

Let Your Kingdom Come:

How Praying The Lord's Prayer Landed Me In An African Village

Written by Tyler Paulson in Spring 2009 for Thea Petchler's Autobiography & Memoir Class

"That's the wrong visa, the one from this trip is on another page," I said to the Ugandan passport officer, "I loved the people here so much I came back."

He stamped my passport and just like that my second trip to East Africa was over. I took a seat and rubbed my thumb over the words "United States of America" on the front of my passport. I tried to envision in my mind again what home was like, the paved roads, the lack of mosquito nets, broadband internet, drinkable tap water, the slick storefronts. Throughout that summer, I had immersed myself as fully as I could into the life and culture of the people there, and I knew going back to America was going to be an even more uncanny transition than the adjustment to life there was. And even though I was going home to a place where we had access to every means of communication and transportation known to man; broadband internet, cell phones with unlimited text messaging, Skype, our own automobiles. I knew I wouldn't be as connected to the people around me as I was when I was living in Africa without any of that. I had been living in a culture that embodied community; our group did everything together. We lived together, shared every meal together, prayed for and supported each other through the hard days, and rejoiced with each other through the good days. It didn't matter that half of us grew up in America, and half of us had grown up in Africa. We were brothers and sisters in Christ and all shared the calling to serve and love the people of this great continent together.

"British Airways Flight 1610 to London is now boarding," I heard over the loud speaker. I walked down the steps to the runway of Entebbe International Airport, a runway made world famous by Idi Amin, the former Ugandan dictator who was responsible for the deaths of over one-hundred thousand people here during the 1970s. And as I took one last look at the planes lined up along the shores of Lake Victoria, I was reminded of all the pain the people here had been through, and how far God has brought the people of this special country.

As the plane took off, I took my last look at Lake Victoria and I chuckled a bit. I had just spent two and a half months in Africa, and just a few years ago I would've certainly been the least likely candidate for a trip like this. How did I get here, so far away from the beaches of San Diego? And in true Africa fashion, it all started in the last place you would've ever expected it to.

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“Man, after seeing that, I definitely don’t ever want to go to Africa” I heard my friends say to each other as we walked out of government class during our senior year of high school. My teacher, with just a few months left to try to turn us into eighteen year olds that could at least be mistaken for adults, had shown us Hotel Rwanda, a film depicting the stories of a group of victims of the Rwandan genocide that occurred in the 1990s.

But somehow I’d had the complete opposite reaction to that film, something I didn’t understand yet came over me, I wanted to go, I wanted to get on a plane right now and help the people there in whatever way I could.

And so began a journey for me, a journey that forever changed the way I viewed the world and what I was called to be in it, a journey that forever changed how I viewed the Church and imparted on me a new vision for what she could be in this hurting world, and a journey that led me to do the craziest thing I’d ever done, jump on a plane bound for Africa.

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The reactions and responses I had to Hotel Rwanda as well as the other films I watched, books I read, music I listened to, and people I met on my journey weren’t some freak accident, it was a divine trail of words from God that he orchestrated to forever change how I looked at Him and this life He’s given me here on earth.

“We want a world that is safe, where we are in control, not the almighty Creator, the One we cannot pin down, box in, or predict.”¹ These words by Craig Borlase brought to the surface a deep cognitive dissonance living inside my soul as I read them. I wanted to be a man whose relationship with Christ was marked by obedience, sacrifice, and relationship,² yet I seemed to only live out these trademarks in situations where it was safe to do so. When I was safe from failure, when I was safe from others seeing how much of a wretch I really was, when I was safe from being stretched in a way where hard work alone wasn’t going to be enough to make me look good in the eyes of men.

The desire for safety and security is deeply embedded in our nature as human beings; and looking at how so many others lived around me, killing themselves to get into the best colleges so that they might have a prosperous and secure future, I knew I wasn’t the only

1 From *God’s Gravity* by Craig Borlase (pg. 43)

2 From *The Naked Christian* by Craig Borlase (pg. 21)

person who struggled with this fear. But I've found the dangerous thing is that when we don't daily give that desire for security to God and let him be our source of peace, we begin to try to achieve it ourselves, and that leads directly to a life of selfishness.

