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THE RAGE IN RWANDA

A SUBURBAN CHRISTIAN
CONFRONTS GENOCIDE



I remember looking up from my newspaper during my bus ride to work one morning in the fall of 1994 and finding everything oddly in place. The AT4 bus was proceeding apace at 8:17 a.m. in the carpool zone. I was comfortably settled in my usual seat one row from the center double doors. My good-natured but nameless neighbors were sitting where they ought and respectively sleeping, reading or talking too loud, according to schedule. The low morning sun was where it should be, creating the glare that always forced me to look up from my paper at that point in the route. In that moment, pausing and looking around at all that American commuter normalcy, something inside me wanted to say, “Excuse me, friends, but did you know that less than forty-eight hours ago I was standing in the middle of several thousand corpses in a muddy mass grave in a tiny African country called Rwanda?”

ASCENSION: COMING BACK FROM A HELL ON EARTH

The Scriptures do not tell us very much about Jesus’ ascension, his

sudden transport from earth to heaven. But there have been moments in my life when I wish they did. All we know is that he was standing with his rather earthy friends on an earthen hill trying as ever to explain something, when “he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). That is all there is to it: one minute earth, the next minute heaven.

The very suddenness of it has always seemed to me something to ponder. What was it like for Jesus, as a man, to be transported in an instant from a horrifically fallen earth of darkness and death to a heavenly country of light and life—to a city that “does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light” (Revelation 21:23)? What sort of mental adjustment, if we may call it that, was required to move so suddenly from the nightmarish world of the cross—a world of betrayal and torture, of blood lust and wailing women—to paradise? What was it like for the divine Man in heaven to exchange in a moment the stench of death and his own encrusted grave clothes for the very fragrance of life, a white robe, a golden sash and a seat at the right hand of the throne of God—to be home at last with his Father, where “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4)?

These may be idle questions, but they have come to me with particular force as I have struggled with the unreality of my own ascension experiences—moments when I have been transported with almost ethereal speed from a hell on earth to a heaven on earth. In a matter of hours I have traveled from the slippery mud and corpses of mass graves in Rwanda to my usual seat at the right hand of my neighbor on our dependably boring and climate-controlled bus ride to my office in Washington, D.C. I remember reclining on a comfortable living-room couch, among friends and family in California, talking about soaring real estate values in Orange County when only days before I had been exhuming the remains of a woman raped and butchered by soldiers in the Philippines. Similarly, I recall watching from my train window as a low summer sun cast a Norman Rockwell glow across Little League fields in Connecticut

when only days before I had been in a country where boys of a similar age but of a different color were being beaten like animals by the South African police.

I don't know whether Jesus experienced dreams while he was here on earth or whether he felt as if he had awakened from a particularly bad one when he found himself back in heaven after his ascension from the earth. But I have certainly felt that dreamlike separation from reality when I have returned from these hellish places around the world. In no time at all it begins to feel as if the nightmare I came from in Rwanda or the Philippines or South Africa has taken place not in another country but on another planet. Back home, it simply does not feel *real* anymore.

Thus my sudden urge to make that announcement about the Rwandan genocide to unsuspecting fellow bus commuters came not from a desire to shock them but from a desire to somehow affirm for myself the human reality and relevance of my own experience. Could it really be true, and could it really have anything to do with me, that in a period of about six weeks in the spring of 1994, nearly one million defenseless women and children were hacked to death by their neighbors in the towns and villages of Rwanda?

I remember very well what I was doing in the spring of 1994. I was trying to assemble cribs for twin girls who were coming into our home, ready or not. I was trying to match wits, and losing, with the class clown in my sixth-grade boys' Sunday school class. I was seeking every advantage, and losing, in my effort to trade in our Honda Civic for a Taurus station wagon. I was prevailing in my arguments in a trial in federal court in Alabama, enjoying an occasional jog along the Potomac River in Washington, D.C., and denying that I had ever watched *Melrose Place* on TV.

