

DESTINY'S CHILD

Snippets from the testimony of Dr. Cephas Tushima

It must have been somewhere around 2:00am in the night. We had no watches or any device to tell time in those days. We often relied on either transistor radios or church (on Sundays) and school bells (on school days), about half a mile away, to give us an idea of time. Otherwise time could be specified as at dawn, sunrise, mid-morning sun, the overhead sun, the mid-afternoon sun, when the sun is shooting its arrows (setting sun) or at dusk. Night time didn't have as clear definitions as the day time, it could be expressed as at dusk, family time of the night (roughly from about 7:00-10:00pm when the family sat together to tell folk tales both for entertainment and moral upbringing of children), middle of the night (anywhere from 11:00-300am), at the first rooster's crow, and dawn. My elder brother, Teryila, and I shared the same hut. At night, we would have to go out to answer nature's call (most often just the minor watery one). So that night, when I was about nine years old, my bladder was filled to overflowing. I rushed outside to empty it. My brother had just come in from a similar trip outside a couple of minutes earlier. I was barely half-way through the process, when I noticed a bright light piercing through the pitch darkness of that night. At that age, the only thing I could compare it to was the headlamps of a car, but this light was brighter than a thousand lamps of cars put together. It seemed to have been advancing steadily toward our compound, which was lit up as in the day time. Scared to death I rushed into our hut and bolted the door. The light presently filled our hut, and even though my eyes were tightly shut, I could see the face that I recognized from the children's book I had seen in church as Jesus, with his eyes gazing penetratingly at me as he stood above the grass-thatch roof of our hut. I then jumped out of bed and hopped into my brother's with terrified speed. When he asked what the matter was, I was too terrified to tell him what I was seeing (and I never shared this with anyone throughout my childhood), so I just told him that it was because of mosquitoes; and at that time everything vanished and the darkness of the night re-emerged.

That was not my first encounter with him. It was the second, and the last in that very visible form. At that time I had no idea what it was all about, it would take another eight years before he would revealed himself to me as my redeemer. His first appearance to me was even more poignant, if only I had someone that would have helped me make sense of it. It all began when I was about 6 years old, with an excited visit into that hinterland of my district: much more rural, primitive, and away from the emerging Western civilization that was tantalizing inviting us into its bosom. I was going to visit my paternal auntie Mbakperan. They lived at a confluence of major rivers (tributaries to the Benue River). So, theirs was a fishing community, and she or her children (who were much older than me) often brought gifts of smoked fish to my grandmother, Ade-ember. I often asked if I could visit her. Since we rarely ate meat in our house the thought of eating fish and wild game every day, if visited her was a most delightful one. What a joy it was when my dad obliged me one day! He rode with me on his bicycle for the 10-mile-long journey, which was a really long journey in those days. I don't remember how long I stayed there, but every day was full of excitement: going to the river with my cousins finishing, spending days on the islands in the river, and observing the cult practices of even more primitive folk religion.

Sadly, my body had also received a large dosage of parasites that it had not known before, which resulted in my being infected with schistosomiasis (bilharzia).

A few weeks after my return from there, providentially one of the children who had come from a faraway village to stay with us and go to school notice that when I was peeing there was blood in my urine and reported to my parents. After a battery of tests were carried out at the mission dispensary, it was discovered that I had schistosomiasis. However, the old type of drug that was used for its treatment them could have very devastating consequences, and that was my lot. While it killed the parasite, the drug was also killing me. My parents (esp. my mother, Kposoga) had many sleepless nights. I recall vividly how they would carry me on their back (my mother) or shoulders (my dad) to the dispensary sometimes in the dead of the night for help because of the agonizing pain. I recall how often the dispensary attendant would scold my parents for waking them up, when he had already told them that there was nothing the clinic could do to help me, and how my mother would plead with him to give anything to ease my pains.