And the Bible makes it very clear, there is nothing God hates more than those who think only of themselves.³

So I had to get over myself.

I'm still working on it.

I'll probably still be working on it when I'm eighty.

God's grace is a beautiful thing.

Up until that time, I had served God with a certain skill set that he had blessed me with. I still do today, and I probably will for the rest of my life. I volunteered and eventually worked as a staff member in the media department of my church, doing everything from mixing sound during church services to designing graphics for upcoming events to filming and editing video. I found joy in serving God with the gifts He had given me and am now in college studying graphic design full time. My skills as a designer will always be a gift that I offer unto the Lord and I pray that he uses them to further His kingdom for years to come.

Left to my own safety seeking devices, I'd probably just have stopped there. That would be the end of my story. But the beautiful thing about God is that He's always pushing for more. He knows that the further He stretches us the tighter our grip on Him will be.

So God started challenging me, and it seemed like in everything I read, listened to, watched, experienced there was a theme that started to emerge.

Social justice.

I define social justice as being a voice for those who do not have one. This is a concept that is easily misunderstood among Christians today. I often hear of Christians performing acts of social justice only because it's a good thing to do and they are Christians and therefore their lives are to bear good fruit. I also often hear of Christians performing acts of social justice just as a gateway to evangelize to a population that is lost and has deep spiritual needs.

3 *From God's Gravity by Craig Borlase (pg. 57)*

And it's not that either of these things are wrong, I'd been a part outreaches with both of those mindsets in the past, I just see them as attitudes missing the the bigger picture that God is painting. And really, neither of them ever excited me as much as what I discovered and now truly believe that God desires to do and is doing in and through His Church.

We are all created in the image of God. And when you look at the character of God, you see that since creation He has been involved, intimately, in each of our lives and he demands that we imitate Him and do the same with others here on earth. God doesn't want us to just passively share something with His children, he wants us to actively love and become passionately involved in every aspect of their lives. When we love and bring social justice to a community, we worship God.

“Worship and the pursuit of justice actually have to work together for them to have integrity. And the one cannot and should not be done, and cannot be done healthily, unless the other one is side by side. It's what makes the church a church. The church is not worshipping, if justice isn't a part of the church. So church without bringing justice to the community isn't worth calling church...You can't talk about worship and sing to this awesome God if your life doesn't show that there is a loving awesome God.”⁴

And when I first began to understand this, it completely blew me away. I fell more in love with my God as I realized that He is a God that when His followers worship Him, everyone around them is blessed. He desires that his Church be one where it isn't just the members who benefit, but everyone around them, that His love and goodness would be spread throughout the community every time his people came together!⁵

I saw this firsthand on the first Friday night I was in Sudan (I spent three weeks there before traveling to neighboring Uganda), a night that ended up being one of my favorite memories during my time there. I joined my friend Sebit in attending a special meeting for a small church that met across the river valley from the town where his ministry's compound was. Immediately upon arriving, I felt the love and joy of the congregation there. We started off by all joining together and singing praises to our King and I was inspired by the passion these people showed in their worship. During the meeting, Sebit quietly translated for me and explained that the pastor of the church had committed adultery a little while back, the congregation had called the service to publicly forgive the pastor and reinstate him to

4 *From the film The I Heart Revolution: With Hearts As One by Hillsong United*

5 *From The Naked Christian by Craig Borlase (pg. 34)*

his post. I was completely blown away by the grace this congregation was showing, and I quickly realized why I felt so much love and joy upon my arrival and during the time of worship. This congregation was loving and showing grace to this pastor in the same way Christ has, and this attitude of mercy in their hearts had clearly bore much fruit of joy in their congregation. Afterwards, we drove some of the women back to the town, they sat in the back of our truck, completely filled with the Spirit, singing praises at the top of their lungs. I couldn't stop smiling as we drove across the African plains as the sun set, singing praises to the King, celebrating the joy of our salvation.

