

## **GOD'S KEEPING POWER**

*"...and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age." Matt 28:20b*

It was just after midnight. The African guard knocked on the missionary's bedroom window. He informed the missionary that he could hear the voices of bandits outside the compound walls plotting to scale the wall and break into the house. The missionary called her house mate. They began to pray for God's protection.

These were missionaries who had come to Africa to announce the good news of the Kingdom. They were studying the local language. It was obvious these two women had been obedient to the heavenly calling yet in that time of faithful obedience, they found themselves in great need. After time in prayer, with peace in their hearts, they went back to sleep.

Some time later the guard again knocked on the window, again waking the missionary. "They've gone", he said apologetically. "What did you do to make them go?" queried the missionary. He told her he had walked the perimeter of the wall reading his New Testament. The missionary confirmed that during that same time she had been inside the house praying. "What happened?" she asked.

The guard explained that he could hear them talking among themselves saying, "we need to move on, there are too many men in white robes standing on these walls, we won't be able to get in." So they left.

Africa seems to be an increasingly more violent place to live and work. At any given time, there are a number of countries involved in ethnic wars, others are on the brink of a coup d'état, and others are in turmoil of one kind or another. Working in these

settings are God's faithful messengers seeking to announce the Good News of the Kingdom.

As numerous countries in Africa are perceived to be high-security alert nations, traumatic incidents such as car-jacking, armed home invasions and political evacuations greatly increase, affecting the lives of missionaries. In 1991, there were 38 CMA missionaries working in Zaire but the following year only six remained after a sudden and traumatic political evacuation. A decade later in another country, Ivory Coast, 77 CMA missionaries were assigned there. Following a sudden violent rebel takeover of half the country, the missionaries were urged to evacuate. Seventeen of them returned temporarily, but were forced to evacuate again in 2004.

Given these troubling circumstances, the question could be asked of these missionaries, "How do you understand the promise of Matthew 28:20b after all you've gone through?"

In a recent study<sup>1</sup> missionaries still serving in Africa who had experienced some traumatic event during their career, were asked that very question. Five themes emerged from their thoughts.

### **They Still Believed in God's Keeping Power**

The overwhelming conclusion arising from the data (thirty-five testimonies) was the fact that the promise of Matthew 28:20b is true, ". . . and surely I am with you always, to the end of the age" (NIV). Not one person questioned this promise. The data yielded quotes from various ones about a deep sense of the presence of God in the midst of the trauma. Even during a horrific rape trauma, a missionary testified of God's presence with her. Not once did anyone repeat the words of our Lord

as expressed to his father, “Why have you forsaken me?” Rather, there was strong affirmation of a loving, heavenly Father who cares deeply and walks alongside his beloved children as they go through trials and tribulations. He himself told us that, “in this world you will have troubles” (John 16:33). There was not one person who, because of a political evacuation, abandoned the faith. Nobody cursed God. All in some way experienced God’s keeping power working in them and in their families. One survivor said, “We need more stories and more case studies out there saying, ‘This happened to me, and this is how God responded’.” This would serve to encourage not only the new recruit considering a life in the “red zone,” but also to bolster the spirits of workers currently on the ground in the midst of battle.

### **They Saw the Big Picture of Redemption**

We see God is at work in the world. He has a global plan of redemption that he is carrying out. Today’s missionaries have the privilege of joining God for a season in various parts of His vineyard. Political evacuations, at times, served to move the workers around to different portions of the vineyard. One country’s loss was another country’s gain. God continued to work in building a redeemed people for Himself despite troubling times. Missionaries were reminded of what God is doing all over the world and how even an evacuation can play a role within the redemptive plan of God for the nations.

### **They Became Open to New Opportunities**

One positive outcome in the midst of various traumas experienced by missionaries was the opportunity for some to begin again in a new assignment. One woman said her nature reacted against getting into a rut. So in some ways she almost

welcomed evacuations, though painful and unsettling to go through. For her, they have twice opened the door to new and challenging ministry opportunities and new ministry foci.

In the past, missionaries often came to Africa with a career destination involving one country only. Today's career missionaries often have multiple careers in a number of countries. Among those interviewed, only ten out of thirty five are still in the country where they began missionary service. Most of the other workers, due to evacuations, are serving in second, third or fourth countries. Serving in multiple countries during a missionary career has become the new norm.

The positive side of this kind of transition is that there is a certain opportunity to start with a "fresh page," that mistakes of the past do not have to be repeated in the next venture and greater care can be given to the establishment of precedent-setting policies and practices. It provides opportunity for lessons learned the hard way to now be practiced in the new situation. New challenges can be invigorating. Bringing hard-earned experience to new ministry opportunities and teams brings richness to the new setting. Where a national church has been established, the departure of the missionary allows local leadership to step into new ministry roles and to learn to trust God for the future. For a national church this can be a faith-stretching experience especially if there has formerly been a misplaced trust in the western missionary as guide, provider and sustainer.

### **They had Fostered Sturdy Relationships**

Because of the strong evidence that good relationships served as a key factor in sustaining victims through and after trauma, it goes without saying, that

building, fostering, and nurturing missionary relationships within teams both nationally and regionally is of utmost importance. Many missionaries interviewed had taken advantage of workshops to help them sharpen interpersonal skills. Doing things that contribute to “teamness” had been a high priority of leadership teams who were later affected by trauma. Strategic plans on-site had included team-building events. Budgets had provided for things like prayer retreats and field forums to ensure that healthy teams with healthy relationships were functioning well. Data shows that in the day of trouble missionaries were sustained by his/her healthy network of relationships.

### **They Lived in the Scripture - They Listened for God’s Voice**

Missionaries interviewed seemed to be very rooted in Scripture. They easily quoted scripture portions that had provided an anchor for their souls. Others used scripture to explain their understanding of suffering and how they actually expected trials in this life. Still others testified that scripture portions had brought comfort to their souls. Several mentioned the benefit of recently memorized scriptures which they rehearsed during difficult days. One had the experience following his trauma of waking up singing one night and feeling very close to God. God ministered to his children through scripture, his voice was heard.

God has provided everything needed to carry on the work of the Kingdom. Data revealed that international workers on the field experienced the keeper side of God and proved that He walks with them. Through sturdy relationships and God’s word, they found strength and nurture for the journey. When the occasion came to relocate, workers found release from past assignments. In an understanding of God’s redemptive plan to

bring the gospel to the nations, missionaries found joy and challenge in new assignments following political evacuations which removed them from former assignments.

Still, today, in high security alert nations of Africa and other parts of the world, international workers continue to walk in the confidence of God's promise: "*I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.*" (Matt 28:20b, *The Message*).

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, Ronald. 2005. Self-identified retention factors by western missionaries in Africa who have experienced traumatic events. D.Min. project. Trinity International University.