Like most Americans in the spring of 1994, I was also starting to see horrible stories in the newspapers about some kind of "tribal warfare" in an African country I had never heard much about. Then I saw pictures on the evening news of bloated bodies floating down a river and heard commentators talking about genocide. Apparently thousands,

maybe even millions, of Tutsis were being slaughtered by their Hutu compatriots in a genocidal hysteria sweeping across Rwanda. But like most of the great ugliness transmitted by TV across the world and into my living room, the terror in Rwanda just did not seem real. It seemed *true*, but not real—not to me. I did not dispute the accuracy of the reports, but they might as well have been pictures from Sojourner on Mars or reports about people who lived in ancient Rome or statistics about how many bazillion other solar systems are in the Milky Way—all true enough, but not real. Not real like my kids when they are sick, not real like my job when I am behind in my work, not real like my neighbors when one of them has been in a car accident, not even real like my Midwestern compatriots when they have been flooded out of their homes.

MEETING THE TRUTH IN RWANDA

But then in the fall of 1994 I went to Rwanda. Only forty-eight hours before taking my seat on the AT4 commuter bus, I had been in Kibuye, Rwanda, a beautiful town sprawling on the banks of Lake Kivu and clinging to the green highlands of eastern Rwanda—and a horrible town—where thousands of Tutsis (mostly women and children) were hacked and beaten to death by their Hutu neighbors over a period of several days. I was in Kibuye directing the U.N.'s genocide investigation in the country, on loan to the United Nations from the U.S. Department of Justice. My job was to march down a list of mass grave and massacre sites provided by U.N. military intelligence and deploy international investigative teams to gather preliminary evidence against the perpetrators. The evidence would eventually be turned over to the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which was just being established to bring the murderers to justice. There in Kibuye and in scores of other towns and villages across the country, the nightmare became real for me.

Kibuye was my last mass grave site before I was to head back home to America. One of my twin infant daughters had been stricken with meningitis, and while our worst fears had passed and she was on the

mend, it was time for me to return to my family. For this final project in Kibuye I brought four other members of my U.N. investigative team: Luc, a jovial, bear-sized criminal lawyer from French Canada; Jim, a delightfully wry police officer from Northern Ireland; Thaddi, a Rwandan school teacher who served as interpreter; and Nehemiah, our U.N. military officer from Zimbabwe who mostly missed his family back home. We arrived in Kibuye after a jarring, five-hour, four-wheel-drive journey from our headquarters in Kigali.

Once we arrived, the most dangerous part of our assignment was over. Though low-level civil war still claimed the country, land mines peppered the fields and bandits roamed the land, the greatest danger was simply traveling on the roads. Narrow, mud-washed trails over sheer mountain cliffs wound their way over the eastern highlands and delivered us to the banks of Lake Kivu—one of the great, deep-blue lakes of Africa—separating Rwanda from Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). Of course, the breathtaking beauty of the lake and its lush tropical shores were marred by human horror, for we knew that many corpses found their way to the placid waters during the genocide only a few months before.

Murder investigations generally begin where the bodies are, and as we arrived in Kibuye, I knew this meant that we would be heading for the biggest church in town—the Catholic cathedral and the adjoining Home St. Jeans, a complex of residential and educational buildings. The large, rough-hewn stone cathedral stood sturdy and squat on a peninsula over the lake. The stone and concrete interior had been scrubbed out, but as we stepped inside, we found the lingering, overpowering essence that could not be cleansed from the stones—the stifling, unnatural odor of a mass sepulcher. For within these walls and on this floor, hundreds of defenseless children, mothers, brothers and grandmothers had been hacked and clubbed to death in a murderous binge of torture and slaughter just months ago. Now the cathedral was empty, except for a lone, deranged man in rags, who had made the empty hall his home and was seen spending hours on his knees mumbling before the altar.

GATHERING ALL THE FACTS

Our task in the coming days was to conduct an investigative site survey, locate survivors and other witnesses and begin to account for the bodies. The story that emerged was a familiar one. On April 6, 1994, the president of Rwanda was killed in a mysterious plane crash in Kigali, the capital city. Almost immediately extremist Hutu factions within the government and the military joined with extremist Hutu paramilitary groups across the country to incite a murderous hysteria against Tutsis and moderate Hutu. The quasi-ethnic divisions between Hutu and Tutsis in Rwanda had been highly politicized over the years, with each side viewing the struggle as a zero-sum game between governance and extinction. Claiming that Tutsis had killed their president and were now coming to slaughter all Hutu, these fanatical Hutu leaders used government military forces, citizen militia and local mobs to start hunting down and killing the Tutsis in their communities. In the days following the plane crash Tutsis in and around Kibuye began to hear of prominent members of their community being dragged from their homes and murdered. Disheveled Tutsi corpses began to appear in the streets.

