

BLESSED ARE YOUR TEARS

Making Sense of Pain and Suffering
Through Community and Storytelling

It was a delight to read *Blessed Are Your Tears*. Michael Ojewale has the gift of telling good stories and weaving them with a common thread of triumphant sorrow. In a world where most of our lives have become private property, Michael shows us the power of vulnerability. This text is a rare find: Authentic humanity.

Gary V. Simpson, D. Min.
Senior Pastor,
The Concord Baptist Church of Christ, Brooklyn, New York

Michael has given us a compassion walk along a difficult path. He is sensitive and vulnerable, and yet manages to stay within an evangelical theological radar screen. Here, a hurting soul will find solace struggling with the *why* of struggling. But he will find that solace ultimately is in the hands of a *loving potter* who is molding that struggling soul into a clay pot that more and more resembles the Lord Jesus Christ. Michael's cross-cultural experience will enhance this work to a diverse cultural and ethnic audience.

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Dean of Biblical Counseling,
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A moving account by a minister-hospital chaplain, whose faith in the redemptive power of Jesus' death provides meaning to his personal suffering. By sharing with us his meditations on the Scriptures, Michael Ojewale inspires us to mine these sacred writings for the gold which purifies our pain and suffering, inviting us to renewed hope and new life.

Benito M. Perri, S.T.B., C.S.W., Ph.D.
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The Reverend Michael Ojewale has shared his personal experience of how God meets us when it hurts most. This book is a practical demonstration of how individual Christians can be God's agents of relief to the sorrowful. The message in the book will inspire and restore hope to the suffering.

Chief M.A. Olorunfemi
Executive committee member of the Protestant Chapel
University of Lagos, Nigeria

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Making Sense of Pain and Suffering
Through Community and Storytelling

Michael O. Ojewale

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BLESSED ARE YOUR TEARS

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June 22, 1974 - July 12, 1999.
“All the Saints salute you.”*

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- *Blessed Are Your Tears: Making Sense of Pain and Suffering Through Community and Storytelling*
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Introduction



MAKING SENSE OF SENSELESS SUFFERING

The Problem of Suffering

I am standing on a street corner in the borough of Queens in New York City on a cold Saturday morning in February, 1998. With me is eight-year-old Chris, so warmly dressed to fight the cold weather, his face is barely showing. We are handing out tracts. Chris is the oldest of three sons whose parents are missionaries with the *Open Air Bible Mission*. Consistent with the orientation I received from Chris' father, I am finding that many people who will not accept a tract from an adult are accepting it from a little boy. It is my first contact with the family, and I am wondering to myself how the boy feels when an individual declines his offer of a tract.

“Would you like some good news?” Chris asks with his hand outstretched, the tract in full view of the approaching person.

One elderly man accepts the tract, walks off with a smile,

then turns back to engage me in a conversation. He has two primary questions: “If there is a God, why does He allow suffering?” And, “Why is there evil?” He accuses the Old Testament priests of justifying murder in the name of God. He lashes out against the church, especially its clergy. To him, the Christian religion down through history has perpetrated evil and has justified its actions with the Bible. He was raised in the Church but no longer believes in a personal, loving Creator God, and certainly not as literally as Adam and Eve experienced in the Garden of Eden. He has his own concept of God outside of the Bible, and he feels we are on our own in making the best we can of the world. When I mentioned to him that God is not responsible for the world’s evil, he said, “I know. God takes credit for the good things, but He is not in charge when the bad things happen.” After our lengthy discussion, he returned the tract to me.

The presence of evil and suffering in a world ruled by a good and sovereign God is a matter that does not stand to reason and, therefore, cannot be reconciled by many. If God is powerful and sovereign, why can’t He stop evil and suffering? When innocent persons, such as children, suffer, where is the goodness and compassion of God?

This problem has led many to deny the existence of God, but it does not have to be that way. On this matter, the Bible speaks clearly about four realities: God exists; He is good; He is powerful; evil is also present. How can these facts coexist? How do we reconcile the presence of a God who is all-good, all-powerful, and all-loving, with a world full of evil, injustice, and all kinds of meaningless suffering?

I have occupied leadership positions in the ministry since 1972 and have seen evil and suffering across all nations. The pastoral ministry by its nature makes the pastor a rallying

point when a tragedy befalls a member of his congregation or the community in which the local church is located. As a result, I have questions that bother me like anybody else and have sought answers. On this point, I do not believe that the Bible is silent. Meaning may be hard to find even when we remain true to conventional beliefs. Beyond offering explanations, I wish to explore ways of encouraging those who experience pain and suffering.

The Believer and Suffering

In many ways, New York City is indeed the place where peoples of the world meet. To God's praise, many local churches reflect this diversity in their membership, including my place of worship in Brooklyn. A member of that congregation, a woman from India, urged me to start a Bible study class. She was so interested in the proposed Bible study, she started recruiting other members.

As we walked toward the church one evening, this beloved member again brought up the matter of the Bible study, inviting a young Hispanic Christian who accompanied us. The Hispanic woman asked me what topics we would study. My response was that the Bible study class would include input from the attendees. In the course of our conversation, I told her about the manuscript that I was currently writing, *The Christian and Suffering* or *The Theology of Suffering*. You should have seen her reaction! To be honest, I was hesitant to mention such a topic when there are hundreds of "pleasant" subjects for Bible study. The sister laughed and shook her head, saying "No, No," several times. When I asked her what she meant, she said something like, "Suffering? Not again! Not any more, please!" And she immediately stepped into the sanctuary.

I think the attitude of this woman reflects the general attitude of Christians toward suffering and pain. If we can avoid mentioning that we suffer, our silence might help us keep it far away. We may, in fact, preserve our testimony before the world and save face. Actually, it is not *our* credibility we often try to defend, but God's. When we, as Christian people, embellish our testimonies or say nice things and leave out the "not-so-nice" parts, speaking only half the truth, what do you think is our motivation? We want to protect God's credibility.

But we rationalize. We say we want our testimonies to encourage others to trust God, but, in fact, we end up leaving those we think we are trying to encourage in limbo. The truth is, things do not happen in anybody's life the way we try to portray them. That does not mean that when things are not as we want them God has failed us. Neither does it mean we have failed God.

We like to present God in as positive a light as possible to the unsaved world, hiding our problems and sufferings as best we can. This pretense advances us as models of how things can work out through faith in Christ Jesus. In this way, we remain true to the invitation we gave to our friends: "If you give your life to Christ, all your problems will be over." In reality, though, we know this is not true. When Christ is in control, things get better than before we believed on Him. But does His presence make our troubles disappear completely? And did He promise to solve every problem that comes into our lives?

Denial is the name of this old game. If we can deny that we suffer, or if we can minimize our pain before the world and hide the true picture of how we feel deep down from our fellow Christians, our faith is validated. But Habakkuk, the

prophet who first penned the words, “*the just shall live by faith*” (Habakkuk 2:4), did not deny the suffering of his people. Nevertheless, he declared that, in spite of the worst that could happen, he would rejoice in the Lord.

David, the writer of Psalm 23, also considered the most frightening scenario: “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*” The experience of death in itself is a lonely road. Whatever else might be implied by the imagery of “valley” and “shadow,” David, confident of the power and presence of his Shepherd, said, “*I will fear no evil: for thou art with me*” (Psalm 23:4). If we could confidently face the worst-case scenario with God’s help, like Habakkuk and David, a great deal of our anxiety would be eliminated.

In this book, I extend an invitation for readers, especially Christians, to be honest about the issues they are facing and to stop trying to defend God or His reputation. God can defend Himself; He does not need anybody to do it for Him. By trying to “save face” for God, we end up hiding His face from the world. The world needs to see that our peace as Christians is different from the peace the world offers.

The peace of the Lord is not dependent on God giving us a miracle or our maintaining control. No! The peace that passes all understanding is evident when we are not in control of anything and when we have done all we can and nothing has worked. Peace comes when, in the midst of confusion, we still acknowledge that God is sovereign and that everything is under His control.

Even when we cannot see His face, we may affirm that God has our best interest at heart, no matter what evidence there is to the contrary. If, at such times, the

unpalatable happens and a feeble unbeliever says in ridicule, “Where is thy God?,” we should make no effort to justify or safeguard God. If you are quick-witted, you may snap back, “My God is on His throne, and He is with me. You had better not say another word because you are delving into a matter with which you are totally unfamiliar.” Or, you may reply with teary eyes, “I know where God is, He is on His throne. What I don’t know is where I am, but I do know that God knows where I am—I am in His plans. He is Lord of all and I am His child by His grace. He knows my ways.” If you are in a very good mood, you may add, “I am crying because life is painful; I won’t deny it. It has nothing to do with you. Do you know that even if something happens to me and I lose my memory and cannot recall my name or the names and faces of my loved ones, God will still be on His throne and all will still be well with me? God cannot lose His memory of me. He knows all about me, including how and where He can locate me.”

Christians should not be afraid to be genuine with their emotions. God’s own Son agonized with tears in the Garden of Gethsemane, struggling with the powers of darkness. Why should we consider it strange if we experience a milder form of such? God is bigger than our feelings or anything we suffer.

Adversity may blow away wealth, health, physical and emotional strength, and even a person’s memory. But no adversity can blow away God’s love and commitment; nothing can erase God’s memory and omniscience. When all else has eroded, God will be there keeping watch over His children. We know the darker it gets, the brighter the light shines.

This book and its companion book, *God and Suffering*, take two different but complementary approaches to making sense of suffering. This book takes the theological perspective of emotional and sentimental suffering. *God and Suffering* considers the topic from a logical viewpoint. We need both routes—which C.S. Lewis called “the rational and the romantic”—to get a complete picture.

The crux of this book is the community while its companion is apologetic. Therefore, stories and human interests dominate *Blessed Are Your Tears*, while logic and reasoning are featured in *God and Suffering*. Fictitious names are used, where appropriate, to protect the identities of the individuals concerned. It might be helpful to keep both a general and a specific question in mind as you read. The general question is: *What help can we find to give us meaning?* And the specific question is: *What can I do to help?*

You are not going to read reports and illustrations of great contemporary examples of human suffering such as the Holocaust, South African apartheid, or Somalia, Sierra Leone, Kosovo, Bosnia, and the like. Such cases are important and deserving of attention. Focusing on them however, has the potential of diverting our attention from the suffering around us. One can hardly discuss the suffering of individuals and people groups in different regions of the world outside the context of their political ramifications.

What I intend is a discussion in which each person has some personal experience to bring to the table, while at the same time seeking to be part of the solution to human suffering. It is for this reason that the book is practical, pastoral, and personal.

An Awakening

We broke bread together as part of the closing celebration on the last day of my third unit of Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), May 1998. This was possible because the “clan” (my peers and the supervisor) was fairly religiously homogenous.

After communion, the supervisor proceeded to tell a story from the Jewish tradition. He said:

“A long time ago a Jewish couple that had been married for three years still had no child, despite all their efforts. This couple went to visit a highly regarded Rabbi. They told him that they believed they would have a child if the Rabbi would pray to God for them. The Rabbi agreed to pray but only after he had told them a story:

“‘A long time ago,’ the Rabbi began his story, ‘before mechanically advanced means of transportation were available, the Jews spent many days traveling to Israel, the Holy Land. For this reason, the pilgrims traveled in companies. They stopped in every village along the way where it was the practice of the villagers to entertain them. A group of three friends on a trip to Jerusalem observed that when a group of travelers had a Rabbi in its company, the villagers were usually more extravagant in their display of hospitality. They prepared better meals, provided finer places to sleep or rest, and were generally more courteous. The friends knew that if they had a Rabbi amongst them, the villagers would offer them the “red carpet” treatment. So they decided that one of them would dress like a Rabbi.

“As expected, when they arrived at the villages with a Rabbi in their company, the villagers gave them a warm reception, quite different from the treatment they had received up to that point. In one of the villages, before they retired for the evening, they heard a knock at the door. A broken-hearted man stood outside. He told them his daughter was critically ill, but he believed that if the Rabbi prayed to God for her, she would be healed. He pleaded with the Rabbi to come to his house to pray for the daughter. The fake Rabbi looked in bewilderment at his two friends. But the friends signaled to him that he had to go. He went and prayed for the girl. The next day, the trio resumed their journey to Jerusalem.

“After completing their worship, the men started for home. They were apprehensive of passing through the village where their “Rabbi” had prayed for the man’s daughter, but there was no other route open to them. With trepidation, they approached the village, their friend still posing in a Rabbi’s regalia. As soon as a villager sighted them on the outskirts of the village, he ran back to the village. With excitement and dancing, the villagers met the trio and ushered them into the village. This time the “red carpet” reception was even grander; the whole village was celebrating. The sick girl who had been prayed for by the “Rabbi” was sound and whole. She was one of those who came to greet them.

“Before they went to bed that night, the friends asked their fake Rabbi friend what prayer he had offered for the girl. He answered that after he reached the house, he asked to be left alone with the girl. Then

he prayed, “Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe. You know I am a phony. But these people believe in you. They believe if I pray to you, you have the power to heal their daughter. Will it be terrible for you to look past my phoniness and grant them their hearts’ desire, just for their faith in you?”

“When the Rabbi related the story to the couple that requested his prayer for a child, he told them that he was then ready to pray. He began to pray,

“Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe. You know I am a phony. But these people believe in you. They believe if I pray to you, you have the power to grant them the ability to have a child. Will it be terrible for you to look past my phoniness and grant them their hearts’ desire, just for their faith in you?”

The story has it that nine months later, the couple did, indeed, have a child.”

The CPE supervisor, ending the tale, reached out and grabbed the hands of those nearest him at the communion table. Sylvia, Gideon, Alyne, Pat, Richard, and I all joined together in prayer. Richard, the storyteller and an experienced supervisor, began to pray, “*Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe. You know....*” I was so sure he would say, “*You know that I am a phony. But these students believe in you....*” But that was not his prayer. I had imagined our supervisor told this story about himself and his students. I did not know it was about the patients and us. With our hands joined together around that table, Richard prayed, “*Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe. You know we are phonies....*” Instantly, some-

thing welled up within me and I began to weep. Richard continued, *“But these patients in the hospital believe in you. They believe if we pray to you, you have the power to grant them healing in their spirit, soul, and body. Will it be terrible for you to look past our phoniness and grant them their heart’s desire, just for their faith in you?”*

I continued to cry to the amazement of my peers. I am not sure they ever saw me in tears before that day. Richard later explained that whatever we do and whatever we achieve in our ministry to patients in the hospital is not because of us. It is because God responds to the faith of those who trust in Him, even though the patients may look up to us. That whole day, the tears continued every time I remembered Richard’s story.

It was the greatest gift I ever received from Richard. While everything in me detests and revolts against the word “phony” to describe me or my ministry, I don’t consider it an undignified or inappropriate a word to say in my prayer because it is the truth. In the presence of God, I am not always true to what I am supposed to be or personally profess to be. I am like that Rabbi, praying:

Blessed are You, Lord, our God, King of the universe. You know I am a phony. But these readers believe in you. They believe I have something to say in this book that will touch and soothe the pains in their hearts and bring them relief. Will it be terrible for you to look past my phoniness and grant them their heart’s desire, just for their faith in you?

Chapter One



DILEMMAS

A thirty-seven-year-old man is dying of cancer. The doctors doubt he will survive through the day. His father, mother, and a woman I suppose is his sister, are in the hospital room. More than anything else, the younger woman, the one I assume is the sister, wants the dying man to “make confession” before he dies. I explain that I am not a Catholic priest, but the two women want me to do something. I go to the patient who is not interested or, maybe, is not sure he needs religious assistance. If only to console the relatives, I immediately summon a Catholic priest to do what I cannot do for a Catholic. As a chaplain intern, it is my first close-up experience with a dying patient and his family.

The father of the patient takes a last look at his only son and rushes out of the room. He has contained himself thus far, but the emotional floodgates are about to burst. The man is short in stature, wears gold dentures, and has a goatee. He stands by the door, his jaw set and his face contort-

ed as he agonizes inwardly, scarcely making any audible sound but shaking from head to toe. I follow him to the elevator. He has no destination; he just wants to get away from the deathbed scene. Oblivious to the presence of other passengers, he bangs his head against the wall of the elevator several times. I hold his hand. We both ride to the top floor, then back down to the first floor where the distraught father rushes out into the street.

Broken and shattered, the man told me that he no longer believed in the existence of God. He was angry with God. Even speaking God's name was disgusting to him; he spit just saying the word. "Why didn't God kill me instead?" he asked. If the hospital could cure his son with a million dollars, he would somehow pay it. He shook my hand several times in gratitude, pressing my hand to his heart. He said I had stood by him; I had helped him; I had done what I could. But God had not. "Religion is mere propaganda. If God wants to take my son, let Him. I cannot keep Him from doing it. But why did God not take my only son at three months? Why wait until he is thirty-seven? So that it can cause me such pain?"

What can a pastor say to bring comfort at such a time? Who is there to judge or silence a father for blasphemy? I did not pretend I could do anything for him. But I could listen to him vent.

As for me, I had lost my voice. The theology of pastoral presence seemed to be the only thing within my reach. If I had spent the next two hours with him, I do not know what I would have said. I had no idea where, or by what means, the family had sought God's intervention. I was meeting them for the first time. From the concern the younger woman showed regarding the dying man making peace with

God through confession and sacrament, I suspected that church (or God) must have been a part of their family life. I guess I felt betrayed as much as the father did.

After we parted ways, I walked slowly to the pastoral care office. I prayed for a miracle that the young man might survive.

I did not get back to that hospital floor that day. This was not only because it was lunchtime, but also because I was scared of facing whatever might be there with the dying man, those two women, and the hospital staff. It was not so much the likely death of the young man that chilled me as his father's agony of faith. I reasoned that I had at least brought in the Catholic priest. That was Thursday.

On Friday morning, the first name I looked for on the census sheet for the unit was the dying man's. It wasn't there; Bed 4C was unoccupied. So, he had died! As I walked toward the floor I had to go to for pastoral visits, my legs shook. How could I walk past that room with the picture of the dying man's face, his mother and father's, and the memory of his dad's words still fresh in my mind? And how could I face the case manager or the referring nurse who themselves must need the chaplain's presence at such a time? They would think the chaplain ran away. And didn't the chaplain run away? My legs made a U-turn. That was it for that unit for the Friday.

Over the weekend I was left to ponder life and death anew. Is there such a thing as a good death, a bad death, a pointless death, a useless death, and a meaningless death? How can a parent find meaning in a meaningless case? Will the father be able to reinvest in life again, or will his son become another case of what an author called a "devil's martyr"?¹

* * *

She is sitting in a chair while the nurse makes her bed, a beautiful black girl, in her early twenties. I walk in and introduce myself. She warmly welcomes me despite her obvious discomfort. I take my seat in an empty chair close to her. “Are you in pain?” I whisper. “Yes,” she replies. I remain silent and sigh. “What is responsible for it?” I ask.

“I have Sickle Cell Anemia.”

It’s like a thunderbolt striking my heart. Suddenly, a strange anger boils throughout my body. I have come to notice in the course of my clinical studies that nothing switches on my anger as quickly as seeing Sickle Cell patients in crisis. My response to cancer patients is sadness and a sense of insecurity at being reminded of my own vulnerability. There are not many Sickle Cell patients on my units, but possibly because they have long hospital stays, I have become emotionally involved with them.

“Not again!” I mutter, shaking my head. I feel diminished by my own spiritual powerlessness at being unable to heal the young woman. I am instantly overwhelmed by the thought of the life-long pain this young woman and her family must go through: frequent visits to the hospital, lack of relief, disruption of her schooling and career, the unfairness of the whole episode. *What is the meaning of all this*, I ask myself, not really expecting an answer.

On the same floor are two other patients in similar condition. One is a twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican man. Whenever the young man is in serious pain, he requests the Catholic priest. But as soon as he is relieved of his pain, or, if the priest comes when the young man is not in pain, he shows no interest in seeing him. I wonder what goes on in his mind when he sends for the priest. He hasn’t opened up to me. There is also a thirty-six-year-old

Hispanic woman who, by every standard, is intelligent, warm, and a wonderful Christian. But there are a number of problems with her body. Her constant friend, besides the hospital staff, is her mother.

