier but it had taken him longer to get around to it. I opened the envelope to find a wad of cash — about one million Ugandan Shillings (just under \$1000 at the time). I was stunned, blessed, grateful and relieved beyond words that God had seen and heard and had faithfully made provision for me — and had planned to even before my need had arisen. By the time I met my friends from Lira I was in much better spirits. In characteristic seriousness they took me aside to tell me how special their relationship with me is to them, and to enquire of my spiritual welfare and the welfare of the brethren back home in Australia. Then after some time one of the brothers pulled a roll of money from his pocket and handed it to me... it was the full repayment of my \$500 loan that I had given them about 2 years earlier! After feeling that God had overlooked my needs, I found myself suddenly awash with enough cash to complete my journey and pay off my credit card when I got home.

Now what were the lessons I learnt from all of this? God knows our needs, even before we ask. But sometimes He will allow things to get a little desperate before He comes to prove His love and faithfulness to us. And ultimately it doesn't matter if other people aren't doing all the things that they perhaps should be doing. As long as we are doing all that we should be doing then God will be with us — just as He has promised. He will NEVER leave us or forsake us — no matter what reversals and setbacks we might suffer.

That particular trip to Uganda (and I have now been there

11 times!) was beset with all kinds of unexpected difficulties and financial hardships, yet it was the first and only trip where I ended up coming back to Australia with as much money as I had taken. Just as Jesus said, *“God knows our needs, even before we ask.”*

# Confrontational Love in the Concrete Jungle

EASTERN SUBURBS, MELBOURNE

It is a rare occasion when I have cause to catch the train. Not being naturally fond of noise or crowds I usually try to avoid the city (and public transport). But you can't avoid the city forever and I had cause to take one Thursday off and catch the train into the heart of Melbourne.

Why they chose to sit near me was a mystery. I would have preferred that they didn't because they were foul-mouthed and offensive. The two girls were in their teens and had matted hair, blackened eyes and numerous body-piercings. The 4 boys were similarly bedraggled. The obvious ring-leader had orange hair, Marilyn Manson t-shirt, and was clutching a 2 litre plastic coke bottle containing some high-alcohol drink. Most of it had already been consumed. The young man opposite the ring-leader was dressed in leather and chains with a red Mohawk hair-cut. The young man who sat closest to us, opposite me was a slouching dark-hooded character — it appeared that the hood served as a defence against any light that might strike his face. The bottle was passed around.

The group made themselves the centre of attention on the train with their repetitious loud expletives. Most of the people on the train looked relieved that it was us that they were sitting next to and not them! They were boasting about their exploits with sex, drugs and alcohol, falling over each other, laughing and trying to outdo each other with how many times they could use the “F...” word for shock effect. If they were not drunk they were well on their way to being so. For a minute I was tempted to be intimidated until one of the girls accidentally brushed my arm and swung around quickly to apologise. What? An apology from an anarchist?! Hmmm... maybe these guys weren't real anarchists afterall. No, they were just kids! Misguided, rebellious and confused kids!

I had rarely encountered such a shocking display of disregard for other people — or heard such public profanity. The girls in the opposite isle were about 15 years of age who had probably literally been everywhere and done everything imaginable — and who couldn't care less what we or anyone else on the train thought of them. How could anyone bridge this gap and communicate on a meaningful level with these guys? There was way too much alcohol and bravado flowing to make communication easy. I rode on in prayerful silence.

An argument soon broke out among them. One of the girls had bought a new 'Iron Maiden' t-shirt for her boyfriend (the ring-leader) and was insisting that he try it on. He, on the other hand, did not like being told what to do, so with a string of more expletives he got up and went to stand in the gap between the carriages to enjoy a cigarette. The others joined him leaving her alone with us. She looked across at us and asked, “*Why won't he f...ing try it on? He loves Iron Maiden. I bought it for him so why won't he f...ing try it on? I want to see if it fits him.*” Her appeal was genuine. I felt sorry for her because she seemed to be looking

for love from someone who seemed quite incapable of giving it. I didn't know what to say so I quietly prayed for wisdom. The group soon came back and ended any possibility of conversation. Did I miss an opportunity? But how could we get through to them anyway? They were so very different to the kind of people that I knew or associated with.

As the train came to a stop I thought back over my youth and remembered the numerous friends I had known who died either as a result of drugs or alcohol related accidents. The hooded figure remained on the train as his companions got off, and he was looking past us waving goodbye to them on the platform. In an instant something welled up within me. Before I really knew what I was saying I spoke to him, loud enough for others to hear and said, *"Are those guys your friends?"*

*"Yeah, they're really cool"*, he replied in a surprisingly friendly tone.

*"Well, take a good look at them now because they're all going to be dead by the time they're 30"*.

I surprised myself with what I had said. He looked at me in stunned silence. Now it was his turn to be shocked.

Before he had a chance to reply I said, *"Mate, believe me, I've seen it all before. I have seen friends die from drug and alcohol abuse and unless your friends make some changes you're going to see each of them die too, one by one. And that's exactly where you're heading unless you turn your life around too. There are better ways to live... don't you know how to live better than this?"*

I don't know whether it was due to my foreboding appearance and physical stature, or whether I somehow manage to communicate genuine concern in my words. I don't know whether it was the convicting power of the Holy Spirit or the fact that he was now alone, but my confrontational approach worked! Much to my surprise I had his complete

attention, and even more surprisingly, his respect.

I also had the attention of everyone in the train within hearing distance!

As we talked the dark hooded young man sitting opposite me opened up and showed us a different side of himself. Jason had been kicked out of home by his mother and was living with his step-father. His biological father had died 6 weeks earlier and his long-term girlfriend had called that morning to inform him that she no longer loved him. That was where he was headed on the train... to his girlfriend's place to seek a reconciliation. As we were talking she rang him on his mobile. She told him to not bother coming — the relationship was over.