By April 17 the violence and hysteria had reached a full boil in Kibuye. Seeking safety in numbers and following the orders of the provincial governor and the mayor, hundreds of Tutsi men, women and children huddled together at the cathedral and the Home St. Jeans complex. During times of ethnic conflict in years past, many Tutsi had found sanctuary within the sacred walls of churches across the country. So as the fever of violence escalated in Kibuye and across Rwanda, the churches became packed to the rafters with thousands of trembling women and children seeking refuge. For the hundreds huddled in the Kibuye cathedral, however, there would be no refuge, only a lure, a trap and a grave.

On that day in April the provincial governor and mayor, who had ordered all Tutsi to the cathedral (ostensibly for their safety), ordered that the complex be surrounded. Eventually a force assembled from members of the Gendarmerie Nationale (the national police), the

local police from the commune, Interhamwe (the extremist Hutu militia group) and an armed mob of local civilians. The governor then unleashed this combined army upon the defenseless people.

Working largely with machetes, metal rods, spears and wooden clubs with nails partially embedded at the head, the mob cut the Tutsis—men, women and children—down by the hundreds and bludgeoned them to death.

In the days that followed, the Gendarmerie Nationale, Interhamwe and armed civilians hunted down and killed any survivors they could find. One survivor we interviewed, a young father of three children, said that he had seen his entire family murdered around him. He survived, but for three days he crawled among the dead on the cathedral floor, wounded and desperately thirsty. He said he nearly smothered a surviving child from another family who wanted to cry out when the murderers returned to beat more survivors to death.

When the orgy of murder had exhausted itself, the killers moved on to the Kibuye stadium where an even larger group of frightened Tutsis had gathered for protection. The brick-walled stadium sat between the town's main road and a steep hill made of the same red clay. By April 18 the police, Interhamwe militia and local mob had surrounded the stadium and were killing anyone trying to escape. Huddled by the thousands within the stadium walls and between the brick grandstand and the thick green grass in the oval, the Tutsi men, women and children cried out for rescue and for mercy, but found none. According to reports it was once again the provincial governor, Clement Kayishema, who raised his pistol to the air and fired off the signal to attack.

With a rush the blood-lusting mob waded into the sea of screaming and scrambling villagers. All day the mob hacked and blasted its way through its Tutsi neighbors—most deaths coming ultimately with a massive machete blow to the head. The exhausting task could not be completed in a single day, however, so with the police and militia sealing off the stadium during the night, the attackers took their evening rest, returning the next morning for another full day of

mass murder. Thus by the end of the next day the stadium, like the cathedral, was silent with death and heaps of broken bodies.

BEYOND THE FACTS: ARTIFACTS AND SURVIVORS TELL THEIR STORIES

By the time I arrived in Kibuye to direct the U.N. military in digging up the two mass graves where all these broken bodies had eventually been flung, it was easy to think of them as exactly that: nameless, faceless, decaying and disconnecting body parts. I had a job to do—to turn over enough of the mass grave at the cathedral and the stadium to corroborate the testimony of our witnesses, and then to move on. It was a filthy, stinking job, but it had to be done. We were busy, and it simply did not pay to think very hard about any particular story represented by any particular set of the remains I was now rearranging for forensic photographs. It had not seemed worth thinking too much about months ago when I saw the pictures at home on TV of Tutsi bodies floating down a river somewhere in Africa. Now that those same anonymous corpses were at my feet, it still felt more comfortable to think of them as a tragic mass rather than as anything like the individual people that I knew and cared about back home.

But at Kibuye, as at every massacre site in Rwanda, a painful glimpse of the truth always came through. This was not an undifferentiated mass of lifeless clods on the inevitable dust heap of a fallen world. In truth each body, now dull and limp in the mud, was actually a unique bearer of the very image of God, a unique creation of the divine Maker, individually knit within a mother's womb by the Lord of the universe. For as difficult as it was to imagine, each crumpled mortal frame had indeed come from a mother, one single mother who somewhere in time had wept tears of joy and aspiration over her precious child—a child endowed with the mysterious spark of Adam and an immortal soul. We would never number all the mother's children in these mass graves, but their Father in heaven had numbered even the very hairs of their heads.