If I could take their pain on myself for one hour and send them out to play and breathe some fresh air in relief, I would. But all I can do is wonder and, with permission, touch their hands and hope that through this they will sense that someone cares for them. I count it a privilege to have listened to the family history of the thirty-six year old Hispanic woman. The account included her mother's breast cancer, diagnosed after the delivery of a younger brother, the death of another brother in his early thirties, and the role of faith in the family. The younger brother was also afflicted with Sickle Cell Anemia. Her brother had apparently experienced fewer health crises than she had. She had thought she would die before her brother, but that was not the case. I wonder what it is like to be part of a family where some members live under a perpetual death sentence, as it were.

We live in a world governed by the law of cause and effect, but most times, the "cause and effect" seems to provide no answer. Unlike many types of cancer, the cause of Sickle Cell Anemia is known and its effects are undeniable, but what solution does that give? Is it an illness that can be prevented?

It really is a silly inquiry, but let's try it:

"Why are these human beings spending the greater part of their lives in the hospital in agonizing pain that shows no promise of going away?"

"They have Sickle Cell Anemia, a genetic mutation."

“Why are they born so?”

“Both healthy parents carry the genetic marker, and their union resulted in a child with the genetic deformity.”

“Why wasn’t nature kind enough to abort the fetus or cause the child to be still-born, thereby sparing both child and parents this unending torment?”

“Medical practice is now able to prevent many miscarriages and infant deaths, isn’t it?”

We could go on with the “why” questions, but when does the answer or comfort come for the sufferer or their parents? Who really is the victim—the child or the parent?

Traditional and ancient philosophy attributes sickness and misfortune to sin. But Jesus refuted that theory when His disciples asked Him, *“Who sinned, this man or his parents that he was born blind?”* Jesus said neither the man nor his parents had sinned, but that he was sick so that God might be glorified. And Jesus healed that forty-year-old man and restored his sight (John 9:2). The Lord was definitely glorified in that instance; the man was healed. But not all people with congenital defects are ultimately healed, and some haven’t been healed yet. Who wants to tell them that they were born with deformities for God’s glory?

As far as my understanding and interpretation of Scripture is concerned, I believe that, though God can bring glory to Himself through painful situations and can enlarge a person through suffering, it does not necessarily mean the problem came about for God’s glory or for the individual’s benefit. God can glorify Himself through what sin has destroyed, but that does not make Him responsible for it nor does it mean that He permitted the sin for His glory. It

is the response of the individual and the providence of God that transforms suffering.

* * *

Roland (not his real name), a Nigerian, lived in the United States for many years, attending school and building a career. He returned home to Nigeria to marry. I married him and his beautiful bride after they attended pre-marital counseling. We shared a special bond during our time together. The pastor of Roland's church, a sound, talented, charismatic man, preached on the wedding day and many people responded to the altar call. Even though Roland had spent so many years away from home, he was still well-connected to his roots. I discovered that he was a relative and friend of some of my university acquaintances. Two years after his wedding, it was my sad duty to perform Roland's funeral. Only in his thirties, Roland tried to cooperate with armed robbers as they pushed him around his apartment. He was ready to part with anything he had in order to spare his life. But they demanded something he did not possess: foreign currency. He told them he did not have any, but they did not believe him.

The pastor of Roland's church was also present at the burial. I knew in my heart that whatever I said would not address the issue in the young widow's heart. She held their one-year-old daughter, dressed in black like her mother. One of Roland's cousins had tried to be meaningful by saying that Roland had made a new commitment to Christ just two weeks before his death. Whenever I looked at the widow, I grieved as I recalled the wonderful moments the three of us shared during counseling sessions.

Then came the moment when I shook her hand and gave her a light embrace. She looked into my eyes as if searching for answers others could not give but which I

must possess. She asked, “Pastor, why?” Her words weighed on me like a heavy load. It was painful. I slowly looked away.

The truth is I had no answer for Roland’s widow. Nor did I have one for the children who suffered from health crises from birth or for the parents who were saddled with caring for their sick children. And I didn’t have an answer for the man whose only son died of cancer at age thirty-seven.

While on the cross, Christ too asked the Heavenly Father, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Matthew 27:46). A simple answer for a Sunday school class might be that God cannot look on sin, and Jesus was bearing the sins of the world. The more complex question—“Why did the atonement for sin have to be made *this* way in God’s plan?”—is really unanswerable.

Sometimes God graciously allows us to know “why” or allows us to find purpose in suffering. But this is not always the case. We may never know why and may never see a greater good achieved from our troubles. Does this mean that God does not have a purpose or that He doesn’t care about our pain? Of course not! He cannot change who He is, but neither is He required to consult us or answer us on any point. We must believe that God is good and trust that He is working “*all things for good*” (Romans 8:28) even when we can’t see how it could possibly be true.

Chapter Two



PHYSICIAN, HEAL THYSELF

The news came from across the Atlantic that my brother Oluwaseyi (Seyi) Ojewale, a senior in Economics at Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria, had died at age twenty-five from injuries sustained in an automobile accident a few weeks prior to his graduation. He would have graduated already had the university not shut down for a while during the semester because of student unrest. Seyi had been like a son to me.

Journal of a “Wounded Healer”

Tuesday, July 13

I was taking a shower when my wife told me I had a call from Nigeria. I expected her to bring me the cordless phone. She thought that I would hurriedly towel and come to the telephone. She couldn't stay on the line for too long because it was a long-distance call. The news she brought me while I

was still in the bathroom was this: Seyi had gone with a Christian Fellowship team on an evangelistic outreach. While on the way home, their vehicle was involved in an accident, and Seyi suffered a serious head injury. My family was preparing to go to see him when they called me.

I felt as if my senses had been temporarily suspended. I stood in the bathroom, my mind blank. When the news began to sink in, I thought, *What's going on? What are you doing to me, Lord?* My brother Steve, an ordained clergyman, had an automobile accident in December 1996 where he had a broken femur, which, by the grace of God, was grafted by surgery. Another brother has a serious head injury. Here I am unemployed. I have no money, no child, no name, no nothing. *What are you doing to me, Lord? You are killing me a little bit at a time. You are stripping me. Why are you reducing me to nothing?* As these thoughts whirled around in my mind, the emotional floodgates gushed open. No, it was not only the emotional floodgates; it was my whole being that opened. I doubled over the sink, wailing, moaning, and groaning.

I sought a word from the Lord as I read two devotionals. One included meditations on heaven and death. That was not what I had in mind. I would have been happier with passages giving assurances from God, such as, "I am with you; I will help you; I have heard your prayers."

I spent much of the day praying. During my breaks and lunchtime, I walked around the block, praying, asking God to provide me with respite. I

remembered the words of Jacob, “*all these things are against me*” (Genesis 42:36). That was how I felt. I longed for a happy ending like Jacob’s. Somehow, by late afternoon, I had peace. I was sure everything was in God’s hands, and I sincerely hoped to hear news of Seyi’s miraculous recovery. I began to recount God’s past blessings, mercies, and deliverances for my family and me, desiring that God would again show mercy and favor.

My wife and my sister-in-law, at two different locations, made frantic efforts to reach relatives in Nigeria who could update us on Seyi’s condition. But by the end of the day, there was nothing definite. This was not one of those times when no news was good news. I had no idea at that point that the news given to my wife was more serious than she had related to me. The caller, a brother-in-law, told her that the chances of Seyi’s survival were slim. Furthermore, should he live, Seyi might not even be the same as before.

Wednesday, July 14

I placed a call to Nigeria early in the morning and was told that those who went to Ife had not returned, so there was still no news.

My wife had her devotional time before I did. She told me she did not enjoy the passage she read. I chose not to read any devotional that morning.

My wife and sister-in-law continued to seek further information from Nigeria. In the afternoon, when I called my wife, there was still no news. I

went home via the church to attend Bible study, but did not stay for the prayer meeting afterward.

I got home to find my wife on the bed, her eyes red from weeping. Everything in the house was quiet. “Any news?” I asked, timidly. “Femi, we lost him,” was all she said. I stood there dazed. My brother-in-law walked in, and, observing my supposed calmness, asked if I had known already. Two biblical characters flashed through my mind. One was Job when he learned of a series of tragedies including the deaths of his children. The other was David when his first son by Bathsheba died. David had prayed and fasted for a miracle to save the boy’s life, but he ate and washed after the child died. There was nothing David could do to bring him back. And Job had said, “*The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord*” (Job 1:21).

I went into the bathroom. It then became obvious that I was neither a Job nor a David. The bathroom walls began to echo again with my groaning, sobbing, and howling. Oluwaseyi literally means, “The Lord has done this,” implying, “the Lord has given us this child.” I asked, *Has the Lord also done this, taking Seyi away? He gave, and has He also taken away?* I felt betrayed, cheated, disappointed. I felt that if the Lord had known how to manage His resources, Seyi should have been useful to Him for a long time. Angrily, I concluded that God had thrown away great potential with Seyi’s life.

I thought of the funerals I had conducted, especially the ones for students when I was a uni-

versity chaplain. I couldn't imagine the agony parents and relatives must have felt. I remembered a professor who lost his twenty-year-old daughter shortly before Christmas. As he lamented, he cried to sympathizers, "Everybody expects a gift at Christmas. Is this my own Christmas gift from God?" Another professor thought that was irreverent and expected me as chaplain to rebuke the grieving father for his inappropriate behavior. I wish the condemning man had been able to put himself in the shoes of the bereaved father for one moment.

I asked whether Seyi's loss was to break my life in some way. I couldn't imagine what else there was in me for God to break that had not been broken already. Anytime I went to the bathroom, I cried. I don't know if it was because of the privacy afforded by that room or if it was the fact that I first heard the news there.

Thursday, July 15

It was my day off. I couldn't pray, and I couldn't read my Bible. I turned to the devotional of the previous day which my wife had said she found so unsettling. The key passage was on the rapture of believers at the Lord's return. Was God trying to prepare us through all these devotionals?

If this was what being in a helping ministry was all about, I wanted none of it. But having nothing to do and being in no mood for anything, I took some of my manuscripts and began to flip through

the pages. Some lines were comforting and spoke to my situation.

Among those who phoned, not all were helpful, but everyone did what they could. I heard such things as, “We thank God he’s gone to heaven.” “He is now in a better place.” “He died serving the Lord.” “We should thank God in everything. If he survived and became vegetative, that will be another thing.” “I have been there. I know what it means. Although I have not lost a sibling, both my parents are gone. Losing my father was devastating, but I can tell you that time heals.”

I went to bed and had a good night’s rest. Thank God.

Friday, July 16

I thought going to work might take my mind off the loss for a while. But while commuting to work, I changed my mind. I went to work, reported what had happened, and returned home. I began to thank God for Seyi’s life and the testimony he left. I thought of Seyi as a shooting star that flashed through the skies, leaving a mark to be seen no more. I thought of him as a hundred-meter dash runner who, in his best effort, finished in seconds, and it was all over. But it still didn’t seem right. Not for the Seyi that I knew.

Nothing makes it right. My mother has six children, but three are gone. Seyi was the third child my mother lost. One daughter had died at the age of twenty and another daughter at twelve. Now she lost her youngest child, a son at twenty-five.

It was Seyi who gave me prominence in the community. I am reclusive, but Seyi was effervescent. He had a winning smile for everybody, young and old. He was especially cheerful and playful with younger ones. I would have been known in the neighborhood of Akoka where we lived in Lagos as a quiet man. But Seyi was a community person to the core. He brought his teachers, friends, fellow students, and neighbors into my life. Many people in the neighborhood knew me as “Seyi’s brother.” And I wasn’t ashamed of the association because the reports of him were good.

Seyi was my mother’s last child. But he was also my protégé and, in a way, my son. I was twenty-two years older than he—old enough to be his father. My wife and I raised him. I am now forty-seven and have been married for thirteen years, but my wife and I do not have children. Seyi was the person on whose shoulder I could place a hand and publicly declare, “That’s my boy.” Unfortunately, that dream was buried. Until the “sweet by and by” when we shall know things in full, nothing now makes Seyi’s death right.

Saturday, July 17

I mused on how different it is to place your hand on another’s shoulders to console and comfort than having their hands placed on you. You want people to call or visit with you, but when the phone or the doorbell rings, there is a question in your mind as to whether you can handle another conversation. During some weeping episodes, I asked, *God, did you*

do this to me? You haven't given me a child, and the only person I could call my son is taken from me.

I read the Scriptures:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die;... A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance;... A time to get, and a time to lose;... He has made everything beautiful in His time.... My times are in thy hand..." (Ecclesiastes 3:1-11; Psalm 31:15).

My wife prayed specifically for my mother, Steve, Funke, Deola, Matthew, other relatives, and those in Nigeria who had to make funeral arrangements in addition to carrying the hurt in their hearts. I was struck by how much more my thoughts focused on myself than on others. But the more I wanted to focus on others, the larger my anxieties loomed.

Taking a cue from my wife's prayer, I made a conscious effort to think more about others and how they were affected. I prayed for them, including Seyi's friends and the Christian community. I even found myself praying for those unknown to me who might be experiencing the loss of a loved one.

I had forgotten to check my blood pressure until a chest pain nudged me. With trepidation, I reached for the pressure monitor. Happily, it was within an acceptable range. I think waking up earlier than usual and having gone to bed early the night before caused the pain.

Saturday night—preparation for Sunday service.

I looked forward to a time during prayer, worship, or singing when I could lift both my hands up in praise and surrender to God. I had so often encouraged others to do so. I had exhorted them to make the lifting up of their hands to God a symbol of offering up themselves and their concerns to the Lord. That was all I wanted to do. The pastor's sermon could go full of the dramatics and excitement that often characterized the service.

Sunday morning worship.

I arrived late for the service and, because the ushers closed the doors to the main sanctuary during the pastoral prayers, I went to the balcony. I discovered the pastor had a preaching assignment elsewhere which dampened my spirits....

The service wasn't as uplifting as I had hoped. I sat on an empty pew alone with no one to my immediate left or right. This was not a deliberate choice of mine, but it just turned out to be so. Nobody in the church knew the emotional burden I carried. I couldn't force myself to sing, try as I might. There was no spontaneous opportunity to lift my hands in praise as I had planned. I stood and raised my hands anyway, but more in a mechanical way than therapeutic. I kept imagining Seyi's face in the church back home in Nigeria, and what he would do if he were there. I cried most of the time saying, *God, You did this to me. Nothing can be the same anymore. I'm wounded.*

It was then that the guest preacher announced his text, and suddenly, something lit up inside of me. I grabbed for my pen and began to take notes. His title was “The Potter’s Work on the Wheels” from Jeremiah 18.

The Potter’s Work On The Wheels

Jeremiah 18:

1. *The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying,*
2. *Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words.*
3. *Then I went down to the potter’s house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.*
4. *And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.*
5. *Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying,*
6. *O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.*

The preacher first declared that a sense of severity clouds this text, which is frightening until we consider other aspects of the potter and his work. He also pointed out that the figure of clay and potter was always used in relation to national affairs. But since the nation was composed of individuals, the preacher took the liberty of applying it to individuals who comprise nations.

He mentioned the principle behind the imagery, the purpose behind the principle, and the person behind the purpose. In the potter we find an intelligent, skilled, purposeful artisan.

The wheel is an instrument that turns and rotates at the command of the craftsman through which the potter can fashion his design. The clay is a soft, pliable material which the potter can mold and shape as he pleases.

By application, the potter represents God's authority, interest, attention, and absolute power. The wheel on which the clay is turned relates to the circumstances in which we find ourselves, the constant turning and sifting of our lives. The wheels of life can turn and change a person's life overnight. But God is watching and has His hands on the wheels all the time. The clay is like our relationship to God. Clay is soft and can be molded. The potter won't put steel on the wheel, only clay that can be molded and shaped. The wheel is necessary but transitory. When God is finished with His work, He throws the wheel aside but holds the vessel in His hand and rejoices in what He has created for His own glory.

The principle is that God has the right to do with us what He chooses, even as the potter has the absolute right to create from the clay what he wants to. However, behind sovereignty is purpose. The potter has something in mind before he puts his hand to the clay. Likewise, God has a plan and a purpose for our lives, no matter what circumstances occur.

When the vessel made of clay was marred, the potter broke it and remade the clay into something else. God has the sovereign right to mold and fashion us into the persons He wants us to be. God may break us, but it is only to put us together again.

Someone may say, "The clay has no power or will to choose, but I do." Therein lies a seeming disparity, but it does not spoil the message. The distance between God and humanity is greater than between potter and clay. Don't imagine you can shake your fist in God's face and tell Him what to do.

Many of you will say, “I have been on that wheel for ten, twenty (thirty, forty) years, and God is still working on me, still remolding me. He is not finished with me yet.” But, when you look back, you can say you are not the person you used to be. You have been remolded and reshaped for a better use.

I am old enough to tell you that I have been through situations in my life in which I was confused and asked God, “Why?” But I can tell you that after the clouds cleared, the dust settled, and the sun began to shine again, I was able to look back on the dark and cloudy days and say, “So, God, that was You. It was You all the time, and I didn’t know it.” The Potter has His hands on the wheel, His fingers in the clay, His total attention on His work. He cannot be distracted from the purpose He is set to accomplish with the vessel.

Under whatever circumstances the wheel of your life may turn, whatever storm or tempest may rage inside or around you right now, be assured that God sees, knows, cares, and is intricately involved in all that concerns you. When in the Master’s hand, all things work together for good to those who are called of God. God is making us into vessels of honor that He can show off to the world.

God is the Potter, and He is merciful and gracious. All the attributes of God are encapsulated in the saying: “GOD IS LOVE.” God is not against you; God is *for* you. When He is finished, you won’t be the same person you used to be; you’ll be a better vessel in His hands.

My spirit was lightened, my hands lifted in praise and surrender, and my feet became swifter. I still cried, and it still hurts, but I know who I am. I am clay. And I know who the Potter is—God Almighty. I know that His power-

ful hands work intricately and delicately on me for a purpose. Most comforting of all, God has His eyes, hands, and attention on me, and He also has interest in me. The molding, shaping, and reshaping are all for a purpose, undergirded by love. For now, that is all I need to remember. We serve an awesome God. I wanted to shake the preacher's hand, but I forgot in my rush to buy a tape of the service. That "country preacher," as he described himself, had no idea what the Lord had sent him to accomplish in my life that day.

Monday, July 19

I went to work for the afternoon shift. Somehow, I had stopped accusing God of "doing this to me." Rather, I thanked God for Seyi's life and testimony. I thank God for His sovereign purpose and love. But everything was fluid, and I was in no way settled emotionally. It dawned on me that nothing had hurt me as badly in all my life as losing Seyi.

I had a heavy chest, dull headache. I cried and especially prayed as I walked around the block during my breaks. I sang praises, hymns, and choruses. I took solace in what the preacher said:

The cloud will roll away, the dusts will settle, and the sun will rise again. Things will not be the same again. I will not be the same vessel I was before.

Reflecting on the Sunday sermon, I said to myself again and again, "The sun will rise again."

During my one-hour break, I sat in the park and read Jeremiah chapters 18 to 22 and portions of the

Psalms. I prayed, “Lord, You had a word for me in church yesterday. Like Jeremiah, You sent me to the potter’s house. I know You have the right to do what You please. And I rejoice in knowing that undergirding that absolute power is a purpose and behind that purpose is love. May Your name be praised. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. The Lord gave us Seyi to experience him and grow through that experience. The Lord has taken him away in order for us to experience the loss and grow through it. The wound will heal, but the scar will remain. The sun will rise again.”

Later that afternoon at work a voice spoke very clearly to my mind. It said, “Is there a God? Isn’t the idea of God just a concept to keep society together?” I couldn’t believe how the thought came to me out of the blue. I shuddered, but I saw it as a challenge and even decided to play devil’s advocate. *Is there a God?* Reflecting on the passages I just read in the park, I said, “Yes, there is a God. He controls history and events. He predicts events through His prophets, and they come true. The sun will rise again.” I thanked God that I had spent my break reading the Bible and that I had found the passages helpful in combating doubt.