Jason was heart-broken. He confessed to us that he knew he needed to change but didn't know how. He also confessed that it was his destructive ways that had destroyed his relationship due to his tendency towards drunkenness and fits of anger. We listen with sympathy and I encouraged him to get it in perspective. I shared how I had also known heart-break in my youth and how disappointments are inevitable bumps on the road of life but whatever we go through, things can get better... there is hope.

Since his plans to meet his girlfriend had fallen through, Jason was getting off at the next station. For some reason I felt constrained not to 'hit him with the gospel'. This was not an exercise in evangelism but in relationship building. Some might call it pre-evangelism but I just wanted to get to know this kid. I invited him to come and visit us sometime and told him that he would be welcome anytime at our place. I gave him my business card and told him to give me a call next time he was in the Belgrave area.

*"What's this?"*, he said, looking at the card.

*"I publish a magazine that teaches people how to live better."* I

said. *“Jason, how you live and the things that you choose in life all come from what you believe. You need to have a good long think about what you believe... that’s the first step to getting a better life”*. As he got up to leave he genuinely thanked us and shook my hand and said that I could expect to hear from him and put my card into his wallet.

I don’t know whether I will hear from him again, but I do know that Jason heard some things from me that he needed to hear — at a critical time in his life. I know that our meeting was a divine appointment. At the next station an elderly lady gave me an indication that Jason may not have been the only one to benefit from our discussion. As she walked past she leaned over and said to us, *“I hope you got through to him! Keep up the good work!”*

One thing that I learned from this experience is that it is so easy to judge people based upon their outward appearance. These kids may have looked as offensive and sounded as vulgar as anyone could, yet beyond their outward appearance and behaviour they were typically human and vulnerable. They showed every sign of having the same concerns and fears that we all share, such as *“Am I loved? Do I have the approval of my peers? Does anyone truly care for me? Does anyone value my love?”* We may not share the same taste in clothes, like the same music or use the same vocabulary, but being different is no excuse for not prayerfully seeking to bridge the cultural divide in order to try and genuinely communicate the love of Christ.

Time and again I have found that it only takes our prayerful willingness, our availability and honest dependence on God to see wonderful things happen. I survived my trip into the city, but meeting Jason was the highlight of my day... and a very educational experience.

# Desperate Times. Desperate Prayers

NAIROBI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

As anyone who travels regularly in the developing world will understand, sickness is a very real possibility. Not only are our pampered western stomachs not accustomed to much of the common bacteria found within the food and water supplies of developing countries, but there is also a much greater likelihood of encountering and contracting exotic illnesses, such as typhoid, cholera and yellow fever.

Most experienced travellers will take sensible precautions, such as obtaining the relevant immunisations, packing a good medical kit, and going prepared with mosquito nets, insect repellent and sensible clothes to prevent against the mosquito-born parasites that spread potentially deadly malaria. But at the end of the day, when all precautions have been taken, travel to these places is still a calculated risk. And when you choose to go to places where hospitals are not well equipped and staff not professionally trained, it really is an exercise in entrusting yourself to God's power to care and protect.

As a seasoned traveller, I make a habit of taking all of the

responsible precautions. But after my first two trips I soon realised that my anti-malaria tablets were actually making me sick, so I made the conscious and deliberate decision to dispense with those, concentrating instead on avoiding getting bitten by mosquitoes in the first place. I don't recommend that for everyone, but it's a strategy that has certainly worked well for me so far — I've been to Africa 11 times and haven't had malaria yet. By contrast I have known fellow travellers who have done all the right things, by the book, only to end up in hospital with typhoid and malaria together. I can only put my experience down to the grace of God and thank him that I have not been afflicted.

But no traveller is immune to food poisoning. In my case it did not come in a remote village while eating boiled goat or cow intestines. Instead, it came at Nairobi International Airport after eating an apricot danish pastry and a chocolate-coated ice-cream — which, by the way, I enjoyed thoroughly.

Maybe it was because I had just come from two weeks in the bush, eating nothing but freshly cooked vegetables and drinking pure rainwater. Maybe my body had become detoxified to such an extent that the butter and dairy produce in what I was eating was too much of a shock to my system. Or maybe there was something contaminated in what I ate. But whatever the cause, my stomach started to complain and it wasn't long before I realised that I needed to find a toilet, and fast. But nothing could prepare me for the severity of what I was about to experience.

It was, in fact, unlike anything that I have experienced. Most of us, if not all of us, have experienced periods of nausea and vomiting. Most of us, at some time in our lives, have experienced diarrhoea. Most of us have experienced abdominal pain and discomfort. But seldom do all three come with extreme intensity at the same time. It was, quite clearly, the most severe

pain that I have ever experienced in my life, and I experienced it all in the privacy of my small toilet cubical at Nairobi airport.

Never in human history has a toilet cubical ever been the location of such extreme and fervent, sincere prayer. Not only was I faced with the embarrassing dilemma of deciding which end should be directed at the toilet bowl as everything within my body apparently wanted be outside of it. But such was the intensity of my stomach cramps that I considered the very real possibility that I might actually be dying. If I'd had more strength I might have acted upon my first impulse to cry for help. But I also realised that for anyone to help me they would need to break down the door just to get in. As the intensity of pain washed over me all of my strength had departed, and sweat poured from my all of my pores as a prayer so desperate, a plea so pure and so sincere, so full of desperate emotion must have cut through the heavens straight to the throne of God and alerted all the angels within 1000 kilometres. Quite frankly, I have never prayed with such pure and desperate intent in all of my life.