As I went along on my journey, my salvation began to take on a deeper meaning to me. "Salvation is the entire universe being brought back into harmony with it's maker."⁶ I began to realize it's not just a transaction between God and I where I pray a prayer and he sets me free from my sin so that I can go to heaven when I die. It is that, and there's certainly a beauty in that simplicity, but there is so much more. God desires to be intimately involved in every part of our lives, both spiritual and physical. The Bible describes God's Word as "living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."⁷ The Gospel is to redeem and transform our minds, our hearts, our lives, our families and our communities. Jesus taught us to pray "Your kingdom come. Your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven."⁸ When we engage in acts of social justice, or when we just love and reach out to those around us, we are a part of God bringing his kingdom to earth. We are being a part of a holistic transformation in our community that goes far deeper than just ourselves.

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But none of this quite explains how I ended up in East Africa and not in one of the many other places on earth where there is an overwhelming need. It all started when my 12th grade English teacher showed us the film *Invisible Children* a few months before I graduated. Immediately, the stories of the night commuters grabbed my heart. They were children forced to leave their villages and walk miles to sleep at night in hidden overcrowded basements in order to protect themselves from being abducted by the rebels. Abducted children are often forced to kill their own family and fight as child soldiers in the Lord's Resistance Army, a rebel army that has been plaguing northern Uganda for the last twenty years. During that time, thirty-thousand children have been abducted, and at the violence's peak, 1.5 million people were forced from their homes to live in displacement camps, where up

6 *From Velvet Elvis by Rob Bell (pg. 109)*

7 *Hebrews 4:12 (NIV)*

8 *Luke 11:2 (NKJV)*

to one thousand people would die every week from the conditions there. A whole generation of the Alcholi people has been nearly lost, if not physically, psychologically as a result of this war.

A few weeks later, I found myself doing things I'd never done before, like sleeping in the streets with thousands of other San Diegans to raise awareness of the plight of the people of northern Uganda. I wrote my first letter to my representatives in Congress. I found myself online reading Ugandan newspapers on a regular basis so that I could know the latest information about the situation on the ground. And as time went on, the stories of these people spread all the way to Washington D.C, and our government took action. Peace talks began and temporary ceasefires came into effect, and even though now, a few years later, things are far from resolved, the people of northern Uganda have been given something they haven't had in years.

Hope.

My passion for the people of northern Uganda spread to the people of the surrounding regions as I read and learned more and more about the people of Sudan, Kenya, and southern Uganda. And soon enough, I found myself on an airplane bound for this region that I had read so much about, to go and meet the people there face to face, and to see what God would do.

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“Hey Tyler, come over here and take a picture of this.”

On that day, my task was to document what goes on during a normal day at the In Deed And Truth Ministries' medical clinic in Tonj, Sudan. I walked into the clinic and quickly flipped the ISO speed up on my camera so it could adjust to the low light in the clinic building. I had spent most of the morning taking photographs of the hundreds of people that had come to this small clinic in the middle of the bush. It was the only clinic like it within one-hundred miles, and daily it provided life saving to medicine for the community at no cost. Today was no exception, as I walked in to the clinic, I saw John Paul in the corner giving an injection to a small child.

Click click. I snapped a few photographs. In the viewfinder I saw the face of a deeply concerned mother, a child screaming in pain, and John Paul, the doctor, cool and collected as always coming to save the day.

“What was wrong with the child?” I asked John Paul afterwards.

“Pneumonia and malaria,” he responded, “she would’ve died in the next hour or so had I not given her that injection immediately.”

I stood in awe for a second as he walked back outside to attend to the next patient, that child was minutes from death. But that was life here. And everyday, this medical clinic stood in the gap, saving the people here from dying alone without any help.

“If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth...And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.”⁹

In addition to running a medical clinic in Tonj, my friends run a discipleship school for pastors. The name of their ministry is In Deed And Truth, coming directly from the passage in James above.¹⁰ Over the last few years as I’ve gotten to know them more and more, they and their children have become four of my favorite people in the entire world. They embody this passage and everything I’ve talked about so far to the people of Tonj and I have an incredible amount of respect for them.