Tuesday, July 20

I did not sleep well Monday night, and, waking, I felt apathetic and indecisive. I kept moving in circles like a zombie. My energy level was low, but I contin-

ued to fight apathy and indifference and feelings that nothing else mattered, nothing could be worse. I recognized these attitudes to be signs of depression. I kept repeating, “The sun *will* rise again.”

I fasted until 4:00 p.m. But I questioned myself as to the fast. Was I fasting because I couldn’t decide what or whether to eat? I stepped in and out of the kitchen and opened and closed the refrigerator. I found the fast helpful, especially the afternoon prayer walk around the block. I did not cry. I prayed, sang praises, and gave thanks. I felt more free. My energy level increased significantly. I smiled a little, reached out to people, and wondered, *Is the sun beginning to rise again?*

Wednesday, July 21

I took the day off for a previously scheduled appointment with the pastor. I had also been invited to join the pastoral staff meeting afterward. It was a beautiful day, except that in the morning I caught myself repeatedly checking to see whether the collar of my shirt was in place or the zipper of my pants pulled all the way up. I wondered if this nervous trait was a sign of insecurity, pointless anxiety over the meeting with the pastor or sudden changes in my body chemistry. My anxiety was relieved when I yawned. I then remembered that I had gone to bed late the night before and was up early to keep this appointment. I didn’t cry throughout the day. I went to bed early to make up my sleep deficit.

Thursday, July 22

On my day off, I did some job searching, dropping off my résumé at several places. I seemed to have stopped crying. I prayed, gave thanks, and sang praises to God. But with a sigh or a shaking of my head, I told myself at intervals, “It didn’t have to be Seyi.” I went to bed early and had a good night’s sleep.

Friday, July 23

I got a phone call from Nigeria early in the morning. I was given more details about the crash. Seyi had been driving students to Lagos for ministry in a minivan, probably owned by the student fellowship group, when a tire blew. In the resulting loss of control, passengers were flung out of the vehicle, and Seyi was thrown through the windshield. Some students were still hospitalized, but Seyi was the only fatality. The accident occurred on Sunday, July 11, and Seyi died the next day.

The details did not make things worse. On the contrary, they seemed to help. I had an impression of finality about it, a thought of, “You can’t help what happened.” I felt concern for those still in the hospital, and I prayed for them, their families, and Christian students in general. Life goes on.

In the late evening, I thought of the words of Jesus to Martha before He raised her brother Lazarus from the dead. Jesus said,

Thy brother shall rise again.... I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? (John 11:23,25,26).

And to His disciples, Jesus said, “...because I live, ye shall live also” (John 14:19).

Oluwaseyi lives.

Saturday, July 24

One of my devotionals had the following Scriptures in its first paragraph for the day’s meditation:

It is the Lord. Let Him do what seems good to Him.... For though I were righteous, I could not answer Him; I would beg mercy of my Judge.... The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.... Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity? (1 Samuel 3:18; Job 9:15; Job 1:21; Job 2:10 NKJV).

What more can I say?

A couple that knew Seyi in Nigeria came to commiserate with us in the evening. It hurt when they talked about Seyi, but I was brave. When tears came to my eyes, I looked away from everyone. I kept quiet, staring at the floor. My voice would break if I dared to speak. I was relieved when they changed the subject.

Monday, August 2

It is clear that only the immediate battles have been won. There is still a lot of ground to cover. Not infrequently, either my wife or I, or both of us, wake up in the morning to complain of body pains, meaningless dreams, and feeling as if we hadn't slept. I realized we were both vulnerable.

My wife said she had bottled a lot of emotions. It was clear she hadn't grieved properly. I believe she didn't want to bring up the subject of Seyi to avoid adding to my grief. I wish there was a way I could encourage her to talk. She has a sharper memory than I, and these thoughts continually nag her. I believe I have found my journaling helpful in pouring out my feelings on paper. No other eyes, apart from God's, read the thoughts I put on paper. I thought I might show my wife my journal, but didn't know what she would think of it—or of me.

I miss you, Seyi.

Friday, August 20.

I read my journal entries about Seyi and cried. The old memories became fresh again. I was edgy and angry. In a dream, I was exhorted, "Trust me with your pain. If you do, your flower will blossom into fruit, if you don't...." I couldn't recall the last part. I guess that's all I need to do—trust and see how the Lord transforms the pain.

Saturday, August 21

I cried. Although it has been quite a while since this happened to me, it was as if I just heard the news today. But I didn't regret reading my journal. I didn't keep the journal in order to file away that part of my life. I figured that it was better to confront the uncomfortable than try to hide from it or wish it away. I never assumed that twenty-five years could be brought to a close so soon.

Sunday, August 22

Today was beautiful. I sang and laughed. Even so, the whole idea of becoming a better person through this sorrowful experience rang hollow. It seemed to me like a bad bargain. If the price of becoming a better vessel was my brother's death, it was too high a cost—a deal I wouldn't accept if my input were asked. I would rather have my brother alive and remain unchanged. I would be satisfied as a lesser person if it meant Seyi would live.

Then I remembered Ivan's tough riddle to Alyosha in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan, the infidel, asked his brother if fixing the problems and sufferings of the world and providing eternal redemption for all could be achieved by torturing a little child to death, *would Alyosha accept the solution? Would he accept the offer of torturing one little child, just one innocent child, in order to heal all the world's pain and brokenness?* Alyosha refused. Then Ivan wanted to

know whether Alyosha thought that those who benefitted from such an act should gratefully receive happiness that rested on the blood of a tortured child and, having received it, should continue to enjoy it eternally. Alyosha answered that he did not find it acceptable.

Ivan's example mirrors exactly what God did for us in Christ Jesus. For the purpose of "fixing" the world's sins and sin's consequences, reconciling us to Himself eternally, God gave His only Son into the hands of wicked men who tortured and crucified His Son. Jesus' death was redemptive; it bought us back to God from slavery to sin and Satan. Christians rejoice in the death of Christ because the cross and the grave were not the end of the story. Jesus defeated death by rising from the grave. But for the resurrection, it would be difficult to conceive of happiness based on the torture and crucifixion of an innocent soul. I pondered this for days. My conclusion was that God could bring good from evil because He is God.

It also dawned on me that Alyosha and Ivan were not only brothers, there was a thin line between their philosophical mindsets of atheism and faith. The same set of circumstances that drew Alyosha to faith drove Ivan to rejection. "*Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen*" (Hebrews 11:1). "*The just shall live by faith*" (Romans 1:17). For me, what defies human logic may sing in harmony with faith. I can live with that. "*For whatsoever is not of faith is sin*" (Romans 14:23b).

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, FOR THY SAKE WE ARE KILLED ALL THE DAY LONG; WE ARE ACCOUNTED AS SHEEP FOR THE SLAUGHTER. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39).

Tuesday, August 31

An encouraging letter arrived in yesterday's mail. A literary agent I had contacted for one of my manuscripts sent a contract, which I received with mixed feelings. I couldn't believe that Seyi wouldn't be able to read my book. He was a member of the invisible audience I always had in mind.

I dreamed of my brothers Seyi and Ayo, but the content of the dream was hard to recollect. I prayed that each person in my family would become a better person through this experience. Only then did I realize I had never offered a prayer for Seyi since learning of his death, because I believe he didn't need one. When my father-in-law prayed over the phone, "May his gentle soul rest in perfect peace," I suppressed my laughter. From my theological persuasion, only the living need prayer. Prayer cannot

change the condition of a departed soul—his fate is sealed in death. But I went outside the tradition of my faith by repeating after my father-in-law, “May his soul rest in peace. Amen.”

’Til we meet again.

A Boy Named Oluwaseyi

Mental images from Seyi’s childhood passed through my mind over the days following his death as my wife and I reminisced. Being far away and unable to contact Seyi’s friends, we carried him in our hearts. Each of us had items we had purchased for him and had just been waiting for an opportunity to send.

Seyi had been raised by our mother in a rural setting until he was twelve. (Our father lived and taught in a different town.) Seyi, therefore, had no father figure in his childhood and became too difficult for my mother to handle. He always managed to get his own way.

I visited my mother at least three times a year during which time I had to check on Seyi. At each visit, my mother and her neighbors pleaded with me to take Seyi with me. They wanted to relieve my mother of the troubles as well as prevent Seyi from killing himself through his foolish, daring acts. I hesitated because my other siblings lived with me, and I thought Seyi would grow into an asset in his own community. Seyi was already learning butchery, my mother’s trade, and he would excel in anything he set his mind to. Maybe we were not all meant to have a formal education, I reasoned.

My mother’s hometown, in the northern part of Oyo State, Nigeria, borders tropical forest and the savanna. It’s an agricultural zone, rich in game. All Seyi wanted was to

hunt game. He always had at least two or three dogs which he trained to hunt. Armed with clubs, machetes, slingshots, and his dogs, Seyi led his peers in many successful hunting expeditions. They brought home “bush meat,” the local term for game such as squirrels, rabbits, rats, or snakes.

Seyi had no clue what schooling was all about. From his first year of elementary education, he was last in his class, as if that position had been reserved for him. Even when he repeated a grade, he was still last. In order to teach Seyi a lesson and ensure his proper foundation, I once instructed that he be given a double demotion. That year he came in second-to-last for the first semester but soon resumed his last position in class. His grade card was filled with red marks, except for attendance.

When I visited my mother after my father’s death in 1986, I learned that Seyi fell out of a tree and landed on his head. God spared my brother’s life. This incident intensified my mother’s and her neighbors’ appeal for Seyi to live with me. I asked Seyi to bring his math textbook and tested him with one of the lessons. He had no understanding of it at all. When I explained it to him, he seemed to grasp the point. I sensed he might be able to learn if properly tutored. So I brought him to live with me in Lagos. That very month, I got a pay raise, confirming to me the Lord would supply our needs.

Seyi could not speak one sentence of English when he arrived in Lagos. In the village school, class instruction had been given in the local language, but in Lagos, English was the medium of communication. My wife took it upon herself to teach Seyi English, math, and Scripture memorization. We found a private elementary school for him to attend. We also made a commitment to teach him at home so he could catch up to the correct grade.

To tease Seyi, my wife and I often showed him a group photograph taken when he first arrived in Lagos. He stood just a little taller than my hips. Our neighbors in Lagos called him “Little Seyi.” But in a couple of months, Seyi grew to my shoulder height and soon could look me in the eye. Before Seyi was eighteen years old, he was taller, heavier, and more muscular than I.

Another way we teased Seyi was to remind him of the first Scripture he committed to memory. We had allowed him to find his own favorite verses, which he would recite during family devotions in the evening. Seyi looked for the shortest verses in the Bible. One, which we found amusing, was: “*All the saints salute you*” (2 Corinthians 13:13).

Seyi quickly adapted to city life and put village life behind him, except for one area—game hunting. He brought his slingshot with him to Lagos. Before he entered school, and while my wife and I were at work, Seyi chased lizards and rats on nearby undeveloped land and in garbage dumps. One day, in the process, he broke the glass door of a widow who lived next to us. I paid to have the door fixed and disciplined Seyi. Nigerian culture and our religious convictions allowed use of the “rod of correction.” I might have been slow to use it, but whenever I had to, Seyi knew who was in control. But it did not bring an end to the game hunting. When I confiscated one slingshot, he made another one and hid it. When he went to spend time with his mother, game hunting was one thing he looked forward to. As he matured, Seyi tried using locally made guns. Threats and appeals did little to keep him away from game hunting. Although my memories couldn’t bring Seyi back, recalling his history helped ease my grief. He lived his days to the full.

A few weeks after he came to Lagos, and after sleeping in his room alone every night, Seyi, the bold, daring game hunter, said he was afraid to sleep alone. He pleaded with my wife and me to allow him to sleep in our room. I encouraged him to pray and refused to let him move. Fear gripped him for consecutive days. He would knock on our bedroom door at midnight to report he couldn't sleep. It sounded unbelievable. We prayed for him, but I insisted he was not coming to sleep with us. He later overcame his fears.

My wife and I attended an English-speaking church. Because of Seyi's inability to speak or understand English, we allowed him to attend a local church that used two languages: English and interpretation into Yoruba. One Sunday morning, Seyi refused to eat breakfast and was rushing to church much earlier than the time for Sunday school. I insisted that he eat even a little bit before leaving, but he refused. I imagined it was another case of testing authority. After I had spanked him several times, Seyi finally admitted that he was fasting. "Why did you not tell us?" I asked. Amid sobs, Seyi said that his Sunday school teacher told the class not to tell anyone they were fasting. He was reporting early to church for prayer before the service. "Well, your Sunday school teacher is right, and I am right. You do not broadcast that you are fasting to everyone, but we are not 'everyone.' We are accountable for you. If you faint in church from hunger, people will want to know why we did not feed you." As a peace offering, I bought Seyi a new raincoat.

Seyi's sense of commitment and dedication was commendable. It seemed he always wanted to commit himself to something. Back in the village, a local church enlisted his co-operation to ring the bell at 5:00 a.m. for early morning

prayers. Seyi did it faithfully with an internal alarm clock that woke him at the right time.

Seyi was adventurous and looked for challenge. We did not know how he coped with the language in school until his fellow students disclosed it. Unbeknownst to us, Seyi paid the student who sat next to him to interpret the teacher's lessons. Seyi showed tremendous improvement and passed that semester's exams with a good grade. He was at the top of his class in the next exam and in every exam until he graduated. When he went to high school, Seyi led his class all the way through. Just thinking back over his life made me miss him all over again.

Seyi demonstrated that he had a mind of his own. He knew when to play and played hard, but he did not take his work lightly. He became a tutor to his classmates. Some private school administrators hired him, even before he went to university, to teach math and science to high school students.

My wife and I were not spared the typical teenage problems with Seyi, despite the fact that he had committed his life to Christ. Although they were not unmanageable cases of teenage defiance and laxity, sometimes I felt like sending him back to his mother, even though I knew that was not an option. After Seyi's high school education though, my wife came to the same conclusion. She said it was time for him to go. I pleaded with her to persevere and complete the work God had started in her with Seyi. She gave Seyi another chance and witnessed his transformation from a village boy who chased rabbits and squirrels instead of studying to a leading student who held much promise and potential.

I do not necessarily recommend my peculiar way of handling teenagers and young adults—especially the way I handled Seyi. It is similar to behavior-contracting: a relationship

where two parties agree (or contract) on a certain behavior and spell out in advance the method of reward or punishment. In my case, maybe because they are not my own children, I let the teens know implicitly or otherwise, that it is their life and future at stake, not mine. I would do whatever I could to let them make the best of it, but I would always give them one chance, and one chance only. If they abused or misused my trust, they would have to work things out on their own. I tell them that God gives us numerous chances, but I don't. If they lose their chance, they have to come up with something on their own. Not unexpectedly, the young people often misunderstood me, thinking I told them that I do not forgive.

For example, I bought leather school sandals for Seyi's first term in Lagos. While playing soccer on the street with his friends after school, he used his sandals to designate the goal post. He walked home barefooted because the sandals were stolen. As a replacement, I bought rubber sandals for Seyi. At the beginning of the next school term, I again bought rubber sandals for him. He pleaded with me to buy leather sandals, but I told him he had lost his chance for leather. He had proven he did not value their worth.

In another instance, I opened a special savings account for Seyi and gave him the bankbook. I wanted to make a deposit into the account every month. Not quite two months later, after he had been reprimanded for misbehaving, Seyi refused to eat at home. We thought he was on a hunger strike, as a protest, not knowing that he had withdrawn money from his savings account and was eating out. That was the last of the special savings in Seyi's name.

Seyi wanted his university education to prepare him for the most lucrative of careers. He studied the lifestyle of

industrialists and sought counsel from successful corporate businessmen. The prominent profession in Nigeria at that time was banking. Seyi decided to study economics. Born leader that he was, in the first two years at university Seyi threw himself into student politics. After a while, he came to the conclusion that chasing money and politics were not worthwhile. He had a greater ambition. He wanted to go into Christian ministry because he was convinced he had a message to share with the world. I knew Seyi could accomplish anything he set his mind to. He played leadership roles in Christian circles and was leading his class with a high grade point average as well.

When he picked me up at the International Airport in Lagos in December 1996, I was impressed with how he engaged students arriving from the U.S. Some thought they could intimidate anyone not from their shores with atheistic or agnostic philosophies. From his discussion, I saw in Seyi an evangelist, a logician, and a teacher.

Maybe I would wake up one morning to find out that Seyi was not dead, and it had all been a nightmare. Could that be?

OLUWASEYI ADEMOLA OJEWALE,

JUNE 22, 1974 - JULY 12, 1999.

“ALL THE SAINTS SALUTE YOU.”

LOVED BY ALL, MISSED BY ALL.

BLESSED BE THE NAME OF THE LORD.

Chapter Three



COMMUNITY: A PRIMAL NEED

There is no doubt that we are communal by nature. Many branches of the social sciences bear testimony to this fact by their research findings. In the Old Testament, God dealt with people, especially in His relationship with Israel, as a community. In the New Testament, the same relationship is seen in God's dealing with local churches. The risen Christ addressed letters through the apostle John to seven local churches (Revelation 2 and 3).

Not only do we live in communities, we are at our best when we do so. Studies have shown that individuals with friends and nurturing intimate relationships live longer and healthier lives than those who are lonely. Even those who live with friendly pets, especially those who walk their dogs, live longer. This could be a result of the exchange of affection between pet and owner or the benefit of regular physical exercise and relaxation which owners receive from walking their dogs. All this indicates that we are designed for community.

The family is the smallest unit of the community. Anything that elevates individualism, autonomy, and independence to the point of destroying communal interdependence destroys the core of our personality. We derive identity and strength from the community to which we belong. Likewise, the health and strength of the community itself is derived from the individual members.

Medical science, through the use of medicines and surgery, may help restore the function of organs and bodily systems. But this is only half the healing process. When an illness, especially a sudden, prolonged, or incurable illness shakes a person and his family members to their foundation, it is the community that helps to restore a sense of balance, orientation, identity, and belonging to the individual. In bereavement or sudden loss by theft, fire, flood, or other natural disasters, it is the community support the victims receive that helps restore their feelings of safety and security.

James urged the sick to turn heavenward (to God in prayer), and outward (to the elders of the church) for support. That is, look up and around for help. *“Is any among you suffering? Let him pray”* (James 5:13 NKJV). This is the cry to heaven. *“Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord”* (James 5:14 NKJV). In other words, let the sick turn to the religious community. The next verse sets forth the promised result of this cry for help: *“And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven”* (James 5:15 NKJV).

We have no record in the New Testament of a sick believer who prayed and was healed miraculously by his own prayer and faith. But we have numerous accounts of

sick individuals who were prayed for by another believer (or a group of believers) and healing resulted. God answers personal prayers for need no matter what, but we see healing miracles in the Bible only in the context of community. This also extends to emotional healing and spiritual growth. James says in the same Epistle:

Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much (James 5:16 NKJV).

The early church found it helpful to live in a community and to meet daily to encourage one another (Acts 2:42-47).

Christian service in the New Testament is always the outgrowth of horizontal and vertical relationships, always a team effort, and always located in the community. We do not find New Testament workers performing solo services. It is always a duo, a trio, or more.

Jesus sent out His twelve apostles on their first missionary journeys two by two (Matthew 10). He later sent out seventy disciples, also two by two (Luke 10). The apostle Peter traveled in the company of other believers. Philip single-handedly took the gospel to Samaria, but he had no sooner done so when he summoned Peter and John from Jerusalem to complement, support, and affirm his ministry (Acts 8). We scarcely found the apostle Paul without a companion, whether he was in cities, in a local church, in the temple, or on a missionary journey.

These early Christians understood well the need for community. It is a sign of character to know when to call for help, to learn to accept care from others, and to humbly lean on others when in need. A soldier who does not know

how to ask for care from fellow warriors will likely become a dead hero.