Just as my lavatorial intercession reached its highest fervour, the pain immediately started to subside. Instead of desperate pleas, my fervent prayers turned to fervent praise, which must have ascended to the throne of God like pure incense. In the aftermath of what had just happened, what I could smell on earth was nothing at all like pure incense. But the pain lifted and left me sitting, trembling, with my head, face and shirt completely drenched with perspiration.

Thankfully I also had a change of clothes in my hand luggage (another sensible precaution for a smart traveller) and after my strength had returned I was able to clean myself — and the cubicle.

It's one of those events that I will never forget. Not only

was it a reminder of my human frailty, but it was a stark reminder of the promise, "*whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*". I did not think that it were possible for me to pray that way — to come to God with such complete and utter fervent desperation. But in my hour of greatest need, alone and severely afflicted, without anyone else to call on or to reply upon, God met me there in that cubicle and administered his healing touch. I returned to the departure lounge just in time to board the plane (and decided not to eat the complimentary meal on that flight). I realised that day there is no such thing as a lone traveller — the Lord is with us always.

# Betrayed

BELGRAVE, VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

It was Monday, June 24, 2002. Life had certainly had its usual trials, but generally everything was sweet. My rammed-earth house in the hills was finally built, amidst much sweat and tears. The last six years had been an amazing adventure following God's call to travel regularly to Africa to establish *Friends of Uganda Worldwide* — an orphan project designed to help some of Uganda's AIDS orphans. I had witnessed miracle after miracle of God's provision for this work and on my numerous trips I had seen God do remarkable miracles in Africa as He poured out his grace, love and healing mercy to many people in need. God had also blessed me with three trustworthy (or so I thought) Ugandan co-workers and I have made many friends both in Australia and the US who were willing to stand with us in what God had called us to. I had led teams to Africa on numerous occasions for what had turned out to be life-transforming for those involved. And I had also recently felt led to launch *Worldview Interactive magazine* — a print and online publication that was designed to broaden people's view of the world through discussions on faith, politics and global events — all from a biblical perspective.

As I walked into my office on this winter morning in June, I became immediately aware of the presence of the Lord — and suddenly impressed by a conviction that He was about to share something vitally important to me. As I closed the door I grabbed my Bible and took a seat and quieted my spirit to listen carefully to what my heavenly father was about to say to me. In the hour or so that followed, the Holy Spirit led me on a walk through some passages in the Bible, highlighting particular verses which I was careful to write down for future reference. Beginning with Jeremiah chapter 9, it wasn't long before I began to see a theme developing. *"Beware of friends, do not trust your brothers... friend deceives friend and no-one speaks the truth"*. Then onto chapter 12, verse 6, *"Your brothers, even they have betrayed you... do not trust them"*. Then onto Chapter 17, verses 5 through to 8: *"Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who makes flesh and blood his strength..."* Then finally to Micah 7:5: *"Do not trust a neighbour, put no confidence in a friend. Even with her who lies in your embrace be careful with your words"*.

After I had received all of this, my sense of the presence of the Lord faded and I realised that I had just been entrusted with some kind of warning about the future. But what did it all mean? All of my friends were good, loyal people — surely none of these would lie to me or betray me. But I was left with the absolute conviction that this was not just my imagination running rampant and I even forwarded an account of my experiences to my close friend in America for a second opinion.

At the time I was working from my home office as a freelance designer, splitting my time between commercial work and fund-raising for the Ugandan orphan project, writing appeal letters, giving our supporters reports of our progress, and holding our Ugandan partners accountable in the use of funds that we were sending them. The lead up to the war in Iraq was also

underway and I was also publishing informed commentary about the questionable WMD (weapons of mass destruction) fear-mongering that was going on in the media, being very concerned that many of my fellow believers were also being swept along in the media hype without much consideration for the lesser-known facts — or what the likely consequences of an invasion would mean to the civilian population of Iraq. This kind of discussion had unsettled some of my American colleagues but I knew, or at least I believed, that the strength of our relationship was much stronger than any political differences we might have. I also regarded my Ugandan colleagues among my closest, dearest friends. I had flown them to Australia, welcomed them in my home and responded to many of their material needs on more occasions than I could recall. In return they upheld me in prayer and guided me through the potential pitfalls as God opened doors for me to minister in Africa. Then there was my home-fellowship. I had met a prominent real-estate investment guru through my business and in the process of working on his promotional material had shared something about our work in Africa. This naturally led to discussions about faith and eventually he and his wife wanted to know more. It wasn't long before both he and his wife were baptised and joined our small Bible study group.

As calm as life can be at times, no-one really knows when the next life-changing storm is coming. And in my case it a vivid dream served as the next precursor to what was about to break upon my life. Like in my my dream, my life was approaching a major crossroads when a violent storm was about to stir up a whole lot of rubbish. And like in my dream, before I could run to safety I was about to be carried away completely and my life changed beyond recognition. Having that precognition didn't shield me from any of the pain — but it did

provide a context for me to understand that God knew ahead of time that it was all about to happen. And like in my dream, the only thing that I could do was to entrust myself to a faithful God and hope that after the ride on the storm was over, that I would come to rest gently and in a good place. But in the meantime there was nothing I could do but be carried and buffeted by the storm until things had run their course.