It made my job infinitely more difficult to look at the dead this way, but day after day, pieces of the truth would work their way into my heart. These mass graves might appear as vague, dark images of generalized evil in an unjust world, but in truth they were an intimate family portrait with a story for every face—each member of the human family having lived and died as one individual at a time.

These stories gradually emerged from the artifacts and survivors. Every massacre site had stories to tell from what was left behind. Tutsis had fled their homes from miles around to seek safety in these churches, stadiums and schools. Many brought with them their most cherished personal possessions, and it was these items that now testified to their humanity in a way that their lifeless forms could not. Of course, anything of value had long been stripped away, leaving only those things that people clutch in death but robbers do not steal—pictures from a wedding day, a French Bible with a loving inscription, a small calendar with pictures of faraway places.

And then there were the stacks of government-issued, mandatory identity cards. In sites where we had only skeletal remains, the identity cards said everything that needed saying. Each card featured a fading black-and-white photograph, a picture of just one person, with a face different from all the rest, looking tired, proud, embarrassed or caught off guard. And each bore a check in the box next to the word *Tutsi*. Despite the mind-numbing scale of the genocide, these little pale-green cards spoke the truth about injustice in the world. Just as with famine, despite appearances, people really do die one person at a time.

Yet it was still hard for me to connect myself to these people—these people who were no more, people I never knew, people who must be so different from me and mine. It certainly made my work more tolerable to view them this way.

In the end it wasn't the remaining artifacts but the survivors in Rwanda who took me across a mysterious bridge that allowed me to behold the same human heart, eyes and hands of these, my departed neighbors.

THE TRUTH OF INJUSTICE BECOMES PERSONAL AND REAL

Some time ago I stopped being surprised by the existence of survivors from such massacres. As I have learned, human beings are strangely easy, and strangely hard, to kill. And each survivor has a miraculous and horrible tale to tell.

I once took testimony from a woman in the Philippines who had been shot in the torso several times by a high-powered firearm at short range. She had the scars to show for it. This woman, called Rose, and seventeen other members of her little village in Northern Luzon had been rounded up by angry soldiers and gunned down in the middle of a rice paddy. She was pregnant at the time of the massacre, and she and the baby were in good health when I met them more than a year after the incident. She was, in fact, a charming young woman—engaging, funny, clever—who had a certain guarded melancholy, no doubt, but no despair. She was a hard-working, generous mother and neighbor. She cared for many, and many cared for her. The resilient spark in her eyes and the life in her smile made one wonder how brilliant that sparkle must have been before her nightmare with the Philippine Army.

Nevertheless, had one of the bullets taken even a slightly different course through her abdomen, I would have never known of Rose. I would have only known of eighteen, rather than seventeen, lifeless victims of an ugly, dirty war in the Philippines. Rose told the truth about a mass grave and about massive injustice in our world, and so did the survivors I met in Rwanda.

Two little girls in Kibuye, with shy smiles of perfect and brilliantly white teeth, showed us the thick, pink scars across the neck of one and across the head of the other. They were being interviewed by Luc and Thaddi in a dilapidated schoolroom when Jim and I joined them after a very long day at the mass grave near the stadium.

I had been picking through human garbage almost all day. I was exhausted, sunburned and dirty. Jim and I pulled up one of the frail, narrow school benches in the back of the room and watched the conversation between Luc, Thaddi and the little girls. They told stories

about where they lived, the animals they liked, the families they used to have and the neighbors who were caring for them now. Through it all they were the picture of courage, sadness and sweetness. At the end of the interview they were dismissed and left the room tugging each other close with whispers. Luc finished his notes with Thaddi.

As Jim and I waited, I had too much time to think. I was pierced again with the true identity of the rubbish I had been forced to wallow in all day. These two little girls—they were the rubbish. Though “fearfully and wonderfully made” (like my own two little girls at home), the awfulness of evil, the remoteness of Rwanda and the lifelessness of death had conspired to very nearly rob these little ones of their human face. I found myself trying to blink back the wave of emotion and the tears in my eyes. I stared hard at the smooth concrete floor and started quietly whistling through my teeth.