At the height of this sickness, when I was almost dying, I remember during those days I would be brought out to rest under the shady orange tree at our backyard in the scourging heat of tropical day. On a few occasions, while under that orange tree, suddenly darkness would envelope my world, and it would seem as if I was descending into an abysmally large pit. I would see large flames of fire welling up to embrace me. I would also hear shrilled wailings of myriads of people in agonizing torment. Then I would see very weird looking bands of unsightly creatures ascending, as I was descending, to drag me into that menacing pit. At that, I would cry for help, desiring light, requesting the ugly creatures be driven away, and I should be saved from those treacherous flames. However, no one in our home understood the gospel. So they would only assure me that it was day time, so there was no darkness, no ugly creatures, and no fire.

While no human could provide the help I needed, the One who was slain for me (and all humanity) from the foundation of the world would answer my call for help. From a very distant and beautiful extra-terrestrial city, I would see One who carried a shepherd's crook, being followed by myriads of saintly looking people, all arrayed in white as he was, following him. His appearance radiated brilliant light like the one I came to see three years later. As they approached the earth, the fire will recede to the bottom of the abyss, the ugly creatures would scamper away, and the darkness would vanish, and the brilliance of a tropical afternoon will return. This happened about three or four times and I was miraculously healed. No one still could explain what was going on to me.

As surely as the divine hand was over me as destiny's child from birth, even so was evil so incensed against me for no just cause, and the cosmic rage of the evil one against me manifested from very early in my life. I am told that when I was about two years old, I had fallen so ill that everyone had given up on me, except my mother. Having been on admission at the small mission clinic for a few days, I was discharge as a hopeless case, as related to me by my uncle's wife. The evening looked ominous with an overcast sky, low rumblings of thunder and faint flashes of lightening. As I was laid on a mat in the central hut (that is usually in the center of other round huts and serves as the living room of a typical Tiv compound) the women were sitting on the floor, huddled around my mother, sobbing quietly as she did. The men sat outside of the in a half moon formation talking in low tones.

Before the sun would deep below the horizon, my mother rose from the floor and dashed out of the hut and headed in to the nearby woods. Everyone present wondered if the grief of her impending loss was driving her crazy. Senda, her friend amongst the women folk, followed her silently. As if by some inspiration unknown to others, she began to pluck the tender leaves of an assortment of trees and bushes. With the same speed, she dashed back into the compound, crushed the helping of leaves in a mortar with a pestle, wrapped the resulting mush in broad tropical leaves and placed it near burning coals to warm up the juice inside. Everyone was quietly watching her, unsure what she doing, until she came where I lay, scooped my almost lifeless body onto her laps, placed my back on laps, had me facing upward, with my head tilted slightly backward, and began squeezing my jaws tight to force them open. There were vain attempts to stop her, as those around thought she was going to hasten my assured demise. Once my clinched teeth yielded to the strength of her hands, rewarding her efforts with a slight opening, she began wringing out the juice from that mush down into my throat. After a few moments, my body was jerked by sudden burst of combined coughing and sneezing that let out a viscid lump of mucus-like substance that had already began to clog my throat. My mother patiently drew the tacky substance out of my mouth. That was followed with a gasp, my once quiescent heart began throbbing palpably, then I let out a cry that brought shouts of joy to the whole gathering. I was now on the path on recovery.

Providence was at work preserving my life in all these. Sadly, however, I was yet to know the One who loved and cared so such for me. When I was seven years old (which was a very early age to go to school in those days), I enrolled in the mission elementary school in my village, Jato-Aka, completed the seven years of elementary schooling, as was the norm then, and proceeded to the bigger town near us to attend a boarding secondary school. At the school, I had enlisted as a member of the student fellowship, went to a local branch of our denomination on Sundays, in company of other students, and enrolled into the catechismal classes of the church. Notwithstanding, I was also being allured to youth ways: attending discos, trying out alcohol and the like.

I must not forget to say that I grew up in a transitional period in rural Nigeria, at a time when there was an intensifying of the contact between traditional ways of life and the growing impinging influence of western culture and civilization and a nascent Christendom, and this was impacting families in different ways. On the one hand, my grandfather was a tribal clan chief, and as such was very steeped into traditional ways and religion. I grew up watching the Tiv traditional sacrificial system and all that goes with it. My father on the other hand had severed himself from the Tiv religious practices, but because he was a polygamist, he could not be accepted into the mission Protestant church in our locality. Thus, he was a free man doing whatever he wanted. My mother started attending church, and was taking us (her children) to church with her; often when dad did not travel, he would also come to church with us, taking us the boys while mom went with the girls: In those days, men sat on one side of the church and the women sat on the other. Unfortunately, however, our church was more moralistic than gospel centered. Thus, though we went to church, we never heard the gospel.