The details of how the storm broke is probably not relevant to the central theme here. But it suffices to say that before a few short months had passed, I had lost every closest friend on whom I had relied. My dear African colleagues, whom I considered to be as close as brothers, suddenly and without cause called for my resignation from the board of the charity, amidst false and unfounded accusations. I was dumbfounded in disbelief and cut to the heart with a sense of unfathomable betrayal. I had spoken to each of them individually on the phone the day before and everything was sweet, or so I believed. Then I received a letter signed by each of them calling me to step down as president of the organisation. It was like an arrow through my heart. It took me three trips to Africa and two full years to uncover the true motive for their actions, and I exposed myself to heap more pain and rejection in the process before I was able to finally close the book on that ugly chapter. It confounds me still to this day how such dear friends, who had received so much from me, could willingly conspire together to cover up mismanagement of project activities and attempt to make me the scapegoat.

But the betrayals I was experiencing were not limited to my Africa colleagues. In all that was going on I felt like Simon in the Bible, whom Jesus had warned, *“Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail.”*

All that I was going through did have a definite hint of

something demonic about it. I was hearing the same callous words echoing from the mouths of completely unconnected people living on entirely different continents: *"Allan, nothing that you say or do could make me want to renew my friendship with you."*

These were the words of two of my Australian colleagues — one of my board members and one from my millionaire friend whom I had led to Christ — delivered over the phone after numerous failed attempts at reconciliation. The other was from my dear American friend, delivered in person and with clinical coldness as I sat across the living room in his home in Atlanta.

From what I understand, my American colleague was offended by my public questioning of American foreign policy in relation to the war in Iraq. We had exchanged friendly emails almost every day for years about many things that we held opposing views on, none of which had previously threatened our friendship. So when he began to avoid communicating with me I wanted to see him in person to try to rescue the valued relationship. On my next trip to Africa I took an around-the-world flight so I could drop into Atlanta and see him face to face. After staying in the home of a mutual friend, I finally was invited to his house and received what appeared to be an amicable welcome. After dinner, sitting opposite me in his lounge room, he made the declaration, calm and deliberate, using almost the exact phrases that I had heard from my colleagues in Australia, *"Allan, nothing that you do or say could make you want to renew my friendship with you"*. I was emotionally winded. Shattered. It was one thing to be rejected by dear friends, but the fact that continents apart these people would choose the exact phrase by which to formally terminate our friendship was beyond any plausible humanistic explanation. At a complete loss of how to respond to such an emphatic reply, I offered my apology for my part in all that had happened,

then the next morning I altered my schedule and returned to Australia. I couldn't get out of America and back to my family fast enough. I began to feel like Job in the Bible and, as I was about to learn, this season of testing which had already taken me to the edge of my endurance, was far from over.

# Stumbling Toward the Light

It would be an understatement to say that I had almost lost the will to live. Unlike many people who fear death, for me it was a welcome proposal. For me dying meant being instantly transported into the presence of the Lord — or sleeping peacefully until the time of resurrection — whichever case happens to be true. Either option was just fine with me. I thought too much about hastening the process but I did not want to leave my family with that terrible legacy. No, suicide was not a realistic option, even though it sometimes gave me temporary comfort to consider escaping this earthly realm. For as long as God continued to give me breath I would live, and hope and pray for better days ahead.

I had stopped going to church long ago — not because I had ceased to believe at all — but because it was all too discouraging to sit and look at the back of someone's head and sing happy-clappy songs that belied the immense grief and disillusionment that I was feeling, and then go back to the car not having experienced anything that I could remotely label as 'fellowship' — that was more than I could handle. It was much easier to

stay at home and read the Bible and pray, and to try in stay in touch with a few of my remaining Christian friends. Besides, in a superficial middle-class social environment, where brutal honesty is not always appreciated, I could never find anyone willing to listen long enough to hear my whole story, much less offer any solutions. The best advise that anyone could give me at the time, upon seeing the depth of my despair, was to suggest that I go on anti-depression tablets. But if what I had observed in some of my friends who went down that path were anything to go by, there were no solutions there either. No, my sadness was not clinical. It was real, valid and due to circumstances completely external to myself. So rather than mask my grief with drugs, I fully intended to take my grief to the Lord each day and pray through my debilitation until tangible solutions and concrete hope appeared.

When I received a call from my old friend Cora I was a little surprised that she had called to invite me to church. Cora herself had given up regularly attending church herself but when she had experienced something unusual in a mid-week meeting and she wanted my opinion. I thought that I had seen it all in my years of walking with the Lord so the thought of seeing something different intrigued me and I went along — as a favour to Cora as much as anything.

The service started pretty much like any other charismatic worship time. The crowd was a good mix of nationalities and an even spread ages and gender. Many of the people present were obviously broken, and more than a few came across as a little eccentric. Some were crippled, some were obese, some were old and frail, some were insecure and desperate. Most of them appeared expectant as the happy-clappy songs began. But soon there was something different. The happy-clappiness gave way to reverence and a hush settled over the meeting. The man at

the centre of it all was conspicuously missing as people seemed to actually be focused on worshipping God. Finally someone did step forward to take centre stage and after some tongue-speaking prayer he pointed to me and called me to the front, then proceeded to tell me, with precise accuracy as if from the Lord Himself, everything that I had been doing for the previous 5 years, beginning with clear acknowledgement of my crushed and broken state. Among the many deeply personal things that I heard that night, he spoke the precious words of truth that I so badly needed to hear: *“You have seen the worst of all that Christians can do.”*

That authentic prophetic encounter was the beginning of the healing process for me, even in the midst of the collapse that was still taking place around me. Over the following months and years I returned to those meetings like a lost and thirsty man returning to an oasis in the desert. And every time I went, with my eyes firmly fixed on the Lord and not man, God never failed to meet me, encourage me, affirm and strengthen me. One of the things that contributed to these successful meetings was Nigel Wright’s willingness to see giftedness in others and to allow them to pray for people as well. On more than one occasion the Lord met me through other people’s prayers as well — and sometime in surprisingly informal ways — such as the spontaneous expression of spiritual gifts during coffee after the meetings.

