

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## Storming the Heavens

*When a train goes through a tunnel and it gets dark, you don't throw away the ticket and jump off. You sit still and trust the engineer.*

—CORRIE TEN BOOM

There are some days that words cannot describe. There are some miracles that stories cannot capture. November 19, 2012, was one of those unbelievable days—and, a few days later, we would see one of those powerful miracles.

The rebel group M23 had, for some time, been threatening to take over the city of Goma, where the Peace Lives Center and eighty young peacemakers (fifty-two former child soldiers and twenty-eight children orphaned by war) resided. But few people thought they could actually do it. For nearly eight months there had been advances, threats, retreats, and declarations by M23, a group known to

be raping women, killing, and recruiting child soldiers, but the fighting remained outside the city of Goma.

Many children we worked with in the villages outside Goma had been forced to flee in the fighting. Most were found; some were not. More than five hundred thousand people had been displaced since the previous April and lived in exile from their homes and communities. During the preceding weeks, we had been in close contact with our Congolese teammates, receiving updates, praying with them, and praying for them. Fear was ever-present and very real. I felt as though my children were in the pathway of a life-destroying storm—a storm I had no power to stop.

But stronger than the fear in our hearts was the faith of our children and Exile's teammates in Congo.

Trying to prepare for the worst and create a possible evacuation plan, I asked David by phone, "What do you *think* will happen? Do you think the rebels will come, or do you think Goma will be spared?"

He responded, without hesitation and with complete trust, "We do not know. We have prayed to God, and now we will have to wait to see what He decides." Often, when I called David in the evening, he did not answer the phone because he was with his family in prayer—for hours. Prayer can be your sustenance, especially when you are fearing for your life and the safety of your family. It is a priceless, utter dependence on God that we, in the West, rarely taste.

Matthew and I were in Washington, DC. Coincidentally, we were meeting with members of Congress to advocate for some of the very children we were holding up in prayer. It was on this trip that

we hoped to deliver the children's letters to the White House. The previous day, I had sent an email to a connection at the White House. We prayed that God would make a way for the two hundred letters to be delivered to the president and for a meeting to be approved. As we ended our day in DC, the dawn brought bullets and bombs to our family in Congo.

I woke the next morning to the following text from David: "War is around Goma. Camps are destroyed. Our soldiers are running. We are at home with nowhere to go. Send texts for any info. Will tell you when to call."

My heart stopped. My breath left me. Even as I write these words and recall this story, my heart races and tears fall. I got on my knees, offered a tearful, pleading prayer to God, then immediately responded with texts of questions. "Are the children safe? Should we try to move them? Would it be helpful to call the United Nations to see if they can send someone?" Praying. Waiting. Checking news sources.

I sent emails to friends at the United Nations base in Congo asking for protection and contacted other friends in Goma to better understand the situation. Then more texts, more prayers, more waiting.

Our flight back to Nashville was the following morning, so this was our only day in Washington to deliver the letters. If the White House emailed or contacted us, we needed to be ready to go. This

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was our chance. The original plan was to purchase a beautiful gift box in which to place the letters and drawings. In the event that we received a green light, I wanted to present the letters as though they were a treasure—a gift to the president—because they were.

At about noon, Matthew and I taxied to a store to purchase what we needed. He was checking out, and I was walking outside to make another phone call when I received another text from our teammates in Congo: “Bombs and much guns. They are fighting at the airport. We are under the bed. Much guns.”

“We love you all so much. We are praying. We are with you,” I responded.

But we weren’t actually with them. I wanted to be there, beside them, to pray and comfort the crying little ones at the center. I longed to be there dodging bullets with them, holding their hands. But instead I was some sixty-five hundred miles away, weeping on the sidewalk in Washington, DC. I felt utterly helpless.

Trying to push back every emotion, I called our contact at the United Nations.

“Philip, this is Bethany Haley in America. I texted and emailed you about our children at the Peace Lives Center. I’m wondering if someone can go to them. They are near the worst part of the fighting.”

“I am sorry, sister. We are evacuating our office at this very moment. Please send me the phone numbers I need, and I will contact David. I will do everything I can,” he said.

*Everything I can*, I thought. *I have to do everything I can.* During the next several minutes, I called and texted everyone I could think of who had connections in Goma as well as anyone living

nearby who could help. In my desperateness, I even contacted someone who had unique connections to black ops contractors in the area. Nothing. If I had had a plane at that moment, I think I would have attempted to fly it into Congo to try to get the children to safety. (Not that I can fly a plane, nor would I recommend this to anyone.)

Between sobs, I said, “There has to be a way. There has to be a way to help them.”