When I went to the boarding high school, I began encountering the gospel. I had even said the sinner's prayer several times, but it had not yet please to the Lord to work out his effectual calling in my life. In some strange way, at the beginning of the summer holiday at the

end of my junior year in high school, I felt I wasn't living wisely. I decided to start reading the book of Proverbs to help me gain wisdom. It was the beginning of God's working on my heart that will eventually unveil my eyes to the truth of Scripture. Within that same summer holiday, I had enrolled in the baptismal classes of my local church in my village. During the month, we had to memorize the entire Shorter Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism in Tiv language. We studied large portions of the Old and New Testaments, but much of it was oriented more in the mold of literary studies than a spiritual/devotional study of the word of God. Nevertheless, God, in his infinite mercy, chose to reveal his Son to me at that time through the reading of Scripture.

During the last two weeks of that month of our Baptismal classes, we were required to read the Gospel of John at home. It was in my reading of John that I encountered the Living Word (the Son of God) in the written word. One of the questions that plagued my young mind was how I could be certain that I was going to heaven. I was weighing my options: How could I forfeit all the pleasures and fun my peers were having without any certainty of going to heaven. Often the answers I received from older "Christians" and church leaders weren't comforting. I was regularly told no one could ever be sure. We simply should do our best in following God and hope that his grace will suffice for us in the by and by. However, as I read through John, the light of the Gospel of God's Son beam in my sin darkened heart, and the veil that was cast over the eyes of my inner man was torn: The truth was unveiled. The Holy Spirit made crystal clear to me the meaning of passages such as John 3:18-19, "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil," (ESV) and 5:24 "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (ESV). The passion narratives were the crowning jewel of it all. Reading that the mere words of Jesus made those who came to arrest him fall to the ground (John 18:4-6), I came to know that though he had all powers, he still chose to lay down his life. Pilate's threefold witness that Jesus was innocent vis-à-vis his condemnation (a travesty of justice) made manifest to me that Jesus wasn't dying for any fault of his, but for my sin. At that point, in the dead of that night, I prayed to seek God's forgiveness and surrendered my life to him who loves me and had been delivering me from harm even when I had not known him yet. That was a turning point in my life.

Time will fail me to talk of my initial growth in faith in my final year in high school, with an overwhelming testimony that was known to everyone in the school, and how God used that to bring many to faith. I'm constrained not to go into details about my growth and labors for him while in college, including becoming the campus president of the Nigerian counterpart of InterVarsity. Same will apply to my days in grad school when studied to obtain professional qualification in Surveying (what is today called geomatics), where I was the resident Bible teacher for the two years I studied there.

Let me hurry to talk about my call to ministry before the time will be up. Very early in my faith walk (right from senior year in high school), there was the burden to share the gospel with others and to teach young Christians the little I knew myself. In college, I was beginning to have a sense of call, but with good counsel, I learn to wait for God's timing. Two years after graduating from grad sch I got married to Hemen (we've been married for the past twenty-five

years). Two years after our wedding, the sense of calling for the ministry returned with an overwhelming urgency. I began to pray for God to confirm that. As I prayed, one day at about 5 am, when I used to get up to pray, I woke up but was still in bed. Suddenly, I heard a voice audibly read Deuteronomy 8:1-3 “The whole commandment that I command you today you shall be careful to do, that you may live and multiply, and go in and possess the land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers. And you shall remember the whole way that the LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that he might humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep his commandments or not. And he humbled you and let you hunger and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (ESV). The voice repeated the reading after the first reading. Then I jumped out of bed and took out my Bible, opened the passage, and it was word-for-word as I had heard it read. Then on my knees I began pray. As I prayed, I felt the Lord telling that this was the confirmation I was seeking from him: He was calling me to start living for and by his word and by winning bread; that there would be moments where like the Israelites, I would hunger but he will feed me in ways that neither my fathers nor I have known. That was in December 1993.