During on of these times I had received a word about ‘reaping treasures in dark places’ and had also developed the conviction to start learning Egyptian Arabic, which I began to learn via my phone’s MP3 player. I would often walk off into the forest near my house and learn Arabic phrases, wondering when I would ever get to use such an exotic language in a such a predominantly English speaking country as Australia.

So when I became convinced that the Lord was calling me to 'come away' with him back to Uganda, I determined to go through Egypt on my way to see if the Lord might have something in store for me there.

I passed through Egypt without much incident and tested my limited vocabulary on the locals, which is always a bit of fun. Then I went onto Uganda where I met with my good missionary friend, Robby Keen. Robby and I had become good friends as a result of a 'chance' meeting on a flight out of Entebbe on a previous trip. Having been burned by my former Ugandan colleagues and having travelled to Uganda to finally close the project down, I was sat next to this tall guy on a near-empty plane. What was surprising, however was that Robby was also a believer and was making his way back home to the UK after having been through heart-breaking experiences that closely paralleled my own. We talked the whole way to Dubai and then talked some more — and had been good friends ever since.

I opened my heart to Robby and found in him a man that I could trust and share my whole story with. In brutal honesty I poured out my confession, my hurts and bitternesses, my grief and sorrow and failures. With remarkable gentleness and understanding Robby was able to listen to it all, and in a symbolic act of humility went and got a basin of water and washed my feet, apologising for the sins of the church against me. Later his missionary colleagues set aside a whole Saturday evening to wait on God, pray for me and share with me what they felt the Lord was saying to me in the midst of my tangled life.

During this time another African friend also shared something that echoed an earlier word that I had received... something about being on a train going to a place I didn't know to receive a blessing from God. I was also impressed by a conviction that I should spend more time in Egypt on my

way back to Australia and travel as far north as I could until I reached the coast.

En route to Egypt I received a message from a business associate in Australia who thought I should meet with one of his colleagues in Alexandria to show him a new product that I had developed. So with that confirmation, I proceeded to Cairo where I planned to travel north. It was only when I was on the train, going to a place I didn't know, that I remembered the words of the prophecy that I had been given. Maybe God was going to open up a door of opportunity for my business? But amidst the backdrop of pain and despair that I was feeling, just getting out of bed each day was still a major struggle.

The day after arriving in Alex I met with the Muslim businessman who had been recommended to me. He was very courteous, but ultimately not interested in my product. But he insisted that while I was in Alexandria I should take the opportunity to visit the famous and ancient Library Museum. I was in no mood for being a tourist and would have preferred just to go back to my hotel room and cry. But before I could say that I was not interested he had arranged a car and driver and given him the money for my entrance fee.

We pulled up in the street outside the entrance to the library and my driver rushed off to get the entrance ticket. I gathered up my belongings, which consisted of my back-pack with my laptop computer and my camera, and proceeded to make my way to the entrance, only to find that I was not permitted to enter with my bag. I was directed to a kiosk where, as far as I understood, I was supposed to deposit my bag and obtain some kind of receipt in exchange. At the kiosk there were two segregated windows where an orderly line of women stretched back for some distance, and in front of what was supposed to be the men's window, was a disorderly scum of men competing

for attention. I stood at a distance in puzzled bewilderment, wondering how on earth I, as a non-Arabic speaking westerner, would be able to communicate what I needed, much less fight my way to the window through the scrum. I must have looked lost and pathetic, because just then an absolutely gorgeous young woman stepped out of the crowd and said to me, "Excuse me, can I help you?"

Little did I know how much those few simple and beautiful words were about to change my life, or how in three years time, that lovely woman would become my precious wife.

## How I Captured Osama

It was my first opportunity to spend any reasonable length of time in an Arabic speaking country, but the Lord had definitely planted a desire in my heart to reach out to Muslims. Six months earlier, before I even knew that I would be travelling to Egypt, I had obeyed a prompt by the Holy Spirit to begin to learn Egyptian Arabic. The little that I learned came in very useful and helped me to develop an instant rapport with complete strangers who were both very surprised and delighted (and sometimes amused) to hear a foreigner attempt to speak to them in their own language. Whilst I was in Egypt I met two very key people... one was a lovely Christian woman by the name of Hanan, whom I met by providence at the library in Alexandria. She and I became instant friends. The other was a thief... a one-armed man by the name of Osama.

I had travelled to this ancient city of Alexandria — a city dating back to the time of Alexander the Great, rich in Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Christian and Muslim history — as a result of another prompting by the Spirit during my recent trip to East Africa. I did not know why, but I felt God calling me to leave my good friends in Uganda and to travel to Egypt and then to head as far north as possible. I met Osama while walking on “the Corniche” — the picturesque beach road that rings

the beautiful bay of Alexandria. He was a friendly and likable young man who introduced himself to me and offered to be my unofficial guide during the time of my stay in Alexandria. After initially trying to politely get away from him I was then quickly convicted that maybe he was the reason why God has brought me so far and I berated myself for the attempt. He also spoke both English and Arabic and I reasoned that he might prove useful as a translator if I had opportunity to interact with the locals. I also pitied him because I was reasonably sure that a young man with a disability would have limited career opportunities in this economically challenged country. Osama tenaciously stuck to me like glue and was eager to show me the tourist attractions of Alexandria, including the beach road cafes, the back street markets and guide me to where I could find an Internet Cafe. In return he enjoyed Turkish coffee, a few meals and smoked 'shisha' at my expense, which is the custom among most men in Egypt.