“We have done everything we can,” Matthew said as he tried to comfort me. “All we have now is prayer.”

So we prayed. *Desperately*. Because the lives of our loved ones depended on the One who heard our prayers. We also asked others to pray—thousands of others. Five words were repeated in every email, every post, every text message: “Storm the heavens with your prayers.”

And people did—families, friends, people we didn’t know, entire churches.

At about three that afternoon, my phone rang. The caller was our contact at the White House.

“I received your email about delivering the letters today,” she said. “I’m wondering if you could meet us at 5:00 p.m. We don’t have clearance to meet with you inside because it’s so late in the day, but we can meet you at the security gate.”

I had cried off all my makeup, my eyes were swollen, and every possible emotion ran through my body at once. I took a long, deep breath.

“Absolutely,” I said. And we were off.

Matthew and I went straight to the Resolve office to prepare the

letters and write a letter of explanation about this gift to the president. Would he actually see them? I didn't know. But just in case, I was not going to miss the opportunity.

We prepared the gift box and were on our way. Walking as quickly as possible, I checked my phone every two seconds as I waited on updates from our team in Congo. And I prayed with every step. Because my body was walking to the White House, my spirit was overjoyed; because our children and friends were facing such terror, my heart was in pieces. It was nighttime in Goma, and the evening had brought a bit of calm to the fighting.

"Thank you for taking the time to deliver these to us," the White House contact said, smiling. "There are members of the National Security Council upstairs and ready to read some of these letters now."

"Will the president see these letters?" Matthew asked.

"His staff will read the letters and select some for the president. He will definitely see a few of these," she responded.

Delivering the children's letters felt sacred. Having their voices heard by the president and his staff added a

new chapter to their stories of redemption. The moment was filled with glory.

Walking away, I realized what walking on cloud nine felt like. God had been, as always, faithful. From the day those tender hands wrote their letters, He knew. He made a way. I had no doubt.

Joy was overflowing, but reality grounded me quickly. Before

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The area around the  
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bed, more text messages from our Congolese brothers came: “Heavy shooting now. We can see their faces. The area around the center is covered by M23 rebels.”

“We are praying on our knees. We pray to a God bigger than war. How are the children? Are they safe?” I asked.

The response was remarkable. “They are singing the hope songs and the songs of peace. Your prayers are keeping us safe and strong. We thank you for your prayers. The children greet you. We know we have a great Provider.”

In the middle of war, in the midst of bullets, surrounded by rebels, strong voices and sweet spirits were singing songs of hope and peace to calm their fears.

The next few days, more people than I knew forwarded our messages and joined us in prayer. What I also didn’t know at the time was that a miracle was happening around the Peace Lives Center in Goma. The youngest children were lying on the ground during the fighting with mattresses over their bodies to protect them in case bombs landed inside the house. Bullets were flying overhead, and mortar bombs were falling around the center. After the fighting stopped and the guns went silent for a time, we found out just how faithful the Lord had been.

Not a single bullet harmed a child.

Not one bomb fell in the center.

Other civilians lost their lives, and our staff told us there were several dead bodies around the center and many tragically lost their lives in the conflict. Rebels had surrounded the area, but not one came to the door to take boys who were already trained to fight. *Not one.*

## Reflections from My Journal...

## At the Foot of a Volcano

I'm remembering a scene in the movie *Mother Teresa*; she is riding through the roads of Calcutta. It's like she begins to see her surroundings through a different set of eyes as she travels the streets and looks out the window. The cries of the hurting seem louder than normal. Those begging in the streets seem to call her name—the empty, the lonely, the poor, the physically distorted. All begin to call to her heart and at one point she says, "I have lived here for many years, but it is like I am seeing it for the first time." It changed her.

I'm also remembering a day that transformed my soul. That gave me a new vision of the suffering in Congo. A new heart.

Wrapping up trauma training for more than a hundred local leaders at HEAL Africa, the rest of the team left for the Rwandan border. I was staying a few more days to work with our new programs and was excited to have some time alone. The driver and I played a delightful game of charades as I attempted to explain where I would be staying (I was getting good at this game—plus it's quite humorous). Knowing just enough Swahili and French to get me into trouble, I tried to keep my

mouth shut. After a good laugh, we pulled out to start the journey.

Driving in quiet. Windows down. Sunset to the left. I soaked in the city of Goma. Starting to take a few shots with my camera, I am gently reprimanded.

"No photo. Not good. Police and then the jail. It is Congo, you know. It is terrible."