God made us integrated wholes, comprised of many identifiable areas in which growth and development take place: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual. Those who have done extensive work and study on the stages of human development assert that growth takes place not in isolation but in community—in relationships and socializing in the context of the culture. These researchers, from various backgrounds, carried out their work among different age groups and in different environments.² In addition, they reached the consensus that the transition from one stage to another in human development is initiated by a crisis; that human growth, by and large, is lineal, chronological, and sequential; and that growth in one area affects growth in other areas. It is the way a person navigates transition and manages crisis that results in growth, development, maturity, or stagnation.

One of our greatest concerns in life is loneliness. The thought of abandonment or of being alone without help poses a great threat. Trust must be earned in relationships. It is built with the building blocks of community.

It is possible that longing for community is innate. According to those who have studied human development, the first anxiety a child awakes to, usually around eight months of age, is separation anxiety (the fear of abandonment). Can he count on the love and presence of the people in his world? This is the beginning of self-consciousness. Up until this time, a child is rarely able to distinguish himself from his mother.

A baby in the womb draws nourishment from its mother's bloodstream through the umbilical cord. To the unborn,

the mother is just a part of the environment and is there to service needs. Usually after birth, whenever the child cries for attention, his mother is there. This way, the child, unable to distinguish him/herself from his mother, actually thinks that the mother is an extension of him/herself. The awakening in the child's consciousness to the distinction between mother and self, and the fact that the mother is a separate entity, comes when the child cries for a longer time before the mother responds. This also awakens in the child a primary anxiety of separation and abandonment. The anxiety of abandonment is relieved when the mother returns to feed the child or to change a wet diaper.

The kind of care and attention a child receives from his/her mother and primary caregivers at this period is important in the child's own development and concept of the world. Is it a world of love and caring people or one in which the child may be abandoned and left untended? To minimize this inevitable anxiety, a child begins to devise its own response mechanisms and defense strategies. It does so to cope with the pain of separation that he begins to experience as the mother fails to attend to him for a period longer than previously expected. These response mechanisms may become part of the child's adult personality and subconscious way of viewing and relating to the world.

Needless to say, many of the child's response patterns to anxiety are unhealthy, and, ideally, should be discarded with maturity. But this is not always the case. We often carry our defenses into adulthood even though their origins lie buried in our unconscious or subconscious minds. The community in which a child grows and develops is important in fostering or restoring to the child a sense of safety, belonging, being wanted, and being deserving of attention from others.

It has been shown that when we are sick, we are most vulnerable and often regress to a childhood view of the world and coping with anxiety. This same fear of separation and abandonment is a constant source of anxiety for the elderly, sick, and dying.

It is significant that people of faith often find assurance in the promise of God's presence, especially in time of need. Sickness and the dying process is like walking "*through the valley of the shadow of death*," in which the Psalmist says, "*I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me*" (Psalm 23:4).

When a disease can no longer be treated, the assurance from the physicians that they will not abandon a patient but will continue to treat the pain has been found to be helpful even though the sickness may progress.

Oncology doctors deal with life and death issues. Even when they have not mentioned the word terminal, cancer patients and family members are already fighting the thoughts of death and loss. When it is no longer feasible for them to remove or reduce cancer cells, successful physicians demonstrate their skill and human touch when they are honest with patients and their families. The doctors can then concentrate on treating inner and physical pain, anxiety, depression, and whatever makes life more purposeful.

By the nature of their care for the sick, family and friends can help a great deal to control emotional and physical pain and provide meaning in suffering even when no cure is in sight. Hospice care has been successful in ensuring this type of support. Patients themselves indicate that support and the presence of family and loved ones help them to cope with illness. Many say emphatically that without this network of family and friends, they would not survive.

As a hospital chaplain intern and a religious leader, it was a joy for me to hear patients say that, first and foremost, God was their greatest support. Next to God, they mentioned the clergy and members of their communities of faith. It made me feel good when they put it in that order. But many patients did not see it that way. Even the religious among them cited family and friends first. Then they talked about care providers (nurses, doctors), treatments they received, and relationships that were forming. This bothered me and caused me to examine the Bible in another light. Now I know that even when the sick point to the support they receive from human beings in time of need, it is indeed a testimony to God's unfailing presence. In fact, I find so many Scripture to support this that I become suspicious if someone talks only about God without relating to his community—namely, family, friends, and others.

If we cannot find God in the eyes and hands of family, friends, and professional caregivers, it will be hard to find Him anywhere else. For example, the Old Testament stipulates that a farmer should not harvest his crops clean but should leave some for the poor: widows, strangers, and the fatherless (Deuteronomy 24:19-22; Leviticus 19:9,10). Without such provision, Naomi and Ruth, both widows, would not have survived in the time of Judges. God sustained Ruth, a great-great-grandmother of Jesus, through the community. In the New Testament, we note Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), another parable of the judgment of the nations (Matthew 25:31-46), how James defines true and pure religion (James 1:27) and true faith (James 2:14-26), and how John describes true love (1 John 3:16-18; 4:10-21). All of these show the face of God through family, neighbors, and friends in times of need.

The elderly, dying, and those who have life-threatening diseases, experience the anxiety of traveling alone the inevitable, ultimate journey. Will family and friends surround them when the end draws near, or will they be alone? Will they find God's love and blessing as they pass from this life to the next? Will anyone in the community be interested enough to listen to their final recollections? If they have a last wish, will anyone hear it? Will anyone miss them when they are gone? Will angels or departed family be waiting to welcome them?

The great apostle Paul, realizing that he might not win the battle against imperial Rome before his death, showed in his second Epistle to Timothy (the last chapter) that he longed for companionship and familiar faces more than anything else. He mentioned those associates who had deserted him, as well as those who had remained faithful to him. More than anything, Paul did not want to face his ordeal alone. Though he mentioned that God had not left him, he pleaded with Timothy, his son in the faith and faithful companion, to hasten to him. Paul also wanted his books and clothing and asked Timothy to bring them. Indeed, 2 Timothy gives us a window into the humanness of Paul as we see the veteran missionary struggling with thoughts of abandonment. Paul writes,

As for me, the hour has come for me to be sacrificed; the time is here for me to leave this life.... Do your best to come to me soon. Demas... has deserted me.... Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you.... No one stood by me the first time I defended myself; all deserted me. May God not count it against them! But the Lord stayed with me

and gave me strength... and I was rescued from being sentenced to death (2 Timothy 4:6-17 TEV).

We have no record as to whether Timothy and Mark made it to Rome before Paul was executed, but his longing for their companionship and presence could not have been clearer.

Even our Lord Jesus did not spend the last days of His earthly life with crowds. He was with His disciples and close friends such as Lazarus, Mary, and Martha. Almost one-third of the gospel narrative is devoted to these somber moments. The disciples of Jesus did not understand what would happen to their Master, but they stuck with Him in His trying moments. Jesus acknowledged their support when He commended them saying, “*You have stayed with me all through my trials*” (Luke 22:28).

Job and his three philosopher friends struggled to find meaning in his suffering. His friends were misguided in their resolve to convict and find fault with Job. God did not approve of this stance, and writers and commentators have criticized them for this posture. The question no one has asked is: What would Job’s condition have been like had his friends not come to assist? Similarly, what would have happened had they left after the first seven days when they sat in silence? Without those three men, Job would have sat alone on the heaps of ashes of his former life, not only destitute of wife, children, family, and friends, but also tormented by his own thoughts. There would have been no one to hear the agony of his soul, no one to reason or argue with him, no opportunity to vent his anger and verbalize his emotions. But the friends stayed with him. And together they struggled for meaning; no one agreeing with the others’ positions, but discussing what was going on in Job’s life. We

may not commend their speeches, but no one can fault them for their loyalty and staying power.

Many people withdraw from friends and family going through crises because they do not know what to say and fear saying the wrong things. I believe the withdrawal is as bad as, if not worse than, any wrong comment that could be made. In the integrity of their hearts and their understanding of God, Job's friends were incorrect and misrepresented God. But they proved to be friends indeed because they stayed with Job through his ordeal. What would Job's life have been like in those months had he no companion in his grief? One time, a man whose thirty-seven-year-old son died of cancer thanked me profusely, not for what I said, but just for staying with him.

I had an uncle whose story I will tell in detail in the closing chapters. During all the years he was housebound because of declining health, my uncle continued to find a healthy community among his colleagues in the talking drum profession. Especially attentive were those who apprenticed under him in the art. They gave him a share of their wages when he could no longer perform with them at ceremonies because of his ill health, although they were not obligated to do so.

A neighbor and relative faithfully helped my uncle manage his farm. He hired farm hands to clean and harvest the crops and sold the produce. Because of this, my uncle was able to feed himself.

One woman in the compound took it upon herself to buy groceries for my uncle and to cook his meals. So, in spite of the tragedies he had suffered, my uncle was not abandoned in his old age. Life may be unfair, but God remains faithful and trustworthy. His care can be seen in the support provided by community.

It was my privilege to visit my uncle about two weeks before he died. At this point, I was not aware of the rapidly deteriorating condition of his health, but I felt a restlessness, and my mind continually was drawn toward him. I was glad I visited. His spirit was enlivened when I related the state of my uneasiness that prompted the journey. I had been on his mind too. I could see his leg was worse than usual. I offered to take him to Lagos for better treatment, but he declined. He said, "This is my place. Here I will remain 'til my Maker bids me come." He could sense his end was near. But still, we engaged in long-term plans for projects. I learned that as soon as I left, he assigned the woman who had been taking care of him to assist in whatever way she could to initiate the project we discussed.

During our last discussion, my uncle asked me if I could research our family roots to learn if we had migrated from Igbori because Igbori is mentioned in our family verse. (Igbori was a prominent location in the ancient Oyo kingdom.) Closure for me will be when I will be able to do or initiate some of the projects of our last discussion.

Chapter Four



COMMUNITY AT WORK

It is because of our interdependence that a religious person, for example, looks up to the spiritual community to which he or she belongs, for wholeness and affirmation. And who is seen as the representative of that community? The clergy, of course. The pastor is the one called upon to give support in tragedy or to celebrate when blessing is bestowed. He is God's spokesman for the people, their intercessor and extended family member.

The beauty of this shepherd-parishioner relationship is in the humanity of the pastor, in the fact that he is not exempt from the same tragedies and blessings that the lay people experience. I learned this first-hand. At such times, it is not only how the pastor handles pain that lifts people, but it is also the fact that he has experienced what others go through. The result is that he becomes a recipient of care and the object of prayer.

In 1992, when I was approximately forty years old, I was hospitalized for the first time in my life, for nine days.

Before that time, I had battled only minor illnesses. The problem that led to my hospitalization was a pulmonary embolism and mild heart attack. The second medical opinion that I secured confirmed the heart attack, but questioned the embolism. Four years later, I had medical examinations with more advanced technology in the United States. The results were inconclusive as to whether I had ever suffered either of the two conditions. The condition of my heart and lungs gave no clue. I believe that my organs have been fully healed by God.

What I had thought embarrassing for “a man of God” turned out to be an unfolding of new relationships of giving and receiving with church members. (Isn’t that the mindset of the public? Don’t we expect our pastors to be a little less human and a little more divine than the rest of the world?)

The elder of the congregation and his wife visited me in the hospital. He bent over and whispered that he had once suffered the same illness. His wife, a registered nurse, grinned and finished the story. I was greatly encouraged to hear this and to see before me someone who had been where I was and who had survived. How relieving that was! I began to look forward to my recovery.

The image of the pastor as the “giant in faith,” a servant of God shielded from what every other human experiences, was shattered. My helplessness and weakness became a paradox of towering grace, humility, and strength. For the first time in my life, I felt I was needed not so much for any talent or ability that I had, but because I was “one of us.” I began to see the Incarnation in a new light. Through His incarnation, God suffered as one of us.

That experience was followed by a second illness in September 1995. The problem this time was Bell’s palsy or

facial paralysis, which occurs when the seventh cranial nerve snaps because of some trigger such as viral infection, sudden change in weather or temperature, or high blood pressure. There was no dispute as to the medical diagnosis this time. There was also no doubt about the disfigurement of my face, which was embarrassing and lasted for months. To this date, I have not recovered completely, but the condition is so slight that many are unable to detect it.

One immediate “blessing” from the palsy was that I no longer felt any pressure to prove or live up to anyone’s expectation as “a servant of God” possessing supernatural power. To begin with, this subconscious, inner pressure to live up to expectation may have been imposed from within as a response to my own need to validate myself. Glaringly, members of the Christian community and the public saw displayed that I was flesh and blood, just like anyone else, and had been afflicted like anyone could be. Members of the congregation in the medical field, especially doctors, nurses, and physiotherapists, began to utilize their expertise on me. Prior to this time, some of these professionals would have thought it a real honor to get so close to “the Reverend” as to touch him. Some would even regard a handshake with “the Reverend” as a blessing.

Following the incident, I was hospitalized at the University Health Center for several days so my blood pressure could be monitored. Those days were tough. I battled with insomnia and horrible nightmares. The mere thought of going to bed at night was an extremely uncomfortable prospect as I faced the possibility of waking suddenly with a numb limb or never waking at all.

I struggled with the thought of my life ending, and fought it with Scriptures such as:

I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord.... With long life will I satisfy him, and show him my salvation.... And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work, and will preserve me unto His heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen (Psalm 118:17; 91:16; 2 Timothy 4:18).

But the odds were many. I had friends and colleagues in the ministry who had been suddenly called home to be with the Lord. One, a gifted marriage counselor, was killed in an automobile accident; several others had aneurysms or heart attacks. They all left this world without being able to say good-bye to their loved ones.

If such Christian men of my age were called home in the prime of their lives, what chance did I have? We served the same God, we lived in the same world, and they had the same goals and family commitments as I. They were faithful and exemplary men, as far as I could tell, some of them touching more lives for Christ than I. I know that every one of us is a unique individual on a different timetable in God's dealings, but my head and heart were communicating different messages. Did I need to be reminded to live each day as if it were my last? I knew that too. And that was how I wanted to live. But I found it was easier to practice that principle when doctors gave a clean bill of health than when the situation presented the very real possibility that any day could be the last.

I recalled my heart attack and pulmonary embolism three years earlier. That stacked the deck even more against me. Twice I had been involved in ghastly automobile accidents, and my life was spared with no physical loss or defect. *Could I ask for more?* These thoughts raced through my mind, but I didn't feel I could discuss them openly with others.

My wife brought the matter out into the open when she said my problem was fear. Often in those days, I woke from sleep shouting the name of Jesus either because I had just had a nightmare or because a limb—frequently an arm—was completely numb. My wife joined me in praying, pleading the blood of Jesus, or rebuking Satan. If I awakened as a result of numbness, I stomped my feet or swung my arm vigorously to restore circulation, all the while praying all manner of prayers. Some days it took a long time before sensation was restored to the affected parts of my body. Those were unforgettable days, believe me. Be they demon spirits, imaginations, physical diseases, or something else, I bound anything you could bind spiritually, loosed anything one could loose in prayer, cast out anything that could be cast out, and rebuked whatever could be rebuked in the name of the Lord. I thank God I am alive to tell the story.

Themes from sermons I had preached from the pulpit and snippets from exhortations I had given others flooded my mind. It really helped as the Holy Spirit reminded me of words I had spoken to comfort, counsel, assure, and affirm others during their difficult times. During that period, I received a letter from my younger brother who was then chaplain of a high school. To conclude his letter, he copied verbatim a portion of one of my printed sermons from “The Sermon of the Month” series, then wrote below it: *Can you recognize whose words those were?* It was a gentle rebuke and a much-needed reminder.

If I ever felt connected to the community of believers, it was during those moments. My family and I knew they cared and that we were not alone. First, in their love, I experienced our shared humanity. Then they powerfully demonstrated the dynamics of the reality of our shared faith and hope. These

bouts with illness brought to the fore the difference between preaching from the head and preaching from the heart.

The marriage of Titi and her husband was one of the ceremonies I performed in my pastoral ministry. The couple relocated shortly after the wedding, so she began attending a different church. When she heard of my ailment, she sought me out. I was keeping a low profile for a while to give myself a rest from the steady stream of concerned visitors. At the end of her visit, Titi asked that we pray. I will never forget the look on her face as she pleaded with me, “Please let me pray. You have always prayed for us.”

She prayed from her heart. It was a moment of healing for me. I was deeply touched by the depth and sincerity of Titi’s concern. It was one of the joys of being a pastor. But this joy is not exclusive to those in ministry leadership roles. Giving and receiving care is the privilege of all believers.

If there is anything I desire or could offer to one who suffers, it is this communal life of faith. That is the primary source of healing. Being let down by the community when one most needs the group’s support and affirmation could be a blow that has the greatest power to shatter the hurting individual. The fear of being let down makes many people shield themselves from all forms of community.

God made us communal and relational beings. Any movement away from community and relationship makes us incomplete humans in one way or another. It is my prayer that you will find your roots in a community and find relationships that promote acceptance, grounding and shape you into the best person you can become.

I am certain that I have experienced a fraction of the pain that others triumph over. Apart from the facial disfigurement, Bell’s palsy is painless. Not long ago, I had a stomach ache for

a few days. I could hardly think of anything but the pain in my abdomen. Then the plight of those whose lives are virtually defined by pain dawned on me. How dare I complain about pain? I can only pray that, in spite of my limitation in personal experiences of pain, God will cause this work to touch lives and minister from heart to heart.

Chapter Five



THE POWER OF COMMUNITY

Brenda is wheelchair bound. She attends a special school which relies heavily on video. Most of the students there suffer from birth defects, but her story is different....

Brenda had asthma when she was three, and she received improper medical attention. Most of her health problems are related to lack of oxygen, but her brain was not severely affected. As preparation for integration into society, all students above fourteen years of age at Brenda's school must hold a part-time job.

On Wednesday, between 9:30 and 10:00 a.m., two young women wheel Brenda into an upscale garment retailer in New York City where I work as an in-house security guard. The two are both vibrant young women—one is Brenda's counselor, the other her intern job coach. The intern's interest was related to the fact that she grew up with neighboring children who were autistic. Brenda's assignment is to greet shoppers as they enter or exit the store. To

make her job easier, we ask her to give customers the company's catalog. It is not a job that must be filled at all times, but it is one that Brenda can fulfill.

On her first day at work in October 1998, as soon as Brenda was wheeled into the store and positioned at the entrance, the general manager walked up and greeted her warmly. Then she stooped down and pinned the company's nametag on Brenda, the same badge that every employee, including the general manager, wore. The employees wear no personal identification card, just the company's nametag. Brenda was a staff member on duty, just like other employees. I was impressed by the honor bestowed on this beautiful teenager in a wheel chair.

Brenda, in her wheel chair, was positioned at the entrance to receive customers. She naturally fixed her gaze on the floor, and this, in addition to her being seated, made eye contact with customers difficult. She is soft-spoken, which made it hard for people to hear her. When no customer was in sight, the coach or counselor walked in and out of the store, expecting to hear Brenda say, "Hi! Good morning!" or "Bye, have a good day!" Whatever Brenda did, they lavished praise on her, and when she missed it, it was her improved performance they highlighted.

Brenda missed many customers who walked past her before she could make up her mind what to say or even offer the catalog. As a customer approached the store, the job coach began to remind her to smile and hand out the catalog. I also prompted Brenda several times. To facilitate her response, I walked up to an approaching customer and said, "Brenda would like to give you something," or asked, "Would you like to receive a catalog from Brenda?" One such person walked up to Brenda and took the cata-

log with a smile. The customer even stood there momentarily to leaf through the pages. Then she turned again to Brenda and said with a smile, "Thank you." In all, on her first day, Brenda handed out about five catalogs. The counselor and the job coach were not discouraged. They said they would continue to work with her until she became familiar with the task. I appreciated their patience and optimism, and they were grateful for my cooperation and assistance. Brenda liked the work and looked forward to her Wednesday assignment.

Brenda's teacher did something quite significant. From the women's department, she selected some items: ladies' dresses, blouses, pants, and skirts. She held each item in front of herself, as if trying it on, and asked for Brenda's comments about the color, style, and so on. Brenda was a part of society, valued in the community. Her opinion mattered. Though disabled, partially retarded, and wheelchair bound, she was alive.

By some standards, Brenda showed little success. But from where she began to where she may go represents progress.