At daybreak, I shared with my wife what had transpired. But I wasn't going to resign my job without her consent. It took another eight months for the Lord to bring that conviction for her. Again, time would not allow me to go into details about that. Thereafter, I resigned my job as a surveyor and went into church planting in 1994. Since then my life has been a life of faith. And God has not failed me once. As he showed me in Deuteronomy 8:1-3, we have gone through moments of dire want to the point of sometimes in the past having to just roast peanuts and eat for the day. But we have also seen him provide in truly miraculous ways. Permit me to cite just one example.

At the time I quit my job, I was the only one amongst my siblings that was financially viable to support our aged parents. My mom was devastated by this, as she was often sick needing me to pay her medical bills. How I could, do that working in an evangelical church where one does not earn living wages? Indeed, at the time I was doing church planting, the stipend I was being paid could not even pay my rents, not to talk of any other thing. At that time my mother came to us with eye problems needing medical attention. I had to tell her clearly that I had no money but I believe God will send money soon. Of course, the “I told you so” talk naturally followed. Three days later, after our family devotion one morning, a lady from our church drove to our house. After exchanging pleasantries, she apologized profusely for coming late, that God had told her three days ago (the very day my mother had come) to bring some money for me, but she had delayed. It was through things like this that my parents gradually came to appreciate the power of God and embraced the faith before their home calling to glory.

Since answering the call to full time ministry twenty-three years ago, I have not looked back. My ministry has spanned such diverse areas as student/youth ministries, being a church planter, serving as a children's pastor, parish pastor, seminary professor, and conference speaker. Presently, besides teaching at Jos ECWA Theological Seminary, which is one of the largest seminaries (if not the largest seminary) in Africa (where I am the academic dean), I am also the president of Hesed Resource & Development Foundation. Hesed, a non-profit I helped found,

aims to be a resource to church in training, equipping, and empowering redemptive communities for vibrant gospel outreach and wholesome kingdom impact in society. We are currently developing a Christian school (K-12) as part of Hesus ministries. We would appreciate your support, if the Lord leads you to support us either as a family or in our ministry through Hesus.

One of the fiercest challenges we face is violent militant Islam. As I speak today scores of Christians are being killed in Nigeria every week, if not every day by Fulani Muslim jihadists and because our current president is of the same stock with them, his government has turned a complete blind eye to it. I will appreciate if any of you has contact with the White House or members of Congress with whom I could share some of these problems because without external pressure, the persecution will continue unabated.

On the home front, Hemen and I are blessed with one daughter, Salome, and for the past seven years we have also brought Deborah under our wings as a foster daughter. Deborah started college in Nigeria this semester, and Salome will be entering college in the fall, hopefully in the States. Pray for them, for smooth transitions and that they will continue to walk with the Lord. Pray also for the safety of my family back home.

Before sitting down, let me seize this opportunity to thank the leadership of the college, President Troupe and his immediate predecessor, Dr. Edgar, the academic dean, Dr. Stephens, the Crossroads director, Dr. Cole, and the chair of Bible Dept., Dr. Watt, for the initiative to have me here. Thank you so much for all that you have done to make my life here comfortable. I am also thankful to my colleagues for the camaraderie we have shared. I wish to specifically mention Drs. Shidemantle, Sigmund, Curtis, Reed, and Doyles, and the staff of the Crossroads office. You have all made me feel a sense of belonging. I am grateful to the entire community of the Genevans. You all made me feel at home here. I feel like I am a Genevan also. Perhaps, I can say I'm now engrafted into your tree.

Thanks, Rut, for this opportunity to share my story. While some of the details may sound strange to many ears, the major motifs highlight the fall and the human predicament, the outworking of providence, sovereign grace, the centrality of God's word and will in our lives, service to other, and the urgency for gospel witness to a needy world. It is my sincere prayer that understanding the human predicament and the offer of grace in Christ, we would all, in the words, of St. Francis of Assisi, preach Christ constantly by our lives, and use words as occasion warrants to bear witness to his grace. God bless you all.