I first began to have doubts about Osama when he developed a pattern of speaking to all the store owners and taxi drivers we met in hushed tones. Then I would often be charged five times the usual price and I suspected that Osama was privately negotiating kick-backs in return for bringing along a gullible tourist. There was also the event at the Internet Cafe: Whilst I was intently reading my emails I had placed my cell phone on the table beside the computer. Osama very smoothly and quietly reached out and lifted my phone from the table, but I saw it in my peripheral vision. When I turned and looked at him he was blank faced and expressionless. I held out my hand and he broke into a smile as if it was all a joke and returned my phone. I was not convinced that it had been a joke and I watched him more carefully after that.

Later that evening Osama's real character immersed when he

asked me if I wanted to meet some girls. I told him no, I was not interested in meeting prostitutes, if that is what he meant, but I told him that if he knew where I could meet ordinary local people for innocent conversation then that would be preferable from spending my evenings alone at my hotel. I also thought it might be an opportunity to share the gospel using Osama as a translator. Osama led me to believe that we would go to a local cafe where he would introduce me to some of his friends, so we met at the arranged time and boarded a taxi. Osama again began to whisper in hushed tones to the driver and when I asked him what he was saying he dodged the question and told me "Mr Allan, I told some girls that you are a rich and famous businessman from Australia and they have paid me money to introduce you to them". I was furious — not only because I had been deceived, but because Osama had apparently also lied to these girls and extracted money from them. I also began to wonder what kind of girls I was going to meet! I stayed in the taxi only because I felt obligated to expose Osama's lie and attempt to get their money back. Not surprisingly, when the taxi stopped we were charged 30 Egyptian Pounds for what should have been a 10 Pound trip, and the fact that we had arrived at what looked like a strip club was more than I could endure. At this point I lost my patience and told Osama that he was a liar and to stay away from me. I walked away from him in disgust and started to make my way back to the hotel alone, but he followed after me profusely apologising. After walking for 5 minutes with Osama on my heels I turned and said to him "Osama, listen to me... I am a godly man... I do not use women. I do not lie to women. I do not exploit women... I regard them as my equals and I treat them with respect. Do you understand?". Osama bowed his head in shame.

I then continued to walk and Osama followed. I hailed another taxi and this time I got into the front and I told Osama to shut up and sit in the back. Not surprisingly our trip back cost only 10 Pounds. When we got out of the taxi I told Osama firmly, *"Now go home!"* but he followed me back to the hotel looking like a man genuinely under conviction and seeking redemption. I even thought I saw some tears. *"Mr Allan, forgive me."*

Now perhaps a more discerning man would never have got himself into this situation at all, but being the naive and gullible man that I am, I was convinced that Osama's penitence was genuine. *"Mr Allan, you see my heart. Here in Egypt people have dark hearts, and in Islam there is no love"*. I had made earlier attempts to witness to Osama but did not see any signs of real interest until now. *"Mr Allan, you have a good heart"*.

*"Osama, if you want a good heart then you need to go home, get on your knees before God and repent, ask for forgiveness and ask Isa (Jesus) into your life. Isa can give you a new life and change your dark heart, but you must believe that He is the Son of God and be prepared to follow Him... are you ready to do that?"*

*"Yes Mr Allan"*

What followed was a discussion about the basic truths of the gospel and how Christian belief differs from Islam. I also explained to Osama the chance of him being persecuted by his family for becoming a Christian. He nodded in agreement and when he clearly expressed a desire to be saved we prayed together. He then asked me if I would come to his house a couple of days later to talk to his family and I agreed. But what I did not realise at the time was that this was all a part of a well rehearsed act and a plan to get closer to me and to introduce me into his wider world of thieves and con artists. The following day I met his brother — a very shifty character

who was also happy to drink Turkish coffee and smoke shisha at my expense. Whilst I was cautious, I did not have any firm evidence upon which to doubt the genuineness of Osama's conversion, and so when that evening Osama intercepted me on the street as I was headed out to eat I invited him to join me at the Pizza Hut. If he was a new believer then I wanted to use every opportunity to get to know him and give him some basic lessons in discipleship.

Whilst eating I placed my cell phone on the table and on two occasions during the meal my attention was diverted. On the way back Osama seemed unusually happy and stopped on the street and began to pray in Arabic. "*What are you praying for Osama?*" I asked. He replied that he was thanking Allah for making me his spiritual father, but it was just then that I realised my phone was missing! Osama looked surprised, but not very convincingly. I asked him if he had taken it, which he denied, so we retraced our steps back to the restaurant to see if I had left the phone on the table.

The manager and staff were very helpful but adamant that the phone was not on the table when they cleared it. We tried calling the number but the phone was switched off. Suspecting Osama but not wanting to accuse this new believer without evidence, I asked the manager to call the police. I also asked Osama to retrace our steps to see if I had dropped the phone somewhere. I knew that I hadn't dropped it but I wanted to give Osama every opportunity to repent and to "find" the phone before the police arrived. It would also confirm him as a definite suspect if he chose that moment to flee the scene. The manager, who also suspected Osama, knew exactly what I was doing and gave me an approving smile as Osama left. But Osama came back without the phone and accompanied me to the police station to help me file the report, which I would

need to make an insurance claim.

God gave me favour with the police and I was able to establish a friendly rapport with them with the little Arabic that I knew. After I made my report Osama and I left the Police Station and I decided to bait him to see if I could establish the truth of what really happened. *“Osama, my phone is very expensive but my travel insurance will pay for it. But what hurts me most is that I have very valuable information on the SIM card and memory card that I cannot afford to lose.”* This was actually true, but I overstated it for effect. I thought if greed was the motivation for the theft of my phone, greed might also be the means by which I might get it back, although I was not very hopeful. Osama took the bait. *“Mr Allan, my brother knows many thieves in Alexandria and if you are prepared to pay him then I think I can get your SIM card back... how much are you prepared to pay?”*

Osama was cunning, but obviously not very smart. Not only had he stolen my \$780 phone in a place where there were few other potential suspects, but he was now wanting me to believe that his brother had reliable connections with every thief in Alexandria who might see an opportunity to snatch a phone. I had been very gullible up to this point, but not that gullible! I agreed to pay \$500 if I could get my phone back and 150 Egyptian pounds for the SIM and memory card. I also promised Osama that he would ‘get what he deserved’ for helping me... he thought I was talking about a reward.