Over several weeks, we watched Brenda's steady improvement at her post. We often retreated from the entrance to watch her interact with those who entered or left the store. On occasion, her voice became stronger, her responses more spontaneous, and her smile more generous. I observed that even when she did not raise her glance from the floor, she could take in the entire surrounding from the corners of her eyes.

I am proud to be a part of an organization that gives employment to people like Brenda. The staff member who hired her for the retailer told me she was glad she made the decision. What that company is doing is more than a service to Brenda; it is a service to the community.

What value does society place on the individual? If we value life only in terms of performance and contribution, people like Brenda have no place. If we see life in terms of its interdependence, people like her do have a place. How much are we willing to invest in an individual? This company's policy is more than charity. It is giving worth to an individual and empowering that person to "earn" a living. It is restoring hope when there is almost none. It is giving Brenda a place in the community, a job to perform, and a contribution to make.

Jesus calls our attention to "*one of the least of these*" (Matthew 25:40), or those by the wayside of life, wounded by fate or adversity, confined in prison or hospital, hungry and naked. Jesus says whatever is done to them is done to Him. He says in another passage that a soul is worth more than all the goods and riches of the world (Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36,37). Jesus asked,

What shall it profit an individual if that person gains the whole world but forfeits his or her soul?, or what shall a person give in exchange for his or her soul? (Matthew 16:26).

Brenda's case strikes me in particular because anybody could be in her shoes by tomorrow morning. All it takes is a head injury and damage to the spinal cord. Regardless of your position in life, in an accident you could lose your memory and the ability to stand erect or to walk.

* * *

Betty (not her real name), an immigrant from the West Indies, is a registered nurse with years of experience working for a hospital in New York City. She is a single parent with two children in college. Downsizing by the hospital authori-

ties was the order of the day. Nurses were overextended, each doing what used to be the work of two or three people. The result was that the nurses did not have sufficient time for their families, patients, or themselves. To cut costs in response to pressure from the health insurance companies, many experienced nurses were being let go and replaced by nursing assistants and nurse's aides, some of whom had only minimal training.

At that time, job security was virtually nonexistent for the traditionally trained nurses. Their frustration was compounded by a sense of powerlessness. As one said, "You are asked to train [nurse's aides] so that they can take your job." This was not a time to fail to perform. Any negative performance evaluation meant a guaranteed spot on the unemployment line. Betty was performing below her usual level, and her colleagues and manager were worried for her. They suggested she see me, the chaplain intern on her floor for almost nine months, or attend one of the healing circles I conducted in the unit on Fridays. (The healing circle is a ministry to hospital staff under the pastoral care department.) But Betty kept avoiding me and giving excuses for her absence at the healing circles.

At a healing circle in May 1998, which Betty finally attended, I noticed she had difficulty expressing herself. I suggested that we talk after the healing circle. During our discussion, Betty shared that her mother—her best friend—had died of cancer. Her mom had worked as a nanny and performed other low-paying jobs that had helped raise her children and grandchildren. She had lived not far from Betty's house and knew when her daughter would be home. Even when her mother's health was failing, Betty could count on her mom to listen as she talked about the day.

When the last chemotherapy and radiation treatments failed and her mother's case became terminal, Betty believed the pressure on the job prevented her from taking care of her mother the way she should have. Betty's brother, also in New York, lived farther away and couldn't help much, and her children were in college. Hospice care or a nursing home was one alternative, but Betty's mother resisted the idea. If it were possible, she wanted to return to Trinidad to die among her own people. Betty and her brother planned to send their mother home if she got well enough after the treatment, but she didn't get better. She was placed in the care of professional care-providers, but her health deteriorated rapidly. Betty kept working overtime and odd shifts in order to pay her bills or be able to take extended days off. In the meantime, she could not spend time with her mother. One Thursday night, she received a call from the institution that her mother's case was serious and the presence of family members was requested. As a nurse, Betty understood the implications. But she was on night duty, and because so few staff were available to attend patients, she couldn't leave her post. Neither she nor her brother was by their mother's bedside when she died. Betty's mother spent less than a week in the care facility before dying. Betty was shattered. She was convinced her mother would still be alive if she had not been institutionalized.

Sobbing, Betty said, "My mother was there for us, but we were not there for her. What kind of useless job is this? I am a nurse. I was taking care of other people, but I did not take care of my own mother. I cannot believe that I abandoned my mother in her dying moments. My mother did not want to go to that place, but I couldn't cope with taking care of her at home with the job pressure. She did not

adjust to the place emotionally. That was the thing that did her in. She did not want to go there. The night she died, I was here taking care of other people, working overtime to pay my bills! What kind of life is this? I should have been there for her to let her die in my arms. I feel lonelier now than I ever felt. I knew when my mother would call and, even now when I get home, I find myself waiting for her call. Then I remember she's gone.... Sometimes, when I want to share my day with someone, I grab the phone to dial my mother's number before I catch myself. I have started taking a course so I have something to occupy my mind. But I still struggle with falling asleep."

Stories like this, if you ask my opinion, show that nursing homes and hospices, good and commendable though they may be, are poor substitutes for modern society that has lost its relational bond, communal interdependence, and familial solidarity. Love is not about convenience; it is about sacrifice. But in a society that promotes self above all, where individuality and being in control are the goals, hospices and nursing homes become the acceptable norm.

I do feel that, for the homeless or those without families, hospices and nursing homes serve a useful purpose.

From my experience with terminally ill patients and the elderly, I have rarely found an individual with family members still living who chose to enter hospice care or a nursing home. I also have hardly ever found members of an intact family who placed a relative in an institution right away. It is usually a last resort, and I find you can often detect a tone of guilt in people's voices for what is considered "the best we can do under the circumstances." Even patients without families prefer to live in their own homes and make do with a visiting nurse service or nursing aides. Many, however, do adjust

to the new environment and form bonds of friendship and community with the other hospice or nursing home residents.

On the other hand, I have come across cases where these institutions have been places of care and commitment for the elderly or infirm. This is communicated in many non-verbal ways through regular visits, phone calls, attention to personal needs, continuity of family traditions for special days like birthdays or Thanksgiving, and value for the individual's personal space. In this way, the elderly or the terminally ill are assured they still belong to the human race and to their families and that their families commit them to the care of others out of concern and consideration for their needs, knowing the care receivers will have access to better treatment in more professional hands than can be provided at home. Besides this, some individuals would rather hire the services of professional care providers than to saddle family members with the burden of their care and risk becoming dependent on them.

I met family members who spoke with pride about sacrifices they made for elderly and terminally ill relatives and how they resisted putting them in an institution. Such people spoke about closure, nurturing, and the intense relationship in the last days of their loved ones' lives. To them, family love is a generational gift; a debt that can't be paid any other way.

I heard a twenty-year-old man speak with pride about the sacrifice he made when he took a one-year leave from academic pursuits to devote time to a family member who needed attention and to alleviate the strain on family finances. That year off did not set him back. Instead, it gave him the memory of a time when he acted with consideration for his family.

I have seen some exceptions to patients' attitude toward nursing homes and hospices. These are from senior citizens who belong to a local church in a black community having a nursing home. This group has an active ministry reaching out to other homes in the neighborhood. To these folks, the nursing home exists to cater to them in their old age, and they do not resent the idea. There are many who do not have family nearby. The church is their family, the pastor or priest their next-of-kin, the African-American community their tribe, and the neighborhood their village. To them, the nursing home is an extension of church life. The nursing home becomes the community of faith in old age.

This local Baptist church in a Black neighborhood in Brooklyn has, in its weekly Sunday bulletin, the names of over 100 sick and shut-in people in its Home Services for Elderly and Seniors Residence and more than twenty members in its nursing home. Prayers are offered, at least weekly in the Sunday service, for each one, by name, by the congregation. Though absent in the service, their names are mentioned in the assembly of their faith community and especially in the hearing of family and friends. Calvary Hospital in the Bronx, possibly the best care provider for terminal cancer patients, started as a mission of the Catholic Church. I believe Catholics find more connection to their spiritual traditions and roots and find better community in Calvary Hospital than other patients.

After spending the greater part of her day visiting residents of the nursing home, an elderly woman was so moved that she stood up during the Baptist church's midweek prayer meeting to challenge the members. She urged them to actively participate in the nursing home ministry as originally envisaged in its inception. She further commented,

“Many residents in the homes may not be very aware of what is going on. But they have rich memories of what they have been through and are always full of testimonies. Listening to their stories has enriched my life and challenged my faith. They know where they are going.”

The soul of a people resides with its vulnerable or dependent members—the children, elderly, and terminally ill. To the degree to which people value, honor, and care for this dependent segment of society is the level to which the soul of that people rises on its “faith barometer.” God’s persistent call in both Old and New Testaments is for His people to manifest their faith by acts of mercy and compassion to widows, orphans, strangers, poor, and the oppressed.

We are made to be dependent on God and interdependent on one another. The sin of Adam and Eve was the first step toward independence. Interdependence on one another involves giving and receiving care. Old age is not meant to be a curse, but a blessing. In true community and interdependence, the blind see through the eyes of family, the lame walk with the legs of friends, the deaf hear with the ears of neighbors, the dumb communicate through the senses of others.

One Body, Many Communities

The Christian experience is described by many jargon words and phrases such as salvation, redemption, regeneration, repentance, born-again, accepting Christ, receiving Jesus, and so forth. This divine act of salvation, worked out in human experience, brings a person into God’s family; it enlists the individual into an army and makes him a citizen of another country. The Bible says that our “*citizenship is in heaven*” (Philippians 3:20). This Christian experience also forms us into a community, a unit called the Church of Jesus

Christ. While the Church sings of her one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one Father, its membership (owing to its nature, temperament, and cultural diversity) has been further grouped into denominations and local churches. That's community.

I questioned why churches and denominations are formed and thrive along ethnic, racial, nationality, and social lines. Even the members of a local church segregate informally along these lines. I wondered why people of different race, education, and socio-economic class do not always worship and fellowship together as we will one day do in heaven. I found my answer in this word: community. I now strongly appreciate that the Church of Christ is still one, but that it has and thrives on many communities.

Let the Latinos, African-Americans, Caucasians, Chinese, Indians, Ghanaian, Senegalese and other nationalities in the same neighborhood have their local churches, but let them reach out to one another in the love of Christ. Let the Pentecostals, Evangelicals, Orthodox, and Liberal congregations maintain their identities, but let them show the world that it is the same Lord they serve

If only the different communities in local churches interacted and intersected, and if only the different churches and denominations, which constitute communities of their own, found occasion to pray together, work together, and celebrate together. Then the world would know that it is one body, one faith, one baptism, but many communities. Unfortunately, this is not usually so.

We may be separated by race, color, creed, class, tribe, political ideology, religion, and we may not agree on important subjects, but our shared humanity and the sacredness of life ought to transcend whatever divides us. The bottom

line is this: If a person who I see as “other” is hospitalized and needs my blood or bone marrow to regain his life, would I consider the sacrifice for him? If the answer is not in the affirmative, we are blind to the greater truths of life—alas!—to life itself.

The power of community, as the chapter title suggests, is not so much in meeting needs as in transforming suffering and giving meaning to individuals and society. Community changes suffering into a ministry of giving and receiving. *Interdependence*. I’m tempted to think that God permits human misery as part of His creation in order that it may draw out human beings in ministry and caring for one another. It is God at work in us who makes us respond to human suffering in acts of mercy, kindness, love, generosity, passion, and sacrifice.

Chapter Six



GOD: A HIDDEN PRESENCE

When a believer is able to see God and acknowledge Him in ordinary events of life, even in seeming and apparent failures in life, it is a step forward in faith maturity. God is sometimes a hidden presence in crisis, and when He shows up, He often wears a human face. To the traveler who was robbed and wounded in the story we call “The Good Samaritan,” God sent help through someone outside the victim’s circle.

The special manifestations of God to the Israelites in the Old Testament, especially in times of national crisis, were either in the form of a special angel or a human (Genesis 18; Joshua 5:13-15; Judges 13; Daniel 3:24-25). Bible students acknowledge these special visitations of angel or man, referred to as a *theophany*, as pre-incarnate and pre-Bethlehem appearances of Jesus.

“No one has seen God at any time,” “God is Spirit,” declares Scripture (John 1:18; 4:24 NKJV). And when God decided to make Himself visible to human eyes, He came in

human form (John 1:14-18), born as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem. God was concealed in human flesh.

The Thanksgiving service is traditionally a special event in the Chapel of Christ Our Light at the University of Lagos in Akoka, Nigeria. As an outreach to the community, members are given special letters they may use to invite their friends and family members to worship. At this special service, regular members, occasional worshippers, and visitors fill the chapel. In my first year of chaplaincy, at my first Thanksgiving service as the chaplain, I used several illustrations and stories to emphasize the points of the Scripture passages. The audience was especially enlightened by these illustrations and how they had “brought home” the message to them.

One particular illustration was designed to teach us to see God in the ordinary events of life. I can't recall the exact details as I presented them then, but I will relate a similar version with the same meaning:

A preacher traveling by boat to preach in a town several miles from his parsonage developed engine problems along the journey. His “old faithful and reliable boat,” as he often described it, began to show structural defects. The wind was strong and the tide contrary as a violent storm erupted. Clearly the boat would capsize and sink unless a miracle occurred.

The preacher knelt to pray for a miracle because he had to preach in the nearby town. There were souls to be saved there. God had given him the boat for his evangelistic ministry, and no demon or storm would take the boat from him. As soon as he prayed, a boat owned by an infidel appeared. Its pilot confessed that something had prompted him to veer from the route he

normally took. The infidel offered to take the preacher to town, but the preacher turned down the offer because he said God could fix his problem.

The infidel made a U-turn and returned to the preacher's village to tell of the pastor's predicament. The villagers took boats to help the preacher, prepared to tow his boat to shore. The preacher thought that accepting their help was leaning on the arm of "the flesh." With confidence, the pastor told concerned villagers that he had prayed to God and they should "*wait and see the salvation of the Lord.*" He began to recite Bible passages to strengthen his faith: "*God's hand is not short that it cannot save.... With a strong and mighty hand God delivered the Israelites from Egypt.... God has used the wind on occasions to rescue His people. The wind and sea obey God and do His commands.*"

The villagers called the Police Department who arrived at the scene in a rescue boat. In the meantime, the pastor's boat was almost submerged. The preacher considered this a perfect occasion for God to show His miraculous power. After all, before Elijah prayed for God to send fire to consume his sacrifice, he made the work more difficult by asking for gallons of water to be poured over the meat. By this time, the pastor stood in water up to his waist; the police radioed the Fire Department, which promptly sent a helicopter. The helicopter hovered over the pastor, lowering a rope, but the pastor refused their help. He was a man of faith. He said to himself, "God will deliver me and prove Himself before the people." The crowd pleaded with him, but the pastor did not budge. The water reached his neck. He shouted to the people that God was never late and noth-

ing was too hard for God. Not long after this, the water swallowed him, and the storm carried him away.

When the preacher stood before God and expressed his disappointment that God failed to come through for him by performing a miracle to rescue him, God told the preacher, "I did not let you down. You failed to recognize Me." The preacher said, "I did not see You." God told him, "I was there. I sent a boat, which offered you help as soon as you prayed." The preacher replied, "I didn't know it was You who sent the infidel and his boat. Besides, the man was an infidel." God told the preacher, "I moved the infidel to abandon his mission. He informed the villagers of your predicament. I made the villagers so concerned, they risked their lives for you. I sent them with rescue boats." The pastor replied, "Oh dear! I did not know that was You. I expected something dramatic. I did not want the villagers to take the glory for my deliverance. I wanted only You to have the glory." God continued, "Then I sent the police." "My Goodness! Was that You? I thought the police were looking for an opportunity to redeem their dwindling public image." God said, "When your life was truly endangered, I sent the fire department with a helicopter." The pastor asked, "How did I miss that? I thought somebody was trying to win political points with dramatic promptness and efficiency." "You see, my child," God said, "I did not let *you* down, you let *me* down. What impression of me do you think the villagers have? What kind of witness did you leave behind?"

Mrs. Alex, sitting in the congregation, had been scheduled for surgery, but she kept postponing the operation. In

the meantime, she was praying, attending crusades, faith clinics, and healing services, and claimed divine healing. She expected God to heal her miraculously, without medical or surgical intervention. Concerned family members and friends who knew her condition urged her to have the surgery before it was too late. In all this, Mrs. Alex failed to see the hand of God until the Thanksgiving service. God spoke to her heart, telling her she was like the preacher who missed seeing Him. She decided then and there to have the surgery. All went well, and her recovery was rapid.

Where is God in Human Misery?

Jay, a chaplain intern, looked into the eyes of patients and their families in the hospital and asked, “Where is God for you in this situation?” It was a favorite question of his. In most cases, when relating their stories, many of his patients and their family members recounted God’s mercies at work in every stage of their crisis. Even though confused, angry, and unsure of what was going on, many testified that their plight could be worse but for the grace of God.

Where indeed is God in crisis? Specifically, where is God for the young widow whose husband was gunned down, or for the bereaved family of the thirty-seven-year-old man? Scripture makes it clear the answer is the community in which they live (Deuteronomy 24:19-21; 26:12,13; Psalm 68:5; Acts 6:17; 9:39; 1 Timothy 5:1-16; James 1:27). Widows, orphans, and strangers have a special place in God’s heart, and He commands that they be treated with kindness and hospitality. God has provided family and designed the community to support these persons.

The same goes for the poor. Where is God for the poor? In the Old Testament, neglecting the poor was a sin (Leviticus

25 and 27). The financially strong were mandated to help those in need or loan them money without charging interest. For example, the levirate marriage (a custom of the ancient Jews and certain other peoples in which a man is obliged to marry his brother's widow) was designed to support poor widows. Farmers were expected to leave some of their harvest for the poor and widows to glean (Ruth 2). And the Year of Jubilee was to be celebrated every fifty years. At this time, all debts were to be canceled, all slaves freed, and all lands returned to the original owners. It was to be a time of redistributing wealth, creating new opportunities, and restoring dignity. Through this elaborate arrangement, a perpetually poor person or family would be unheard of. But there is no record that biblical Israel ever observed the Year of Jubilee. God also enforced the Sabbath as a day of rest so Israelite servants might rest from their labor. Today, God is in the community that equips and empowers the poor to pay their debts, recover property or dignity, and earn a descent living. Every community that fails to do this will face God's judgment.

Even today, Jewish life is largely communal and family-centered. A fellow intern was a reformed Jewish rabbi, more liberal than other branches of Judaism and openly gay. I learned a lot about the Jewish community from this reformed rabbi. In all his self-evaluations and the theological dynamic papers he wrote for the two units we had together, the reformed rabbi pointed out that he did not know whether he was an atheist or an agnostic. It was a matter in which he seemed to take great pride. He said there were many rabbis of the same agnostic persuasion. It all could have been rooted in the Holocaust.

I was curious to know what he had been doing in the clergy for almost three decades if he was not sure God exist-

ed or if he believed in God. He told me he saw his rabbinic duties as a service to his community. To him, theology is an intellectual enterprise; Judaism is community—it is life. His rabbinic calling was to serve his people, to support the community, and to uphold tradition.

I think the aftermath of the Holocaust reinforced commitment to community and the need to stick together. The impression I gathered could be summed up in this sentence: “If you cannot be sure that God will be there for you (especially a God who could allow the Holocaust), be certain you are there for one another.” Those were not his exact words, but that was the impression he gave.

Jewish people derive their identity from community. This could be an extreme example, but God intends that we give and receive support from the community and that communities be interdependent. It is when the communities fail to intersect, interact, and interrelate that societal cohesion breaks down.

Where was God for my uncle? God was in the neighbor who dutifully arranged for the clearing of his farm and sale of produce. God was in the woman who bought his groceries and occasionally cooked his meals. God was in the neighbors who periodically brought food and delicacies to him. God was in the talking drum band members who visited him after every performance and shared their earnings. God was in relatives in the compound who, every morning before going on their day’s business, knocked on my uncle’s door to say, “Good morning. How are you today?” and after returning from their day’s assignment saying, “Good night. Have a good sleep.” God was in the uneasiness I felt that prompted me to visit my uncle two weeks before he died.