I once heard Mark Foreman talk about what constitutes a revival, he talked about how it isn’t just a culture of people responding to the Gospel in high numbers, but how it’s something greater. A revival effects every aspect of the life of a community when it sweeps through. The people, the schools, the hospitals, even the jails. Everything. The Gospel is holistic in nature, it is meant to affect every part of our lives and every thing that we are apart of.

And it is happening throughout southern Sudan, and I was blessed enough to see it happening myself in Tonj. Everyone at In Deed And Truth is a part of the revival happening there, they are equipping scores of pastors to preach the Gospel, but they’re not stopping there. Through their medical clinic and other outreaches such as feeding centers during times of famine, they are facilitating the Kingdom of God’s permeation into every aspect of life there. They are teaching the people there about a loving and awesome God through their discipleship school and showing the people that there is a loving and awesome God through their medical clinic. As well as through their presence alone; the people in the community know they don’t have to be there, that they have a way out, but that they choose to

9 1 John 3:17-18, 23 (NIV) emphasis mine

10 other translations replace “with actions” with “in deed”

live there, and the love of Christ shines brightly from them as they do so.

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The van slowed down as I looked to my left and laughed, there was your stereotypical baboon sitting on the side of the road with a big old banana in his mouth. He stared at us and we stared back at him.

The baboons here were obviously a little more comfortable with humans than the ones I met in Sudan, who took off running when a human got within two hundred feet of them. We were on our way to Gulu, Uganda, the main municipality in the northern region of the country. At this point, I had spent over two months in Africa, but had yet to visit the war torn region in the north whose stories initially compelled me to come to this region of the world.

We said goodbye to the banana eating baboon and continued on our way to start our time in Gulu where we would be coming alongside a church there to help them do construction on their building as well as spend as much time as we could with the local people.

During our time there, we drove by many of the places that I had seen in the film Invisible Children. I met many people who had been deeply affected by the war, I did my best to pray for and encourage them, though I was often left without words that would suffice. I had a blast playing with the children, who were completely blown away by the flash on my camera and the bright light it emitted. I was encouraged to see how far northern Uganda had come in the last few years, as we drove without worry on roads where I had seen video footage of cars being ambushed on just a few years earlier. We saw children attending school who previously were unable to, we saw a population that finally had some hope.

The thing I will remember the most from my time in Gulu though was the relationship I built with a local pastor. We were staying right next door to him and his family during our time there and I got to spend a lot of time with him at night. At this point in the trip, I was beginning to face the fact that my time to return back to America was approaching quickly, once we got back from Gulu, I'd only have another week and a half left in Uganda. The first night we were there, I shared with him about a lot of the experiences I had during my time in Africa, how I wanted to return home as a different person, and how I was praying to God for greater clarity as to what my role was in the body of Christ.

The next night we started talking again. He shared with me that while we had been gone working that day, he had been praying for me. He shared that while he was praying for me,

God revealed to him that I was to be defined as a man who humbly serves the body of Christ with everything the Lord has give him. He brought me up in front of his church the next day and had his entire congregation pray over me, that I would humbly receive the gift of service and bear its fruit, wherever I was.

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I woke up as the wheels of our plane touched the runway of London's Heathrow International Airport. After going through security and finding the gate to my next flight, I took a seat underneath a television and began to watch the BBC. The news quickly reminded me that just because I was back in the first world, I wasn't in heaven, not even close. The unusually high amounts of stabbings occurring in London that were in the news two months ago were still going on. I stopped and prayed that God would let His kingdom come, that He would let His will be done, in Sudan, in Kenya, in Uganda, in England, in California, all across the earth as it is in heaven. And in the end, that's what social justice is, that's what being a servant is, that's what sacrifice is, that's what love is. It's getting ourselves out of the way of and allowing God to change our lives so that they bring God's Kingdom to earth, wherever we may be.