What followed was like something out of a movie. When Osama and I parted company that evening I followed him at a distance, staying concealed behind lampposts and groups of people as he retraced our movements back toward the restaurant. I was trying to stay out of sight but I suspect that he was returning to the scene of the crime where he had stashed the phone somewhere. I lost track of him in the crowd and

returned to my hotel where I spent a sleepless night, grieved that I had lost not just a valuable phone, but what I had believed was a new brother in Christ as well. The next day I returned to the police station with Hanan and filed another report naming Osama as a suspect. The police were very professional and co-operative and together with Hanan and the police we organised a 'sting' where Hanan would contact the police when she got my signal, and they would come and catch Osama with the evidence on him at my hotel. I arranged to meet with Osama at 3pm that afternoon, but I spent the afternoon enjoying the sights of Alexandria with Hanan and deliberately left Osama waiting at my hotel for 4 hours. When I finally returned I found Osama agitated, impatient and nervous... just the way I expected to find him.

Osama told me his brother had found my phone and he wanted me to immediately accompany him to a cafe where the cash transaction would take place but I refused. *"Osama, I know you are a good man, but these men who stole my phone, they are rats and thieves"* I said, looking him straight in the eye, inwardly savoring the moment. *"Osama, these men cannot be trusted. If I go with you they might attack me, steal my money and even harm you. No Osama, if there is going to be a deal it has to take place here in the hotel lounge. If my phone or SIM card have been damaged I will not pay anything. I need to see them and test them before any money changes hands."*

Osama was now visibly squirming. Having waited with heightened greed-driven anticipation for me for more than four hours, he was now facing an immovable obstacle to his plan. He pleaded with me but I was adamant that I would not leave the building. In frustration he reached into his shirt and then opened his hand to reveal the MiniSD card which I recognised as being from my phone. When I went to take it he

pulled his hand away and refused to let me inspect it. Hanan then called me (I had since bought a replacement phone) and now that I had seen the physical evidence I gave her the pre-arranged signal to call the police. The next few minutes were tense as Osama tried to persuade me to leave and I refused to go. He became more and more agitated and paced back and forth. The hotel staff had been watching Osama cautiously all this time and began to confront him in Arabic. I did not understand what was being said. I tried to smooth things over and whispered to the manager that the police were on their way, to which he nodded and backed off. Whilst I was talking to Osama he casually went to the door and locked it, blocking off any avenue for Osama's escape. Osama was trapped and the police were just minutes away.

When the police swooped in there was one uniform and four plain clothes detectives. They grabbed Osama and I informed them that he had my property on him somewhere. A full search revealed nothing until one of the police went to search under the stump of his missing arm and he resisted. Some reasonable force was applied to ensure his co-operation and my SIM and memory cards fell out onto the floor. That was enough... Osama was under arrest and now he would either have to provide details of his fictitious criminal connections or face charges for the theft of my phone.

The senior detective sent me under guard back to the police station and asked me to wait there while they took Osama to his house and searched it. An hour later a very happy looking detective returned with my phone in hand and informed me that it had been found in Osama's house. It was here that I began to see God's bigger plan. In the office where I had been waiting was a large poster of the Hajj Pilgrimage at Mecca. While the detective filled out the paperwork I asked him if he

was a Muslim, to which he replied “*Yes, are you a Muslim?*” to which I answered no. This naturally led to a discussion about my work in Africa and how I had seen many people in Uganda healed as a result of prayer in the name of Isa (Jesus). I told him that if he had an relatives who were sick I would be happy to pray for them, at which time he eagerly told me about a few ailments of his own. Right there under the poster of Mecca I prayed for him in the name of Jesus as his fellow police officers went in and out of his office. God gave me such favour that all the police were talking about the Australian and the stolen cell phone.

The next day I had to appear at the District Attorney’s office and spent the whole day waiting and then being questioned and answering questions about the case... mostly waiting. It was a fascinating insight into the criminal justice system in Egypt, and I have to say that the men I dealt with were very professional, polite and efficient. The District Attorney requested that Hanan return to help with translation and there was a lengthy time when I was questioned about some false allegations that Osama had made about me in his efforts to deflect his own guilt. It was fortunate for me that Osama was such a prolific liar and kept changing his story each time he was questioned, otherwise I could have been in serious trouble. Eventually Osama was brought in and interrogated in my presence. During this time Osama swore on the Koran that his statements were true and accused both me and the police of fabricating evidence against him. This drew an angry response from the prosecutors, “*Swear if you like, but not on the Koran because we know you are a liar!*” They even offered him more lenient treatment if he would confess and co-operate, and I would even have been happy to drop the charges if I had seen any sign or remorse. But sadly Osama persisted with his

lies and it was here that I learned that he had a past criminal record. When given a chance to pardon him I spoke directly to him and said, *“Osama, I feel sorry for you — I really do, but I feel more sorry for your victims. You have shown no signs of remorse and you have fabricated even more lies about me. I think you need to go to prison and use that time to think about the direction of your life”*. My response seemed to please the prosecutors who then returned my phone and after some friendly discussion told me that I was free to go. Osama would face court and based on the overwhelming weight of evidence against him he would probably serve between 4 and 6 months in prison.