Where is God for Brenda, the wheelchair-bound teenager? God is in those dedicated teachers who invest their lives in her. God is in the manager who offered her employment. God is in the retail company that offers people like Brenda a place to work. God is in the shoppers who take time to recognize her and not just walk past her. God is in those who are pleased to push her wheelchair around and who are not embarrassed to be seen with her. And God is in family who makes daily sacrifices to lavish patience, love, and care on Brenda.

Where is God for the aged or terminally ill people in nursing homes and hospices? God is in the professional care providers who pour their lives into others. God is in the chaplain who takes time to sit with patients and offer himself in ministry. God is in that woman who spent her time listening to the stories of those in the nursing home. God is in the man who brings his guitar to the nursing home to play and sing spiritual songs and old tunes. God is in the leadership of the church who decided to provide a place to care for those who would not be able to look after themselves.

Where is God for Betty? I believe that God is in the anger, agony, and pain which she suffers. I pray she will be given the grace to channel these emotions to a peaceful resolution and productive end and will find a healthy way to memorialize her grief. What she makes of it will depend largely on the relationship she builds in her community.

Where was God for Mrs. Alex? God was in the woman who invited her to our Thanksgiving service. God was in my sermon preparation and delivery. God was in the relatives and friends who had urged her to see God's wonderful provision in the medical team that would handle her case. God was in the operating room. He was in the doctors and nurses who attended to her.

Where was God for the man whose thirty-seven-year-old son died of cancer? The man acknowledged my presence, but not God's, because in his grief he failed to see that I was with him in God's name. I was in that hospital room in the capacity of a pastor and as a chaplain intern in the institution's pastoral care and education department. God is in the hospital system that provides pastoral care for patients and their families.

Where was God for me when we lost Oluwaseyi? God was in my wife and my sister-in-law who phoned so we could get information. God was in the technology that facilitated communication across continents by phone and e-mail. God was in the Bronx preacher who, I believe, was sent with a message for me. God was in the infrastructure of the neighborhood where I worked, which afforded me the opportunity for quietness in the park. God was in my job that engaged me in something outside myself for eight hours of the day. God was in friends and relations at home and abroad who phoned, sent e-mails, and assisted in other ways.

Let's get back to the man who took the tract from young Chris at a street corner in Queens. He said he no longer believed in God and that we humans are on our own to make the best of our situation. I believe he is partially right. It is outrageous to say we are on our own, but it is appropriate to say we have a stewardship duty and responsibility to one another and the environment. By divine design, we are supposed to be our "brother's keepers," to live as community members, and to wisely transform the earth. We have been made co-creators with God by virtue of our creation "in the image and likeness of God." God's decree to our first parents was, "*Be fruitful and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it*" (Genesis 1:22). That's authority along with responsibility.

Regardless of the fact that this man had turned his back on God, I see God in the man's effort to become a better neighbor and more responsible steward of the environment. While our good works and self-righteous deeds do not save us, we are held accountable for those acts that we are capable of doing but fail to do. It is the grace and Spirit of God that restrains the forces of sin and lawlessness from running rampant in the world.

I also see divine order in my encounter with the man on that cold morning in February. I know fellow Christians and Christian ministers who see demons in almost everything. To them, every problem and every discomfort in life is demonic. And they may be right. I believe we see what we look for, and I choose to set my mind to see God. I look for Him and I find Him, even in uncommon and unpleasant circumstances.

In Fyodor Dostoevsky's book, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Alyosha's position was one of humble, obedient submission to the incomprehensible. Ivan, his brother, rose up against God for causing or allowing suffering. Ivan is the critic, rebel inquisitor who will not rest until he has satisfactory answers. Alyosha does not spend a lot of time in finding answers but directs his attention to the sufferers. He serves them, bears their pain, and forms community with them—becoming their hope. Throughout the whole book, Alyosha represents the behavior of Christ. It is courageous to serve others without questioning God or questioning the condition of those you serve. Alyosha doesn't see himself as a spectator or a critic. He is one of the actors, and he is always found in the worst spot where there is the most suffering and where people are most humiliated or demeaned. Even in self-imposed suffering, we find Alyosha with the

sufferer. No matter who they were, Alyosha did not forsake them. He is found where we expect to find Jesus.

Mother Teresa endeared herself and her organization to the world because she went to the poorest of the poor, the sickest of the sick, the dying and the living dead. Whether they were victims of war, flood, famine, epidemics, infectious and communicable diseases—no questions asked—she nursed, fed, clothed, lived with, and gave them back their human dignity. Mother Teresa went to people Jesus would go to and lived among those with whom Jesus would be pleased to make His home. The challenge to us is that without geographically relocating, each of us can find our own “Calcuta” close to home.

We do not become God or play God to other people. We are to become for them representatives of God’s healing presence, His empathetic eyes, His listening ears, His soothing voice, and His loving touch. St. Augustine said, “Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not.” While God is not limited in power, He has chosen to work His purposes through mankind. “He has no hands but our hands.”

This is not to be confused with pantheism or any suggestion that all humans are little gods. We are not gods, but God works His purposes through us:

For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.... For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them (Philippians 2:13; Ephesians 2:10).

The Book of Esther in the Bible is the classic example of God’s providence—God working behind the scene, ordering events, circumstances, and people to accomplish His pur-

pose unbeknownst to the people. God's name is not mentioned once in the Book of Esther, but no reader can fail to see His hand orchestrating the drama.

C.S. Lewis penned this:

He [God] works on us in all sorts of ways. But above all, He works on us through each other. Men are mirrors, or 'carriers' of Christ to other men. Usually it is those who know Him that bring Him to others. That is why the Church, the whole body of Christians showing Him to one another, is important.³

Involvement in ministry to others has its blessings both for the helper and for the recipient. When we visit and help others in their crises, we tend to forget our own problems or are able to put them in manageable perspective. As a person becomes involved with others in their struggles, heartaches, and tragedies, the care provider no longer feels alone and isolated in his burdens. In a word, community applies!

By seeing God in the acts of people, are we saying that humans will do no good deed unless they are moved and directed by God? Are we saying that human beings are incapable of any good work apart from God? I take two approaches to those questions. The first approach focuses on the doer of the deed, while the second focuses on the receiver.

Focusing on the doer, can an individual do good deeds apart from God working in and through that person? Though the question is open to theological debate, my answer is "No," because even the worst of mankind is never completely devoid of God's grace. From the creation account in Genesis 1:26,27; 2:7, we see mankind is a mixture of "deity and dirt." Redemption of the human race was possible because sin did not completely obliterate

God's image from mankind. While a person's good works will not save him, they are testimonies that God's Spirit is at work.

Focusing on the receiver, can an individual be the recipient of kind deeds, mercy, favor, blessings, and gifts apart from God? To that, again I answer "No." All that we are and our accomplishments come from God. God is the source of our being. Humans are God's channels. Read the following Scripture that supports this:

For all that is in heaven and in earth is Yours... for all things come from You (1 Chronicles 29:11,14 NKJV).

My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.... If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us, then they would have swallowed us alive, when their wrath was kindled against us.... The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works.... You open Your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing (Psalm 121:2; 124:2,3; 145:9,16 NKJV).

Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning... (Lamentations 3:22,23 NKJV).

For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:45 NKJV).

A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven (John 3:27 NKJV).

For in Him we live and move and have our being...
(Acts 17:28 NKJV).

What do you have that you did not receive? (1
Corinthians 4:7 NKJV).

*Every good and every perfect gift is from above, and
comes down from the Father...* (James 1:17 NKJV).

God is the source of all good things. If we would allow ourselves to become instruments of God, to provide assistance like the Good Samaritan did, more needs would be met in our communities.

Chapter Seven



HOME, KITH, AND KIN

Indulge me for a while as I provide a little bit of the context in which I grew up. I am Yoruba. Yoruba is a tribe in West Africa with high concentration in southwestern Nigeria. Yoruba, the language spoken by the tribe, is one of three major languages in Nigeria and is spoken by close to twenty million people. The Yoruba language is people-friendly and relational. This is evident even in its greeting culture. Typically, a Yoruba person versed in the language will not express his opinions plainly but will season his speech with idioms, proverbs, paradoxes, and parables. These add richness to the language. In writing, he may also put some of his opinions “between the lines,” if only for plurality of interpretation.

The world of my childhood, especially as the son of a village elementary school teacher, was simple and unsophisticated. Some of the places where my father taught were Local Authority Primary Schools, which served an aggregate of villages and settlements. This gave him the privilege of farming to supplement his income. Such a world was close to what

could be described as a true community, except that it was not inhabited or run by perfect human beings. Mine was an environment rich in the scenery which tourists and journalists from the West would be delighted to photograph in support of their biased opinion of wild, uncivilized Africa.

As my culture came into contact with others, change was inevitable. I only wish that certain values and norms had been refined by stripping them of their pagan trappings. Unfortunately, that was not the case. But villages still bore a resemblance to typical Yoruba culture.

Back then, law and order were maintained in society by many forces, the most common force being fear and respect. For instance, if a chieftain or council of elders made a pronouncement, obedience was obligatory, if only out of self-preservation. To disobey was to invite trouble because the leaders were believed to hold power in trust for the common people. People also believed that even if a person was not caught for his wrongdoing by human authorities, God saw everything and would, in His due process of justice, punish the disobedient in some form during his lifetime or in the lives of his offspring. This fear of divine retribution kept many from wicked behaviour.

Control, security, and certain traditions were protected by taboos and superstitions. Nobody had to look over his own or anyone else's shoulders; the taboos kept him in check. Sometimes, the members of a group or society affected control by placing a curse on anyone who violated an agreement. Even if an individual covered his tracks and evaded detection, fear of inviting a curse was a sufficient deterrent for the majority.

For most everyday events this system kept society at peace—the method of placing a curse was not elaborate. Simply invoking the names of deceased ancestors and the

town's founders as witnesses was sufficient to make an agreement between residents sacred. Market women, for example, controlled product prices in this way. For serious issues, the market women bound themselves to an agreement by saying aloud something like this: "If any one of us does contrary to this mutual agreement, may she know her children's graves, (may she not know peace in her husband's house; may she toil but another eat the fruit of her labor). Let our ancestors and the founders of this land be witnesses and judges." The curses raised the stakes. One stood to lose more than could be gained by cheating.

Cultic groups, such as the hunters' association, kept their secrets by fetish rituals with more frightful consequences for disobedience. For serious communal matters, the village elders might break a *kola nut* and eat it, binding their covenant. Everyone who partook of the *kola* had, by that token, sworn to act as one body in concert with others. To betray trust carried adverse consequences.

It is not surprising therefore that even today some Nigerian pastors and denominational leaders use this "blessing and cursing" method to keep order and maintain control. Church leaders—and members under their leadership—obey instructions and conform to traditions not out of personal conviction or support for corporate policy but out of fear of falling under their leader's curse. For the same reason, the church members dare not speak their minds openly or voice a contrary opinion on issues in which they already know the leader's position.

The family is central in a Nigerian person's thinking and, for a woman, it sets her life's goals as well. Children are important for many reasons. Having many children and grandchildren is like an insurance policy against old age in a society that has no Social Security. These progeny support

and care for their elderly parents (and grandparents). Since no one could be sure how many children would survive infancy and how many children would outlive their parents, the more children a couple had, the better chance they had of securing survivors to bury them.

A male child for the couple meant that the husband's family name and traditions would be carried on, while the wife received admiration for bearing the family successor. For a woman, many children, especially male children, was a source of security, guaranteeing her position in her husband's family. Having many children and grandchildren was considered public evidence of God's blessing upon the couple. But in the long run, it was not quantity, but quality that mattered. Yorubas have several proverbs that suggest that one resourceful and dependable child is more to be desired than many disgraceful children. At the same time, having many children was not encouraged for poor couples who would not be able to adequately fend for them. And although polygamy was allowed, it was not the norm. The Yoruba saying, "*Iyawo kan, waha-la kan; iyawo pupo, wahala pupo,*" means, "one wife, one trouble; multiplied wives, multiplied troubles."

Being essentially an agrarian community in those days, having many children was also a way to ensure many farmhands. But now that agriculture is no longer the mainstay of the economy, and formal education or apprenticeship to a trade makes it impractical for children in their teenage years to be available on their parent's farm, couples are counseled to refrain from having many. "*Omo beere, osi beere*" means, "to have plenty children equals plenteous poverty."

Responsibilities in the home were clear-cut. A man's expectations of his wife generally included the ability to bear many children (especially male children), raise the

children, and cook meals. She must be devoted to the extended family, engage in an occupation such as trading, weaving, or selling farm produce, and, above all, show respect and obedience to her husband.

A woman could expect from her husband a housekeeping allowance, protection, shelter, provision for their children's upbringing and education, and, most of all, the display of a strong image symbolized by firmness and authority over the children.

Well-behaved children made the task of motherhood less strenuous. The father, as the authority figure, was to set the tone for discipline. If, for example, a mother announced to an erring child, "Your father is coming," a child was expected to check his misdeeds, conform his behavior, and, in extreme cases, cringe and run into hiding out of fear and respect for his father. To remain adamant was to show disrespect to his father. A man who couldn't rule his home and maintain order was not fit to be a leader in the community. However, being a part of a patriarchal society, a mother still took the blame for her child's misbehavior.

Divorce was rare—almost unknown in those days. When it happened, it was more a severance of ties between families than between couples. Some men could afford to have more than one wife, but many were monogamous. Polygamy was more often a symbol of affluence. Men who were not wealthy and had more than one wife received little sympathy for their family troubles over housekeeping and children.

Divorce was virtually unheard of because the marriage contract bound a person not only to a spouse, but also to a network of age-old friendships, people with shared identity, common history, and sometimes, sacred religious traditions.

In certain cases of arranged marriages, commitment preceded love. Marital love was expected to grow out of the bond of commitment and caring. Even if love did not result from the relationship, for many couples, the bad blood and disequilibrium that divorce would bring to the community or the stigma to personal reputation and family name was considered a worse catastrophe. You were likely to be more deeply concerned about the repercussions an action would have on your family and its name than on yourself.

A female who remained a virgin until marriage changed from the norm to an outdated, if praiseworthy, ideal. To be otherwise was tolerated and often excused for those advanced in age or those who lived in cities. But it is still an embarrassment for deeply religious families to find their daughter sleeping with her intended husband, or to learn that she is pregnant before her wedding day. Many churches and pastors today will not perform the wedding as a holy matrimony if the bride is expecting.

Life back then was closer to nature. It was a privilege to eat fruits and vegetables fresh from the farm. You never had to worry about pollutants. Drinking water came from streams, gently flowing rivers, or wells. Thanks to the body's immune system, you were able to combat many water-borne diseases. Treated water available from public faucets was not yet widespread in villages and suburbs. You could bet that after six to eight hours the water stored in your mother's clay pot was as cold as any from a refrigerator.

When night fell, oil lamps and kerosene lanterns lit houses. Battery-powered transistor radios brought news from around the world. This was also a point of socializing. On weekends, wagerers listened to the results of foreign football games they had gambled on. Winning or los-

ing did not matter much to them; they learned to mourn their losses over kegs of palm wine. The rest of us gathered around the radio for programs like the Saturday night music, riddles, jokes, and folktales.

My family lived for four years in the village school where I started my primary education. The whole village was comprised of not more than thirty families who occupied fifteen—or fewer—bungalows. Houses were built of mud walls, and roofing was of thatching or corrugated iron sheets. The school registered pupils from approximately twenty such hamlets of varying sizes.

My father had a particular way he whistled to call me if I was in a different part of the village. On hearing this, I responded with a loud “Sir!” and ran to him as fast as my legs could carry me. The interesting part was the way the whistling animated the entire village. Anyone in the village who heard him would call out my name in order to alert, locate, or awaken me. As other concerned villagers picked this up, my name echoed through the community. Until the people saw me running toward my father, they continually called my name: “Sunday! Sunday! Sunday!” No one in the village knew for sure what my father said with his whistle, but we conjectured that he was saying, “Olufemi, I’m calling!” I believe it was a sign of respect for the teacher that no one in the village whistled the tune to fool me into thinking that my father wanted me.

Through the systems called *aaro* and *owe*, farmers in the neighborhood assisted one another in major farming tasks like clearing, ridging, planting, or harvesting. These were means of using additional manhours provided by other farmers on a specific task and day. A group of farmers would do this in rotation among themselves, pooling

their physical resources. Where no such group existed, a farmer in dire need could ask a favor of his colleagues. In requesting a favor, or *owe*, he would invite his friends to help him on a certain fixed date for a specific task. On this particular day, the women prepared heavy meals for the workers. Six or more men working for at least seven hours on one individual farmer's plot equaled a lot of manhours. The camaraderie and cheerfulness with which they worked, and challenges posed to one another resulted in their working on large parcels of land for their colleague.

Esusu and *ajo* were the means by which one had access to a lump sum of money. *Esusu* was group contribution, while *ajo* was personal, regular savings. In *esusu*, a group of friends, neighbors, or colleagues would contribute a fixed amount of money on a weekly or monthly basis. Each week or month a different member received the collection. It was an exercise in discipline and mutual trust.

The *ajo* operated differently. Usually there was a contractor who was a well-known member of the community. The contractor went to the participators with a logbook to record a person's daily or weekly contribution. The amount was not fixed, and it depended on a person's own ability. The money was paid to the contributor at the end of the month, with a small contribution going to the contractor for his services. Literate individuals could countersign, and illiterate people could record each contribution they made by making a stroke on the wall of a room with a chalk or charcoal. Trust was the name of the game. A person might combine *ajo* with *esusu*.

Greeting is an important tradition to the Yorubas, and the Yoruba language is very rich in this. The courtesy of greeting displayed by a younger person to an older one is a sign of respect for authority. Among equals, it is a sign that

two people or two families are in harmony or are at least on speaking terms with one another.

There is a specific pleasantry, word, or phrase in Yoruba to express a greeting or good wish for every activity, occasion, event, or mishap you can think of. Some of these express a prayer for the person or occasion. For example, there is a specific word or phrase to greet a person who is sitting, standing, returning home, going out, working, waking up, going to bed, walking, relaxing, convalescing, cooking, eating, drinking, feasting, fasting, grieving, mourning, preaching, traveling, or newly wed.

Yorubas do not spend a lot of time in greeting as compared to other tribal groups. But it is typical when paths cross to greet one another courteously. Typically, the person of lower rank or who is younger makes the first move, to which the senior responds. The traditional courtesy expected of a well-brought up Yoruba is for a boy or man to fall prostrate with his chest touching the earth; and a girl or woman kneels to a parent, elderly person, or chieftain. Parents, elderly people, and rulers offer a blessing. Often, they use a person's *praise name* and add a few lines from that individual's *family praise verse*.

Every Yoruba child is given a praise name (something like a pet name), and it is typically three syllables. One's parents (or those higher in rank or age) use it on special occasions, especially when the individual has done something of which his family is proud. The family (or lineage) verse is a series of unending poetic lines (depending on how far back in history a person is able to trace his roots), recounting an individual's family: history, migrations, notable personalities, and achievements. The family verse connects a person to his history and the achievements of significant relatives in past generations.

At times a talking drummer or professional praise singer has researched well into your family history and begins to chant verses in praise of the worthy achievements of your ancestors, publicly acknowledging your good heritage and connecting you with the heroes of your family or clan. Psyched up, elated, and intoxicated with a feeling of self-importance, those who are naturally miserly have been found to lavish charity on the praise singer almost without realizing what they were doing.

By the same token, if you have to perform a feat and are vacillating or unsure of yourself, parents and family may call you by your praise name and begin to recite lines from your lineage verse to psyche you up. As they remind you of your stock, they challenge you to perform like your forefathers; they plead with you not to let down those conquerors whose blood runs in your veins. Believe me, at such moments, the adrenaline in your body rises significantly to empower you for the task.

Many people have criticized the Yorubas for their extravagant and ostentatious spending on musicians who sing their praises at public functions. Many preachers among the Yorubas have strongly denounced this practice. While I do not justify the extravagance or even the emotional appeal of the praise singers, I can excuse the elation of pride in ancestry.

