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From

*Glimpses of God
...in the Lives of the Poor*

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Welcoming the Enemy

It was midnight. Before retiring I walked out on the porch where my fifteen-year-old son was sleeping. I was leading a team of seventeen young people, including two of my own children, on a three-month work assignment in a jungle area 200 miles from the nearest city in a South American country. Four years before, my husband and I, with our four children, had first come to this area at the request of the village people to help them start a church, build a fish hatchery, and develop other forms of appropriate technology to meet basic human needs. After the church and appropriate technology center had been established we moved to work in another country. This summer the village had asked us to return to experiment with a vegetable protein project.

When we received the invitation, my husband was already committed to a project in Haiti for the summer. We decided to divide up for three months in order to work in both projects. My husband took our fourteen-year-old Karen with him to Haiti while our fifteen-year-old Tommy and sixteen-year-old Kathy went with me leaving our nineteen-year-old Christ to take care of things at our headquarters in Alabama.

The air on the porch was chilly, so I laid a blanket across Tommy's cot, then stood a moment looking out across the fishponds that were bringing hope for more food to our village. The light from the moon made a rippling path of white across the water.

Suddenly I heard a crash. Turning quickly I could see in the moonlight that a soldier had slid into our water barrel. I was paralyzed with shock as I looked out over the clearing that separated our temporary home from the jungle. About thirty soldiers were rushing our house.

Our host country had just held elections, not the usual custom, and the military did not agree with the results. It had taken over one week before, exiling the newly-elected president and repressing any resistance, real or imagined. Since we were in such a remote frontier village, I had not expected the fighting to reach us. While I stood there, frozen in fear, watching the soldiers surround our house, the message our neighbor woman had brought me that day flashed through my mind.

"Sister, keep your team in the house," she had urged. "I just came from the market over near the military camp. I overheard two soldiers saying the Americans were to blame for the resistance to their takeover. They said they would not rest until they had exterminated every American in this zone."

Since we had not been involved in political activities in their country, I thought that she had misunderstood. I did not think that we would be suspected of participating in such resistance, but now what the neighbor woman had warned me about was taking place before my eyes. Evidently, the soldiers were intent on carrying out their threat. If they wanted to kill us, there was no way to stop them.

My heart beat so fast. I thought my blood vessels would burst. It felt as if I were about to have a stroke. I knew I had a responsibility for the team members inside the house, but I could not even call out to them. I was paralyzed with fear.

I had only a split second to pray before the soldiers found me: “God! If I have to die, take care of my family. Please take away this fear. I don’t want to die afraid. Please help me to die trusting you.” I was suddenly aware of the presence of God.

We do not always feel God. Usually we trust God by faith. However, at that moment God’s presence was very real, seemingly touchable. I still thought I was going to die, but I knew God had things under control. I remember thinking that maybe our deaths would accomplish things that we had not been able to accomplish with our lives.

I found myself stepping up to the closest soldier and speaking words I could never have thought to say, “Welcome, brother,” I called out. “Come in. You do not need guns to visit us.”

At that the soldier jumped, dropped the bullet he was putting into his gun, and shouted, “Not me. I’m not the one. I’m just following orders. There’s the commander over there; he’s the one.”

I raised my voice and repeated, “You’re all welcome. Everyone is welcome in our home.”

At that the commander ran up to me, shoved the muzzle of his rifle against my stomach, and pushed me through the door into the house. Thirty soldiers rushed into the house and began pulling everything off the shelves and out of drawers, looking for guns. They herded the team members into the kitchen where they sat quietly by the glow of the two candles we used for light.

The soldier who led the attack turned his gun on me and demanded angrily, “What are you Americans doing down here trying to stop our revolution? Seventeen Americans would not be living in this poverty if they did not have political motivation.”

“Sir,” I responded truthfully, “We have had nothing to do with your revolution. We are here for two reasons. We are teaching self-help projects to the hungry and we are teaching the Bible.”

“That tells me nothing,” he responded. “I have never read the Bible in my life. Maybe it is a communist book for all I know.”

“You have never read the Bible in your life? Oh, sir, I am so sorry for you! You have missed the best part of your life. Please let me tell you what it says.”

He made no objection. He had to stand there with his gun on us while the other soldiers ransacked the house looking for the guns we did not have.

I picked up a Spanish Bible and turned to the Sermon on the Mount. “We teach about Jesus Christ,” I said, “God’s son who came into this world to save us. He also taught us a better way than fighting. He taught us the way of love.

“Because of him, I can tell you that even though you kill me, I will die loving you because God loves you. To follow him, I have to love you too.”

“That’s humanly impossible!” he burst out.

“That’s true, sir,” I answered. “It isn’t humanly possible, but with God’s help it is possible.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“You can prove it, sir. I know you came here to kill us. So just kill me slowly if you want to prove it. Cut me to pieces little by little, and you will see you cannot make me hate you. I will die praying for you because God loves you and we love you too.”

The soldier lowered his gun and stepped back. Clearing his throat, he said, “You almost convince me that you are innocent, but I have orders to take everyone in the house and the ham radio. I will let you get some warm clothes and a blanket. You will be sleeping on the ground.”

They marched us two by two at gunpoint down a trail to where a truck was waiting on the one little road that came into our village. We saw that others in our town had been taken prisoner also. The district superintendent of the church, the leaders of the youth group and other leaders were lined up at gunpoint, ready to be loaded on the trucks with us.

Suddenly the soldier changed his mind. “Halt,” he commanded. “Take only the men. The women will come with me.”