Putting my camera to my side, I knew I would be using it again. Unfortunately, I'm stubborn like that. Slowly, I began to see that tiny part of Congo as I have never seen it before. Nothing to distract me. Just me. And Congo. The empty seemed to cry to me. The lost were desperate to be found. The wounded screamed to my heart. Black dirt streets. Black volcanic rock walls. Black lava-stained city.

And then I see a figure moving across the road.

At first I can't make out what I am seeing. It looks like an animal, but as we approach, I see more clearly. It is not an animal at all. It is a man. He is a young man in the heart of Goma traffic ... crawling across the road.

This is not just any road. The ash-covered roads in Goma were "repaved" by a volcano a few years back. The 2002 eruption of Mount Nyiragongo had wiped out 70 percent of the city and destroyed forty-five hundred houses and buildings. The aftereffects are everywhere. Houses built with

lava rock. Walls constructed with lava rock. And the roads, well, they are simply broken lava rock. Driving or riding in a car is like driving or riding up the side of a rocky mountain.

As we get closer, I see that the young man's hands have flip-flops on them. He is using them as shoes. On his hands. With two hands down, he lifts the rest of his distorted body and drags himself a few feet at a time. He lifts and scoots. Lifts and scoots.

Cars pass him. Motorbikes dodge him. Black dirt covers him.

As we pass him, time morphs into slow motion. Our eyes meet. He is to the right of the car. I look out the window and toward the ground at him. I smile. He returns the smile, so brightly. I wave. He waves back with a beaming smile. And we drive on. In the middle of the street. Using his hands as his feet. Mangled legs that must have been bruised and calloused. Covered with the black dirt of Congo. He smiles.

But that was just the beginning of the drive. We pass person after person who is maimed or handicapped. We see children walking on homemade crutches. We watch men and women riding makeshift tricycle-like wheelchairs, with pedals and gears at hand level so they can "pedal" the three-wheeled contraptions.

One man has no legs at all and only one small arm,

which he uses to steer a three-wheeled chair as two friends help push. Hundreds of people line the sides of the roads and we are in stop-and-go traffic. We keep passing the man in the three-wheeled chair, then we catch up to him and pass him again. His head is larger than the rest of his body and he has one limb where two legs were supposed to be. But he is smiling. Laughing, actually, along with his friends who are pushing from behind.

We pass child after child carrying six or seven jugs of water. Some empty, some full. We see women carrying charcoal and bundles of wood that seem triple their body size. I feel as though we are driving through the blackest darkness.

A few nights before, I had very intense and evil nightmares. I could feel it somehow—the heaviness. But what I felt more than anything was that these people of resilience didn't view their burdens as being as heavy as I did. As horrific as they were, they carried their burdens with a courage our culture can't imagine. Our culture, which some consider easier or more inviting than this one, lacks the inner strength I witnessed here.

My heart was heavy and my mind spinning from all I had seen. I kept going back to the young man crawling across the street. What is his name? What is his story? How does one begin to make a drop in this ocean?

I drive through neighborhoods in America and see

houses that engulf those who live within their walls. The cost of food that we (I) throw away in one month could feed hundreds here. And it's not okay. There should be an answer. Or at least we should not settle; we cannot give up. There is an answer. There has to be.

We finally pulled up to the guesthouse where I was staying. It felt like a piece of heaven in the midst of an abyss of anguish. I couldn't get into my room soon enough. I immediately took the cover off the bed, placed it on the cold concrete floor, and fell prostrate on the ground in a prayer position of surrender. Face to the floor. Hands out, palms up in surrender. Facing Lake Kivu, the volcano was to my right and the sunset faded in front of me. And I wept. Praying that God would take my heart and make it His. That He would show me my role. My heart ached for the injustice here, for those who suffer in the streets, for the women pedaling their makeshift wheelchairs. For the man crawling across the road.

And then I stopped.

I looked up, out over the lake, toward the sunset. I stopped and stood still. Wait!

He had smiled at me. He smiled! How was that possible? Crossing a volcanic road covered with remnants of ash, wearing flip-flops on his hands, which he used as feet. He smiled at me.

It was a moment that transported me to a new

perspective. I could see the truth more clearly. I felt the pain more acutely. Maybe, just maybe, that man has more within himself than I will ever hold in my wealth-filled hands. Maybe he has found more joy in the limitations in his life than we "privileged" will ever find in our bounty. Maybe it is not he who needs saving. And maybe, just maybe, he is the teacher and we are the students.

And maybe—I have found my Calcutta.

I remember another quote from Mother Teresa that brings me pause: "The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread, but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty—it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God."

Father God, I ask nothing more tonight than that You help me see life through spiritual eyes. Teach me. I am Your student. You are my Lord. I am Yours.