I know many Christians object to anything cultural because of its idolatrous connotation. I have nothing but respect for those Christians who are strongly opposed to the use of family verse because it traces a person's identity not to the new life in Christ, but to idolatrous roots. I know Christians who have rewritten their lineage verse in a way that gives praise to God and reflects their new identity as

Christians. Some lineage verses sing the praise of the family deity, and some actually sound like incantations or invoking of ancestral spirits. In some instances, judged by the frenzied emotional response, one may infer a possession by an ancestral spirit rather than a rush of adrenalin.

All this aside, the lineage verse is no more than oral history. Unfortunately, the aged people who are really versed in it are dying. Many elderly people today know only a few of the lines.

I can hear my mother's voice greeting me by my praise name, reciting a line from our family verse: "*Pele, Akanbi ori, omo Kulodo n'Gbori ile.*"

Balogun's Compound

Our family home, when I was growing up, consisted of a single row of adjoining rooms, each opening onto a corridor. A room or two took care of the privacy needs of a nuclear family. The portion of corridor in front of each room served that family as kitchen, dining room, living room, and recreational space. It was customary in the 1950s for a big clay pot that held water for general use to be placed near the cooking area. Because my father was a schoolteacher assigned to small towns and villages, we were often away, spending little time in our family home. But our residence was there for us, and we enjoyed returning on holidays.

My family was not blessed with property and material things—just a roof over our heads. But we were a family.

My parents separated in 1961 and were re-united in 1969. My father took another wife in 1962 and that union was blessed with five children, in addition to my mother's six children. Because the number kept increasing, every

three or four years (until the mid 1970s), it was difficult to know the exact number of people in my family.

When my father died in 1986, barely a month after my wedding, he left no estate for his children. But he invested in our education. One of my uncles echoed to me the remark made by several people: “Your father did not build any physical house in his lifetime, but he built lives. He trained you.” Then this uncle urged me to build a house in my hometown. I am hoping for the day when I will be able to do so, dedicating the house to the memory of my father.

Besides training his own children, my father helped to build and develop many lives. Being a primary school teacher for almost forty years, he molded many children when they were young, giving them a solid foundation. This prepared his students for various careers.

Our compound was a cluster of connected houses. All units were interconnected by a common open space, a main entrance, and rear exit which could be closed. In those days, the enclosed open space served to dry farm produce or the laundry. A raised, rectangular platform, on which mats were placed, was used to sun-dry farm products, protecting them from the domestic livestock: sheep, goats, chickens, and other pets which roamed the neighborhood.

The eldest male ruled the compound. Every adult person in the compound, before going out to the farm, school, or workplace, visited each block and greeted all the residents. The routine helped not only to check up on the neighbors, but also showed when relationships were strained between certain individuals. When that happened, and an individual avoided certain rooms or people during his morning rounds, those who noticed it called the elders to effect reconciliation.

The compound, like any rural setting, was a buffering ecosystem of its own. It had its checks and balances and built-in support. For example, if, in the middle of preparing a meal for your family, you suddenly realized you had run out of salt or had forgotten to buy an ingredient when you went grocery shopping, you did not need to panic. What were neighbors for? You could run to a neighbor three rooms (or three houses) away for a spoonful of salt or whatever else you needed.

And if you had some unexpected guests, your anxiety over what to serve them might prove unnecessary. As soon as your visitors were settled, neighbors might bring special meals, delicacies, and drinks for you to share with your guests. If your plight went unnoticed, you could send your child to a neighbor through the back door for a portion of the meal the neighbor just prepared. Neighbors considered it a privilege to share in this way.

Should you just return from a trip, mothers and elderly women extended hospitality. They brought or sent food and fruits to help quench your thirst and satisfy your hunger. Of course, you wouldn't forget to send small gifts from your trip to your neighbors. If you failed in this simple gesture of generosity and thoughtfulness expected from a mature adult, you would be painting a bad picture of yourself.

If your child went into convulsions in the middle of the night, before you called for help, your neighbors who heard the unusual noise from your quarters would show up at your door. After assessing the problem, some might rush home to fetch a family herbal remedy; some might volunteer (or be sent) to another part of the compound to invite a specialist in handling such a crisis. And there would be those who had the "how to" skills to manage the situation themselves.

Generally, the elderly men constituted the authority for settling family feuds and marital disputes. The elderly women were midwives who delivered babies, especially in the days before maternity clinics were staffed by trained nurses or midwives.

Anyone who was older than you were, even by one day, was your senior. That person was expected to behave with greater maturity and take responsibility for your safety. That individual was, therefore, deserving of your respect and deference. Despite this, Yorubas have this saying: “*Agba ko d’ogbon*,” which means that age is not synonymous with or equal to wisdom.

It was your responsibility as an adult to correct any youngster in the neighborhood, especially those you knew personally or whose parents or guardian you knew. You might even report a child to his parents or guardian for further disciplinary actions if you thought it necessary.

Everyone was considered family, but you were exhorted to be careful with your trust. My mother repeatedly told me, “Even Jesus said, ‘*Beware of men*’” (Matthew 10:17). And she recounted story after story of bad things that happened to religious individuals at the hands of wicked people. Then she concluded that, although those religious people feared God, they suffered misfortune because they failed to beware of men.

In terms of the landscape, the moon left some refreshing memories on the children. The neighborhood children always looked forward to the full moon to play under its light and listen to the elders retell stories and fables.

The national highway that passed through the town ran behind our compound. Across this main road on the opposite side of our compound is the facility of the renowned

First Baptist Church, Fiditi. The easiest way to give directions was to ask a person visiting our home to follow the road opposite the church entrance. Nobody needed a street or house number to find our residence. Such things wouldn't help you. One only needed to ask someone for the location of the Oje house. But getting to the house would not be easy, even if you were standing close to our house, because whoever you asked for directions would likely request a hint of who you were and of your intention to visit. If, by his judgment, you had failed to give satisfactory reason for the cause of your enquiry, he would either fake ignorance or be kind enough to direct you to a different part of the town. Then he would rush to us and give a full description of a stranger who had asked for our residence, and he would also add he had done us the favor of sending him somewhere else.

This is the same game you play when you screen your calls through a caller ID device or through a receptionist. Your colleague picks up the receiver and asks: "Hello! Who is this? With whom did you wish to speak? May I put you on hold for a moment?" Then he consults with you, after which he returns to the receiver and says, "I'm afraid he is not available right now. May I take a message?"

The Oje Family

Relationships in my home, and even in the compound, were not always joyous and without suspicion. Even though there were generally no open quarrels or heated exchanges, rifts still existed. This was perceptible more on the level of attitudes than behavior. But one common bond we all shared was the "Oje" prefix to our names.

"Oje," an ancestral worship, is believed to be the incarnation of the dead. My forefathers were great warriors. Our

compound was named the “Balogun’s” because my family holds the chieftaincy title of commander-in-chief of the army of our township. The office was equivalent to an army general’s who led military campaigns. The town had battled a tribal group that brought the paraphernalia of *Egungun*, one of the gods the tribal group brought to the war-front to assist them in combat. Believing the *Egungun* to be the incarnation of the dead, they invoked the presence and spirits of their dead ancestors to fight for them. But they lost the battle and their god, the “Oje” (or “masquerade”) was conquered, its regalia taken to my ancestor’s home as a trophy.

The “Oje” became for my forefathers not only a booty of war, but also (supposedly) an object of worship and identity, as reflected in family names. I was told my grandfather was named “Ojewale” to commemorate the bringing home of this deity/trophy. Ojewale literally means “the Oje (or masquerade) has come home.” I said the idol supposedly became an object of worship because, for all I know, it was never worshiped. It certainly is not now. But its historical significance is a symbol of pride, representing entertainment and cultural symbols in the town.

I have nothing but deep respect for the born-again Christians in our compound who sought ways to destroy this cultural-religious heritage and so rid the family of any taint of idolatry. I also have deep respect for my siblings who, out of religious conviction, dropped the “Oje” prefix in their last names to reflect their new identities in Christ.

Names are very important in Nigerian culture; they are laden with meaning. They confer both meaning and identity. A person’s name reveals a lot about circumstances surrounding the birth. Much thought goes into choosing or coining names.

My parents were married for a few years before my mother was able to conceive and give birth. I was their first child. They sought medical and spiritual help during their time of waiting. It was a real miracle for the family when I was born. My father told my mother in the hospital before she was discharged, “We shall call him Oluwafemi.” Oluwafemi means “The Lord loves me.” My parents acknowledged my birth as a testimony and token of God’s love for them (and for me, too).

I was born on a Sunday (October 12, 1952). Since Sunday is a hallowed day, the day of the week became one of my names. Until I entered high school, my family, neighbors, and peers called me “Sunday”; only my parents called me Oluwafemi. I believe that name was a constant reminder to them that this child would not have been born but for the grace of God. And for me, it is a joy to hear my name called—a constant reminder that God loves even me. In general, I am known as Michael, but my wife refers to me as Oluwafemi, an endearing name.

During the annual *Egungun* festival in my hometown (Fiditi in Oyo State, Nigeria), many residents look forward to seeing our *Danafojura* regaled in its multicolored costume, bearing its sword, and followed by a band of drummers giving it praise. During the festival, it can be seen making its rounds, dancing in the streets, collecting charities, and saying prayers for its benefactors as it goes from house to house of families and friends. *Dana* is one of the town’s three biggest masquerades.

The talking drummers play a prominent role in setting the mood for a peaceful or tumultuous outing with their beat and rhythm. They are usually warned not to incite the *Dana* to fight a rival *Egun*. If the nature of the praise

singing of the drummers is warlike, the temptation will be for the *Dana* to attempt to establish supremacy against the *Oyilaluba*, the town chieftain's *Egun*, which does not carry a sword. It is for this purpose that the *Dana*'s sword has been soldered and sealed in its sheath.

The *Egun* is a person, generally a male, covered from head to toe in the masquerade costume in order to hide his identity. Such a one also speaks with a croaking voice and sometimes moves in an uncharacteristic manner to further conceal his personal identity. Traditionally, the *Egun* is believed to be the reincarnation of the dead. Many of the *Eguns* today are for entertainment and cultural displays. But some are still deeply a fetish and require some rituals at their shrines before their outings.

There is the story of one *Egun* in a town that was run over by a car. The driver of the car was charged with murder. Whether factual or hearsay, I do not know, but it makes an interesting story. Because of his apparent wealth, the hapless driver secured the services of a clever attorney. The attorney was said to have asked the plaintiff to tell the court what the *Egunguns* were believed to be. "Visitors from the underworld," was the complainant's own admission. Turning to the judge, the attorney said, "My lord, if the *Egunguns* are from the underworld, as is widely believed, and as the plaintiff said in your presence, how could my client be accused of killing a person who is already dead? Can the dead die a second time?" The driver went away—free.

One of the "Oje" families in my house is ostracized by the others. The suspicion was that their mother had been a witch who passed down the sorcery to her daughters, but they were shunned mainly because they just didn't get along with the rest.

When my family was home for Christmas and New Year's in 1959, an incident that happened was kept secret from the children (and public) and was discussed only in whispers. I was seven years old at the time, my sister was four, and my youngest brother was barely three months old. I caught a bad cough, but even with treatment, did not improve. Soon my sister caught the cough. No amount of medication helped us. We were literally coughing our lungs out. Finally, my baby brother began to cough. Concluding that the weather at home was not conducive to our health, our parents planned to terminate the family holiday and return to the village where my father was then teaching.

An old woman, the mother of this now-ostracized Oje family, had not been seen for hours. The children assumed she had gone to visit neighbors without telling anyone. But when evening dragged into night, the family grew worried. They searched but could find no trace of her whereabouts. Then one of the children remembered seeing her mother go in the back yard to have her bath. The woman had carried a bucket half-filled with water for her wash. No one recalled seeing her come out to get dressed.

Half fearful, they opened the door to the backyard and found the old woman sprawled on the floor, practically naked, muttering. She was unable to stand. The children guessed she had fallen, probably because she had more water in her bucket than her feeble body could support.

When the old woman fell, no one was around to help her. No one had needed to visit the backyard, and no one had heard her cry for help. She was reported to say something like: "Will this baby be my undoing? I killed—nothing happened to me. I crippled—I inflicted—with an incurable disease, nothing happened to me. I cursed—with misfortune; nothing

happened to me. I attacked Sunday and Toyosi [my sister] with cough, but nothing happened to me. But this Ayo [my three-month-old brother] is too hard for me to handle. This baby is the fishbone in my throat. Will this small child be my undoing?”

It was an embarrassing confession, if that’s what it was. Her children locked her in her room to prevent her strange confession from leaking into the public. They prevented relatives from visiting her. Within days, the old woman was dead.

There may have been a scientific explanation for her behavior. If she fell and hit her head against a wall, suffered brain damage or spinal injury, or was unconscious too long, she could have imagined events that never occurred, afflicting her conscience with guilt. On the other hand, she may have been punishing herself for evil thoughts she had entertained against others. Could it be she was paranoid, or hallucinating, resulting from the combination of her age and the fall? No medical doctor or psychiatrist attended to her, and no one performed an x-ray, autopsy, or any other diagnostic test. All I know, and my recollection has been supported by my mother’s, is that my siblings and my coughing episodes, which had not responded to treatment, suddenly disappeared when the old woman died. It is possible the cough had simply run its course or finally responded to medication. Or maybe something in our environment made children of our age susceptible to the cough. Who knows?

Because of our recovery, my family’s holidays were not cut short and we stayed as originally planned. We stayed also to participate in the arrangements for the woman’s funeral and burial.

Chapter Eight



AN UNCLE OF CONCERN

One of my uncles who lived in the family house had three children: a son, his first child, and two daughters. If you were looking for an upright, considerate, religious person, you would find it all in my uncle. Yet very few people have suffered as unfairly as he. Because of a guinea worm infection in one of his legs, he had an open sore that never totally healed. For all the years I knew him—from 1959 when I was seven until he died in 1990—he had this infection. He dragged his swollen left leg after the right, always putting the right foot forward first. The open sore was a real discomfort, and it constantly oozed. My uncle was a comparatively successful, but definitely not wealthy, cocoa and coffee farmer. In addition to his own portion of the family farmland, he was custodian for the property of female family members who had been married or those men who, like my father, were in professions requiring them to travel. My uncle was also a professional talking drummer, which made him invaluable for local entertainment.

My uncle's wife was an energetic, hard-working woman, but she was mentally slow. She fantasized like a child, taking pleasure in her own world of daydreams and make-believe. I don't know when or how this condition came upon her. I know she was limited in mathematical ability, but she managed to hire herself out as a manual laborer. She was exceptionally physically strong. Because of her limited mental capacities, those who hired my aunt frequently exploited her.

My uncle and aunt's last daughter didn't crawl, walk, or even stand until she was more than three years old. At the time when children her age were running and playing in the neighborhood, she sat in one place or was carried around. She was also overweight. One time, my mother insisted she was going to make my cousin walk, a feat that herbalists and the local pharmacist had not achieved. My mother bought a locally-made walker constructed out of wood. She stood my cousin against the walker, placing the child's palms on the handle, and pushed her along the corridor.

My mother disregarded the direction in which my cousin's knees, ankles, or feet were spread or dragging. The girl cried, but my mother paid no attention. Often, her parents and neighbors would leave the scene when they could no longer stand her crying or even the sight of this training. My mother planned a training schedule. Few neighbors who responded to my cousin's shrieks were able to watch the sessions for any length of time. I couldn't stand it long, either. Family members and neighbors were critical of my mother, referring to her behind her back as "heartless." But my mother did not give up. Relatives and friends pleaded with her privately to leave the child alone and spare herself the stigma of a bad name, but my mother did not listen. When my mother had a mission, no amount of opposition or

pleading could stop her. Besides, few people were brave enough to confront my mother.

In the course of time, my cousin began to show signs that she could walk like any other child. As people noticed her improvement, they came around during a session to offer encouragement to both trainer and trainee. Eventually, that girl walked and ran without any trace of defect. I would say it was a miracle. Local medical professionals had done all they could and failed. My mother was vindicated. In all fairness, my uncle and aunt were extremely grateful to my mother, and family members and neighbors alike commended her for her patience. Few would dare to attempt what she did and stick with it.

My uncle's two daughters were sent to live with relatives in Lagos, then capital of Nigeria. They both dropped out of elementary school and married men who were also school dropouts. Neither girl was in a position to support herself or her family, nor did either show signs of caring—by visit or provision—for their father in his old age. They never returned for a visit after leaving their parents for Lagos.

In those days, raising a child in Nigeria (or specifically among the Yorubas) was an obligation of the extended family, although it remained the primary responsibility of the parents. It was an accepted practice to send a child to a wealthier relative, one who lived in a big city or who could offer better opportunities than the parents. Any child who was too playful or too difficult for the parents to control would be sent to live with a relative or family friend who was thought to be capable of enforcing boundaries. Sometimes a child was sent to live with a relative out of consideration for the family member. If a relative was single, widowed, handicapped, barren, or needed help, families sent

their children to that person to provide companionship and assistance. Otherwise, it was the wealth or better environment of the relative that prompted the parents.

Needless to say, this system was not without its complications (hence its subsequent breakdown). An adage in my language, “*Olowo kan otosi mefa, otosi ni gbogbo won,*” means that one rich person in the midst of six poor ones creates a bunch of paupers.

The beauty and complication of the extended family system is in the interdependence and generational indebtedness it fosters. Because of this, the successful person in any family in most cases would have been raised or supported by an extended family other than his own. That individual is, in turn, indebted not just to the people who raised him, but to the extended family network; to younger ones he or she would be responsible for rearing.

Unfortunately, many relatives abuse the wards placed in their charge. They use them more as household help than anything. When my father went to Teacher Training College in 1957, I was sent to live with an aunt in Lagos with the understanding that she would enroll me in school to start my primary education. But I was not enrolled in school. While my aunt’s children of my own age were attending school, I was the unpaid helper both in her home and in her food-vending business.

My uncle’s oldest son, Ade, left town after completing elementary school to live with an older aunt in Lagos. She was to provide board for him while he served an apprenticeship in a trade or profession. My cousin first tried electrical maintenance, then switched to tailoring. In a short while, he became a successful and well-established tailor. He was so good at his craft that he supplied department stores with his designs. He

was the envy of more experienced people in his profession.

He rented a large apartment, which he furnished lavishly, reflecting his newly acquired taste, affluence, and status. Soon, Ade provided shelter to many relatives. Because of the way he dressed, carried himself, and the kind of gifts he lavished on relatives during his vacation at home, he stood out. Things were going well for him.

In 1973, my cousin Ade brought his father to Lagos for a couple of months so that my uncle could receive better medical treatment for his leg. By 1975, my cousin made plans to introduce his fiancée to his parents.

Motorcycles were the craze among young men and professionals at that time in Nigeria. Cousin Ade bought a big motorcycle, which also served to deliver his products.

Sometime in 1975, news came home of cousin Ade's motorcycle accident, which resulted in one of his legs being put in a cast. Two weeks after Ade's accident, my younger sister Toyosi, a born-again Christian, died of tuberculosis. She was only twenty, a brilliant student.

Cousin Ade couldn't come home to be with the rest of the family because of his leg. He sent word that he would visit when he got better. Barely two weeks later, while standing at a street corner with his leg still in a cast, Ade was hit by a vehicle and crushed to death. Ade, too, was in his twenties.

Why Ade? He was the most promising of my uncle's children. At the time of his death, he was making plans to sell his motorcycle and buy a van for his business. His wedding plans were in motion, and he was planning a visit home. But the family reunion was not to be.

And why my uncle? The light in his life was suddenly quenched, just like that! Already, the sore on his leg prevented him from going to the farm or to parties where he

might earn a living from drumming. And now, a man who would have very likely been nursed and taken care of by his son became dependent on sympathetic neighbors.

And why did we, under the same roof, have to mourn the deaths of two young people in the space of a month? The townspeople had their own explanations. There were whispers that it was the handiwork of our enemies, of witches and sorcerers. If their explanations were true, what did my uncle do to anger these enemies?