He led us back to our home, saying, “I don’t know why I am doing this. I was about to take you into a jungle camp of over a thousand soldiers. I cannot take you.

“In our army no one breaks an order,” he continued sternly. “I have never broken an order before, but for the first time tonight I am refusing to obey an order. If my superior officer finds out that you were in this house when I raided it, and that I did not take you, I will pay for it with my life.” He strode to the door, stopped, and looked back again.

“I could have fought any amount of guns you might have had,” he said, “but there is something here I cannot understand. I cannot fight it.”

Then the hard part began, waiting to hear what had happened to the men of our team and the leaders of the village. The waiting, the uncertainty, seemed endless. If a twig snapped outside our window everyone jumped, thinking the soldiers were back again. The people of our village were as distressed as we were. They stood around in our house all day, some weeping, others coming to offer sympathy. No one knew what would happen next.

The local people insisted we could not have a service in the church on Sunday because the soldiers considered any meeting held to be for the purpose of political agitation. “Soldiers will be there if you have a service. They will take more prisoners,” they told me. We all agreed to pray at home on Sunday.

But on Saturday night a messenger came to our door. “I bring a message from the man who commanded the attack on your village Thursday night,” he informed us. “He says he will be at your service on Sunday. However, he has no vehicle on Sundays so you are to bring the church’s jeep and get him. He said to tell you that if you don’t come he will be there anyway, even if he has to walk the ten miles.” It sounded like a threat.

I sent a message to everyone in the town that night. “We will have the service after all,” I told them, “but you are not obligated to come. In fact you may lose your life by coming. No one knows what this soldier will do. Do not come when the church bell rings unless you are sure God wants you to come.” I knew that the villagers feared the military and stayed out of sight when the soldiers were around. I did not expect any of them to come.

The next morning I took the jeep and went to get the commander. He came with a bodyguard. The two of them marched coldly into the church and sat down, still holding their rifles. The women on our team came in, the bell was rung, and we began to sing. The church was packed before the first hymn was over. The people came pale and trembling, but they came. They had felt that their faith was at stake, and they were determined to attend, even if it meant imprisonment.

Since the leaders of the church had been taken by the military, I led the service. I tried to do just what I would have done had the soldiers not been there. It was church custom to welcome visitors by inviting them to the platform, singing a welcome song, and waving to them. Everyone would then line up to shake the visitors' hands, hug them, and say some personal words of greeting.

How could I ask these people to hug the very man who had taken their husband, son, or brother prisoner? That was asking too much. I decided that I would ask them to sing a welcome song but that I would stop there and leave out the hugging.

The soldiers were surprised when I asked them to come to the platform to let us welcome them. "Welcome us?" they asked in amazement. "Well, all right," they shrugged. They came forward and stood very formally with their guns across their backs. The people stood, singing weakly and waving their hands timidly. I expected them to sit back down, but no. The first man on the front seat came forward and put out his hand. As he bent over to hug the soldier I heard him say, "Brother, we don't like what you did to our village, but this is the house of God, and God loves you, so you are welcome here." Everyone in the church followed his example, even the women whose eyes were red from weeping for their loved ones whom this man had taken prisoner. They too said words of welcome. The looks on the soldiers' faces became ones of surprise, then incredulity.

When the last person finished greeting them, the head soldier marched to the pulpit and said in a very stern voice, "Now I will have a few words. Never have I ever dreamed that I could raid a town, come back, and have that town welcome me as a brother. I can hardly believe what I have seen and heard this morning," he said to the congregation.

"This is the first church service I have ever been to," he continued. "I never believed there was a God before, but what I have just felt is so strong that I will never doubt the existence of God again as long as I live."

He turned from one side of the congregation to the other. "Do all of you know God?" he asked. "If you know God, hang on to him. It must be the greatest thing in the world to know God." As he spoke in an urgent voice he motioned with his hand, clenching it as though to hold on to something, while in his other hand he held a gun.

"I don't know God," he confessed in a low voice, "but I hope some day I shall, and that some day we can once again greet each other as brothers and sisters, as we have done this morning."

He came home with us for lunch. The men caught fish from the ponds to cook for his meal. The women helped me cook, even those who had lost a loved one. While we prepared lunch, the men took him around to see the brick project for dry housing, the chicken and vegetable protein project, and the clean water project. At last he said, "I have taken innocent people, but I did not know it when I did it. If any of you need anything since you do not have your men, please tell me, and I will pay for it out of my pocket." He left, planning a return visit that was never to transpire.

Seven days later the bishop of our church sent a message for all Americans to come immediately to the capital city. He urged us to return to the United States as soon as possible, since he feared that our lives would be endangered by a possible countercoup.

Once in the capital, we learned that the American men who had been taken from our house at midnight had been taken by dump truck to a military camp ten miles from our village. There they had been loaded on a plane with many other prisoners from the local area and flown to the capital, where they were held in a basement cell.

Three days later the U.S. embassy was successful in negotiating the release of the Americans and helping them leave the country. The local men, however, were not released for two weeks. Some, particularly the religious leaders, were tortured.

Often I think of the soldier and his 30 men who stormed out of the jungle ready to kill us. Within fifteen minutes he had changed his mind and risked his life to save us. I thank God for putting divine love into my heart for a person I could not love on my own.

I cannot forget the last thing the soldier said to us as he left: "I have fought many battles and killed many people. It was nothing to me. It was just my job to exterminate them. But I never knew them personally. This is the first time I ever knew my enemy face to face. Now I believe that if we knew each other, our guns would not be necessary."

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