As Hanan and I walked out onto the street I heard a voice behind me, *“Mr Allan”*. I turned to see who was calling me and saw Osama handcuffed being led back to the police lockup. As I watched him being led away he turned and said *“Sorry”*. Perhaps that was the first truly honest thing that Osama had said to me. I nodded and waved and resolved to pray for Osama throughout the term of his incarceration. Maybe our meeting was this beginning of his redemption afterall... that is certainly my prayer.

## 1978

Rewind to 1970: Someone gave me a Bible in Sunday school. I started reading it but I couldn't understand it. I thought it was boring. I just wasn't really interested.

Fast forward to 1973: When I was 11, during the Christmas holidays, God answered a prayer right in front of my eyes. So when someone gave me Bible on my first day at secondary school, this time I read it. It was a Gideons Bible with a topical index, was pocket-size and easier to read. So when I was feeling low I would look up the index, *'Where to find help when feeling sad'*, or *'Where to find help when feeling anxious'*, etc.

I even carried that Bible around in my school bag for years — a fact that remained unknown to all of my friends. I still didn't understand it but I knew there was something to it. I was searching. I was becoming more spiritually hungry.

During those years the Bible certainly wasn't all that I read. I read books and articles on psychology, eastern mysticism, psychic and paranormal phenomenon, UFOs and meditation. Those topics were on the top of my list whenever I went to the school library. But I also read the Bible... even though I still didn't understand it.

Fast forward to 1978: At the age of 17, in the midst of my adolescent restlessness and constantly gnawing existential angst,

and in the midst of numerous failed attempts to find inner peace through experimenting with different ideas, I knew that I was a sinner. I knew, not because I had done anything particularly bad, but because I felt empty, alone, worthless and guilty... like so many other people in the world today. I also knew that there was something more that I didn't understand about life. Not understanding was also getting to be almost too much to bear.

One day it all came to a head. I got down on my knees beside my bed with that Gideons Bible in my hand and I had an 'honesty session' with God. I prayed a desperate heart-felt prayer — the kind of prayer that God cannot resist:

*"God, I know that you are there. When I read the Bible I find some things that comfort me, but to be honest God, a lot of it seems like a lot of rubbish to me. But I know that there must be something more to it than what I am understanding because these men in the Bible were willing to give their lives for what they believed so they must know something that I don't know. God, if you are there, and if there is something more to this book than what I am understanding, then please let me know! I really, really need to know. Pleeeeease God. Please let me know!"*

When I got to my feet I had a strange feeling that something was going to change. Something big. I even thought maybe I was going to die.

Very soon after that my brother, Steve, announced that he was having a friend from college come and stay the weekend. Joshua was a Chinese Malaysian student who was in Australia studying electronics engineering at Bendigo with my brother. Steve announced that he was a good guy but he was a bit of a religious nut. That made me curious.

When I met Joshua there was something about him that immediately drew me to him; something that was in him and yet... beyond him. As someone who had grown up in a small

country town, I actually hadn't had many opportunities to meet foreigners and I was interested to learn more about him. What surprised me most was that Joshua talked about Jesus as if he was someone that he actually knew personally... someone who was at work in his life in a very real and tangible way. As he told me his story I was fascinated by the fact that he had been raised as a Buddhist but had become a Christian. That was amazing for me because all of my interest in religion had, up until that time, been drawing me towards the east and he was coming from that very direction — in the opposite direction.

Somehow for me all the lights just came on. Jesus was not just a historical figure anymore... he was alive and well and active in people's lives today! He was the spiritual master that I had been looking for — and He was still alive! How had I not seen that before? Had I never been told? Or had I somehow just missed it? All of my religious instruction up until that time and all of my Bible reading had led me to conclude that somehow Jesus belonged in the past — in the dusty pages of history... that he had done something important and then had gone far away. But Joshua showed me that Jesus was alive here and now — and that he was also calling me to follow Him!

Everything up to that point in my life had led me to that moment: all of my spiritual hunger, all my curiosity for spiritual things and even my guilt and loneliness... it was all leading to this encounter with a young Chinese Malaysian who seemed to me to radiate the very love and wisdom and presence of the living Jesus. Despite all my spiritual hunger and seeking, all my Bible reading and all my praying... it actually *took a person* to reach me. A real flesh and blood person.

You know, sometimes we think they we can send money or Bibles or Christian literature to foreign lands and in doing so we feel that we have done our part to reach the world. Sometimes we think if we publish a website or 'get the word out' that people will believe. But even though God could have sent us a letter, or even written a message in the sky, he sent His Son into the world instead. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth... and we beheld his glory.* I praise God for that! And I also still praise God today for the fact that 33 years ago he sent a messenger by the name of Joshua to open my spiritually blinded eyes and lead me to Christ.

### **GO... AND MAKE DISCIPLES**

So why is it important to go? With so much of the Word in print and on the web, and with so many missionaries at work around the world, is it really necessary for more people to go? Why did God send someone to me from Malaysia when there were Christians right there in my own home town? Frankly I really don't know. Perhaps it's because sometimes it not only takes a person, but the *right* person to reach each person. But whatever the reason, we know that He is the Good Shepherd... God goes to great lengths, He goes out of His way, to seek and save the lost. He is the kind of shepherd who will leave the ninety-nine sheep and go in search of the one that is lost.

Remember, it *takes a person* to reach the lost. God wants YOU to be that person to someone else. It doesn't take years of training or Bible College degrees or clever apologetics. It's really not rocket science. It only takes your *obedience* to go and your *faithfulness* to genuinely and honestly tell your story about *what Jesus has done for you.*