Not long after Ade's death, his mother was invited to Lagos for a short visit with one of her sisters. This was considered a healthy step in the grieving process. But it turned out that her sister had an ulterior motive. My uncle's wife never returned home. Reports said that she was made to do all types of labor in exchange for room and board and hand-me-down clothes. Even though her daughters also lived in Lagos, they had almost no contact with her. My aunt died a few years after my uncle's death.

My uncle found solace in God's sovereignty without bitterness against real or imaginary enemies. Yoruba people believe that though thousands of powerful enemies surround you, if God does not deliver you into their hands, their effort will be in vain. Yorubas believe in *ayanma* (predestination); no one can control the hand of destiny or fate.

My uncle died a religious person and was buried in the church cemetery. But what I cannot get out of my mind is that he wouldn't have suffered or died as he did if his son had not been killed in that accident. If I did not know the questions to ask in 1975, or if then I considered it inappropriate to question God, my faith development over the years has now freed me from those culturally-imposed restraints.

For me, the real crisis is not when we mere mortals accuse or take the liberty to question the “Immortal, Invisible, God-only-wise,” but when the tables are turned and the Almighty God poses questions to us and demands answers of us human beings.

I am naturally more logical than emotional. And, knowing who I am, an answer that satisfies me one day may be the seed for questioning on another. But as a Christian I am learning to put a period (or an exclamation mark!) after anything the word of God directly addresses and to walk by faith in areas of life where Scripture seems silent.

The truth is I don't demand answers, although I search for them. I'm simply grateful for the liberty to question. Questioning may produce satisfactory answers that are, in turn, subjects of further questioning. When we see our heavenly Father face to face, our present knowledge, which is in part, will be complete, and our questions will be answered. That is when I hope to receive closure.

Chapter Nine



A STORY WITHIN A STORY

I know from pastoral caregiving in the hospital that patients often tell long and winding stories, that have little bearing on their present crisis, for various reasons. Some are in denial, and story-telling is the way they avoid talking about their problems. Others talk about the past in order to draw inner strength and make meaning of the present. And still other patients talk about the past because it is less frightening to them than the present. Stories also divert them from that which is uncomfortable. In this respect, the human brain is a powerful ally. The brain can suppress or even block memories of trauma. This tends to make the past less worrisome. They may talk about the “good old days” of the past, when, in fact, life was never easy.

Terminally ill patients often tell extensive stories about their lives, sifting through them and taking inventory: the good and bad decisions, the things they condemn themselves for, and which they give themselves praise. In the process, they may validate life or may count it a waste. As

they go through this life review, it often appears they are trying to elicit comment from the listener, but in reality, it is a dialogue with their own selves. At other times, they may want the listener to play the role of priest and pronounce a blessing or forgiveness.

Back to Roots

In the process of relating my uncle's story, things got out of hand, and what was meant to have been his story became my own. In telling the story, I took an emotional journey home to my roots. It is true that one never really appreciates what he has until he loses it or faces the possibility of losing it for good. I found the reminiscing met a need in my life that possibly could not have been met by any other means. There is something about recalling childhood that makes life invigorating and humbling.

Elijah, the great prophet of God who prayed down fire from heaven and killed the prophets of Baal to rid Israel of idol worship, was led out of his paralyzing fear and depression and into restoration by taking a trip to "Horeb, the mount of God," (1 Kings 19:8). Mount Horeb was a place of spiritual, cultural, and historical significance for any Israelite or prophet of Jehovah. It was at Horeb that Moses stood before the "*God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*" (Exodus 3:6) to receive the law, the divine constitution for Israel. At Horeb, the Israelites saw the mountain in smoke; they saw fire, an earthquake, thunder, and lightning as God extended His covenant. To get to Horeb, Elijah walked past the wilderness, the honeymoon place between Israel and Jehovah.

What other site would a Jew visit in his hour of need to reconnect his roots and find renewal for his spirit? At Horeb, Elijah was made to witness the fire, thunder, earth-

quake, and to hear the “*still small voice*” of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (1 Kings 19). He left the place a new person, recharged and determined.

In the same vein, when opposition was mounting against Jesus in the last couple of days of His earthly life, He revisited the Jordan River, “*the place where John at first baptized; and there He abode*” (John 10:40). In the heat of the opposition, Jesus went to a “*country near to the wilderness*” (John 11:54), the place of His temptation and forty days of fasting. Jesus’ ministry was deeply rooted in Jordan and the wilderness.

At Jesus’ baptism, John the Baptist officially presented Him to the world when he pointed to Him and said, “*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). Jesus’ baptism at Jordan was also His public commissioning, as God publicly declared, “*This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” At the same time also, “*the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him*” (Matthew 3:13-17). After this public declaration and commissioning, “*Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil*” (Matthew 4:1). Jesus defeated Satan in every temptation.

What better places on earth could Jesus have visited for rejuvenation than the Jordan River and the wilderness? With the cross—the culmination of His earthly ministry—clearly in view, Jesus sought connection to the spiritual roots of His ministry. He had once defeated the devil in the wilderness; He would again confront him and defeat him on the cross. Jesus had heard the voice of the Father at His baptism giving public testimony to His Sonship; the Father would give another public affirmation (John 12:27-32).

I never considered myself a tribal person or thought seriously about my tribal heritage until I found myself on the other side of the Atlantic, thousands of miles away from my country. Away from the familiar, I was a subject of racial stereotyping because of my skin color, often assessed at interviews by those who lacked sensitivity to other cultures outside their own, and, not infrequently, embarrassed because of my accent. This situation forced me to think seriously of my tribal identity and cultural heritage. In the process, I found that a lot of what I had taken for granted were honored and honorable traditions in my community.

Christians are complete in Christ (Colossians 2:10). Therefore, we do not need any additional information or practice from any other religion or philosophy to supplement the work Christ has done for our forgiveness and peace with God. But our completeness in Christ does not make us into little islands; rather, it grafts us into community. Unfortunately, we often gloss over the fact that Christianity is relational in its inworking and outworking. It is the restoration of our broken relationships with God, with others, with self, and with the environment.

Yes! All need for significance, belonging, security, and acceptance are fulfilled in our identity and relationship to God, but God has also created us as relational beings. God designed certain human relationships and institutions (such as marriage, family, home, church) to be the expression of our completeness in Christ. When these human relationships and institutions fail to provide support, as often they do, our relationship with God does not become a substitute. Rather, God comforts and strengthens us and heals our brokenness.

By design, our physical, psychological, and social needs are to be met by the people God places in our lives: family,

friends, neighbors, employers, coworkers, teachers, pastors, doctors, and church members. Where a need remains unmet, God's grace enables us to live without it. In spite of Adam's unbroken communion with God, he was lonely. Adam's need for a companion of like-mind was met when God created a woman, Eve, for him; it was not met by increased fellowship with God.

A recurring theme for me, especially since coming to the United States, is the need for connection to people. Unfortunately, building interpersonal relationships is my growing area. Once in a while, I set personal goals to build and maintain connection, but I need to continually work on it. By nature I tend to be a lone ranger, though I desire to reach out and be connected. Apart from my in-laws with whom my wife and I stayed, we arrived in this country with no address of a church, ministry, or organization under which to serve or which to use as springboard. I kept exploring and hoping for God to open doors, but He seemed to be on a different timetable. Some days I was happy that I was not spared the pain and frustration of job-searching and the often futile efforts at forming relationships. Other days, I felt isolated and disappointed.

My life does not have only spiritual and emotional components. As a person, I am a social being who needs connection and relationships. Embedded in my person as a new immigrant were cultural orientations that were put together by God to make me a unique person. Just as my physical body requires physical nurturing, my psycho-social also needs tending to. Uprooted and transplanted from my comfort zone of over forty years, I was like a fish that once glided unhindered in the sea but then was placed in an aquarium, banging its head against a glass wall with every move-

ment in its new, artificial environment. Visiting the past was helpful for me to keep alive the hope and vision of a brighter tomorrow. I never dreamed that I would become a permanent resident of the United States.

My story with its glorious, sometimes ugly, and romantic past in untold volumes, is not out of sync with my completion in Christ. God was a part of my story even before I knew Him. Even the recounting of my pre-conversion life story helped me to get in touch with who I am and to be more aware of the grace and favor of God in my life. I can confidently say, “’Tis grace that brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home” (“Amazing Grace” by John Newton). *“I know, O Lord, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortals as they walk cannot direct their steps”* (Jeremiah 10:23 NRSV). *“Our steps are made firm by the Lord, when He delights in our way”* (Psalm 37:23 NRSV).

Without diminishing my completeness in Christ, I have found it empowering to take this mental and emotional trip to my roots. It was a trip to the setting where I was accepted and valued for who I was, without discrimination or rejection, to my mother tongue—the language of my subconscious conversations. In my imagination I was face to face with my mother who put her hand on me and welcomed me home. Home is where a person is grounded in love, care, and community.

There is benefit in remembering what we were and where we came from. As a Yoruba proverb says, a river that forgets its source will dry up sooner rather than later.

I had intended to write a couple of paragraphs to provide the environment in which my uncle lived as a preface to his story, but it turned out to be my story. My uncle’s

story is really a story within my story, and my story is a story within the story of God's redemptive plan. In February 1999, I shared a message with a church group in London comprised of Nigerian immigrants. I realized that many of these immigrants were in London for various reasons, doing all sorts of jobs. I titled the message (which I admit probably spoke to me more than it did them) "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands." The message was about how God moves individuals and nations to achieve His purpose, regardless of the immediate circumstances accountable for their displacement.

I used illustrations from both the Old and New Testaments. Rarely were the Israelites' movements peaceful. Sometimes, they had to move because they were acting rebellious, such as when God confused speech and scattered human inhabitants into all the parts of the earth (Genesis 11). There was the enslavement of a nation yet unborn and its subsequent release (the Exodus) after four centuries (Genesis 15:13-18). There was the result of sibling rivalry which led to Joseph being sold as a slave into Egypt (Genesis 45); famine, such as when Jacob and his family left Canaan and came to Egypt to be supported by Joseph, the minister of agriculture (Genesis 46); wars, as in the example of Israel's Babylonian captivity (Lamentations 1); persecution of the church, which led to the scattering of the disciples after the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 8:1-8); unfavorable political edict against Jews, which made Aquila and Priscilla leave Italy for Corinth (Acts 18:1,2). All these took on different meaning when cast in the backdrop of the story of God's redemption. As stories within *the* Story, they were used for the furtherance of God's purposes.

In Amos 9:7, God took responsibility for the drifts, dispersions, and movements of nations. God chided Israel,

“Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?” (Amos 9:7).

Whatever apparent reasons occasioned their dispersion, God was behind the resettlements of the Israelites, Ethiopians, Philistines, Syrians, and other nations. For these reasons, I boldly declared to the London congregation that God, who has the whole world in His hand, has a plan for each of them.

I centered my exhortation to those Nigerians on Jeremiah 29:11:

For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.

If they made the best of the opportunities they had in London, they would one day thank God for their sojourn there. It was a word I needed to hear more than anyone else.

I thank God I am able to see the big picture; it is a story within *the Story*.

Chapter Ten



WHAT A FRIEND I HAVE IN FAILURE

This is a confessional. This book is the result of three failures. First, a major Christian publishing house considered a proposal for the manuscript titled *God and Suffering*. After about two months of waiting, I got a letter saying that they had decided not to accept it.

I was angry, but I decided to channel my anger toward a productive end. I was determined to find what would interest a publisher. My guess was stories and human interests. So I began to tap into my own stories. I first thought of seasoning the original manuscript with human interest, which might just increase the size. This book is the result of that effort. In the process, the quest shifted from what would please a publisher to what would be my own authentic voice. It is true that life's reverses are God's way of moving us forward.

Alyne Coy, a retired college administrator and colleague in a unit of clinical pastoral education, and John Rose, MD, both read the initial manuscript. They encouraged me to look for other publishers rather than change the material. I

want to thank Alyne from the bottom of my heart for her free editorial services. She read each chapter of this work in its developmental stages.

The second failure had to do with the judgment of a local chapter of Association of Clinical Pastoral Education Consultation that reviewed my work midway through my course. In the committee's opinion, I was so unfit for the job of a pastoral caregiver, they advised me to look for ministry elsewhere within my own tradition. That was devastating, to say the least. To many insiders in the profession, that committee went beyond its powers. It was supposed to be a consultation with senior colleagues pointing out the growth areas to budding professional chaplains. That was in February 1998.

I had submitted, along with a clinical case study, copies of my self-evaluations and supervisor's evaluations of the first two units, a sample of my verbatim pastoral interview with patients, and a current autobiographical history. Based on these materials, the presenter wrote his comments which he made available to the committee and gave them to me about an hour before I appeared before them. In fairness to the presenter and the committee, I may have cornered myself in my self-evaluations. I regarded my self-evaluation as a dialogue with myself and, as a reader of this work may have observed, I often throw caution to the wind in self-disclosure. Any reader who was not a part of the group dynamics in which the interactions, challenges, and growing processes I put on paper took place, could read my words out of context. Coupled with this, I rarely show my best at interviews.

My supervisor for the first two units was Rabbi Mychal Springer. Dr. Richard Bennink, my new supervisor for the third unit which was about to start, was present with the

committee as an observer. He was not to contribute or comment. He was dismissed before the committee deliberated. Both Mychal and Richard were unhappy with the committee's assessment. They believed I was misunderstood and misrepresented. They promised to raise the issue in appropriate quarters. Richard, who observed the exchanges, suspected a cultural undertone. I fired back with a two-page disclaimer, rejecting the committee's verdict and giving my own side of the story. The committee's report and, hopefully, my response, stands in my record. Richard committed himself to work with me to "unpack" the committee's report and its effects. Although I tried not to let it affect me in the performance of my work or ministry, it kept dogging me. I have not been the same person since that February.

My supervisor in the fourth unit, Dr. Margot Hover, often challenged her students to assert themselves and claim their authority as chaplain in their respective units. I believe that this work is another way I am heeding Margot's call and responding to her challenge to claim my authority and find my space. In the same breath, I seasoned several other works with insight and interaction with patients, partly to affirm and validate my pastoral work in the hospital.

I am immensely grateful to my supervisors who believed in me and to the presenter and the committee that declared me unfit for the work of a pastoral care provider. Even though it was not intentional, this is my defense, my apology. What a friend I have in failure!

The third downfall was my failure to secure a position as a hospital or prison chaplain, associate pastor of a local church, or counselor in a para-church organization at the end of my chaplaincy residency in August 1998. To keep my skills sharp and current, I volunteered one day a week as a

chaplain in a hospital. For employment, I accepted a job as an in-house security guard at a retail outlet.

Here I was, with graduate-level academic degrees and professional qualifications to my name, doing a job for which I was required to tender only my high school diploma. I stood guard at the door for eight hours a day, five days a week, for a salary just slightly more than minimum wage. Of course, I had plenty of time for reflection and self-pity, especially in the mornings when the store was slow. And, as someone once said, “A writer is writing even when he is not writing.” Fortunately, a pocket notebook and a pen are essential tools for a guard on duty. The result was two manuscripts: this book and *The Ministry of Caregiving*. It was my desire that my withdrawal from the glamour of pulpit ministry and the one-on-one emotional engagement of hospital chaplaincy would help me reclaim the voice and freedom of an outsider.

I had taken the job of security guard as a temporary arrangement to keep me from staying home jobless or roaming the streets in search of employment that might not come soon enough. I had not expected that I would do it for more than a couple of weeks, but it stretched into many months because, after almost three years after emigrating to the United States, I couldn't find a job that fit my training, gifts, and experience. But God's grace enabled me to turn the venom of self-pity against itself.

Standing at the door and wondering what was going on, I often encouraged myself by bringing to mind the experiences of some faithful person in the Bible for whom it seemed that life was “put on hold” and how God came through in the end. I thought of Moses who, by his natural upbringing, was an apparent heir to Pharaoh's throne. But

he found himself in self-imposed exile, feeding his father-in-law's sheep in the Midian desert for forty years. This time proved to be preparatory for what God had called him to be and do.

I often thought of David, too. Acting under God's directive, the prophet of God anointed David to rule over God's people. In spite of this public attestation, David was a fugitive for more than a decade, living like an outlaw, running for his life from Saul. But in the fullness of time, he ascended the throne that had been promised him.

Another of my favorites was Joseph. In spite of God-given dreams for leadership, Joseph found himself thrown into the bottom of a pit and later cast into prison. While in prison, Joseph interpreted the dreams of two inmates of high standing in Egypt, Pharaoh's chief baker and chief butler. He thought he was nearing the end of his ordeal with the promise from the butler to mention Joseph to the Pharaoh. But the butler forgot all about Joseph for two years. When the time was ripe, God brought him from the prison to the palace.

An editorial in *Discipleship Journal* (January/February 1999) had the title, "What a Friend I Have in Failure." I think the editor meant failure as a friend, but with the "F" in friend capitalized, she might be giving a twofold message which was the way I understood her writing.

First, we can see God is the "Friend We Have in Failure." Truly, we have God when we fail. Family and friends may desert us when we fail, but God will not. In fact, that is when it seems God is on a hot-chase after us. God partners with those who fail on a regular basis, and He transforms their attempts or failed lives into something wonderful.

Second, failure is our friend. When we see—by God's grace—some good arise from our failures, we will concur that

it may indeed be a friend. Failure may be the means by which we thirst and are driven to drink afresh from God's fountain of grace and mercy. Failure may also be the means by which a person discovers the stop signs, roadblocks, and closed doors to his venturing. But that individual who ventures and fails is blessed and is at least richer in experience than one who, for fear of failure, fails to venture. As the old saying goes, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Whatever Susan Nikaido's meaning was in "between the lines," I agree we have both a personal Friend and a philosophical (or metaphorical) friend in failure. If I had secured the job I wanted, could I have written a book without the kind of emotional strain that was mine in those days? It is true that problems readily turn a person into a philosopher. Writing has become the pastime by which I try to make sense of situations I cannot control or change. Engrossed in prayers for open doors to ministry, I almost failed to realize that a ministry was going on behind the "closed doors."

Song in the Night

Here is another confessional. This chapter is my "*song in the night*" (Job 35:10). It is a testimony in advance of its occurrence. Paul and Silas, with their hands and legs in chains in a Philippian jail, "*at midnight... prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them*" (Acts 16:25). Apparently, they could not care less about being imprisoned without a trial and about the unfair treatment they had received in spite of being Roman citizens who were guaranteed fair and due process by the law (Acts 16:19-40). They sang and praised God at midnight.

I wrote this chapter in confident anticipation and hope of the day when I would walk over my present set of problems

and become engaged with a new set. Faith saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Faith could see these manuscripts—these private conversations between me and my word processor—becoming printed pages. Faith sees things that do not exist as if they were actually present. Though the battle continues, faith can thank God that the victory has been won.

The Scriptures declare:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.... Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.... But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him (Hebrews 11:1,3,6).

God... calleth those things which be not as though they were (Romans 4:17).

The just shall live by faith (Romans 1:17).

For we walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me (Acts 27:25).

I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day (2 Timothy 1:12).

Being confident of this very thing, he which hath begun a good work in [me] will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).

For it is God which worketh in [me] both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13).

The Lord will perfect that which concerneth me: thy mercy, O Lord, endureth for ever: forsake not the works of thine own hands (Psalm 138:8).

Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee (Isaiah 26:3).

I have been young, and now I am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread (Psalm 37:25).

Faithful is he that calleth [me], who also will do it (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

Now unto him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Jesus Christ throughout all ages, world without end. Amen (Ephesians 3:20,21).

Notes



¹ Quoted in: Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press).

² James C. Wilhoit and John M. Dettoni, *Nurture that is Christian: Developmental Perspectives on Christian Education* (Michigan: Baker Books, 1995).

Anita Woolfolk, *Educational Psychology* 8th Ed. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2001).

³ Quoted in: *Caring For People God's Way*, Brochure for Certificate Program in Biblical Counseling (Forest, Virginia: Center for Biblical Counseling, 2000) p. 4.

*All attempts were made to find all source information.
Where proper credit was not given, or complete
documentation was not cited, the author apologizes.*