After a moment, I heard my own idle tune: “Jesus loves me / This I know / For the Bible tells me so / Little ones to him belong / They are weak / But he is strong.” In another moment, I heard Jim whistling a soft harmony behind me. Apparently he too had been to Sunday school. We sat waiting a bit longer for Luc to finish, walked back to the truck and rode silently home to our base camp. Jim and I never spoke of the moment to one another.

SEEKING JUSTICE: GOD’S COMPASSION, COMMANDMENT AND COMMISSION

These were tough moments for me, but there was no longer any question about what this horrible injustice in Rwanda had to do with me, a suburban American lawyer who rode a bus to work during the week and taught sixth-grade Sunday school on the weekend. It had everything to do with me because of what my God loves and what my God hates. To quote another Sunday school chorus: “Jesus loves the little children / *All* the children of the world / Red and yellow, black and white / They are precious in his sight.” Rwanda might seem far away, and these Rwandan children might seem different from my own, but I do not know anything about my God or the truth of my own

childish choruses if I do not understand that, truly, “red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight.”

Moreover, this has everything to do with me because God hates injustice.

The LORD examines the righteous,
 but the wicked and those who love violence
 his soul hates. . . .

For the LORD is righteous,
 he loves justice. (Psalm 11:5, 7)

The Bible says that when officials are acting like “wolves tearing the prey, shedding blood, destroying lives to get dishonest gain,” the Lord looks for someone to “stand in the breach,” to “intervene” and to “seek justice” (Ezekiel 22:27, 30; Isaiah 59:15-16; 1:17 NRSV). By the time I arrived in Kibuye, I was much too late to stop the killing. I couldn’t bring the dead back to life or back to their families. But it matters to God whether the evildoers are brought to justice:

[The wicked man] lies in wait near the villages;
 from ambush he murders the innocent,
 watching in secret for his victims.
 He lies in wait like a lion in cover;
 he lies in wait to catch the helpless;
 he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.
 His victims are crushed, they collapse;
 they fall under his strength.
 He says to himself, “God has forgotten;
 he covers his face and never sees.”
 Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God.
 Do not forget the helpless.
 Why does the wicked man revile God?
 Why does he say to himself,
 “He won’t call me to account”?
 But you, O God, do see trouble and grief;
 you consider it to take it in hand.

The victim commits himself to you;
you are the helper of the fatherless.
Break the arm of the wicked and evil man;
call him to account for his wickedness
that would not be found out. (Psalm 10:8-15)

It matters to me, therefore, that the leaders of the Kibuye massacre (the governor, the mayor and their accomplices) have been captured and indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda. As I sat down to write *Good News About Injustice* in 1998, they were being “called to account.” The prosecution had presented closing arguments and recommended four terms of life imprisonment on counts of genocide and crimes against humanity, and a minimum of forty additional years on violations of the Geneva Convention. This was partly through the testimony of survivors and witnesses that we interviewed inside that little schoolroom—including those two little orphans with shy smiles of perfect teeth. Over the next few years the Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Tribunal Courts found these men guilty of aiding and abetting genocide, committing genocide and conspiring to commit genocide. They were each sentenced to ten to twenty-five years in prison.

Of course, convicting the war criminals of Kibuye ultimately cannot bring true justice and healing to Rwanda or to those little girls. Nor can it or any other human mechanism promise ultimate peace and salvation for the human race. But by calling these men to account we can hope that the next generation of wicked “princes” will think twice about perpetrating such abuses, and the dead will not be mocked by impunity for their murderers.

In any case, seeking justice is a straightforward command of God for his people and part of Christ’s prayer that his Father’s will be done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). At least for me as a Christian, it is part of my testimony about the character of the God I love:

You hear O LORD, the desire of the afflicted;
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,

defending the fatherless and the oppressed,
 in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.
 (Psalm 10:17-18)

The great miracle and mystery of God is that he calls me and you to be a part of what he is doing in history. He could, of course, with no help from us proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with lifeless stones, feed the entire world with five loaves and two fish, heal the sick with the hem of his garment, and release all the oppressed with his angels. Instead God has chosen us—missionaries, agricultural engineers, doctors, lawyers, lawmakers, diplomats, and all those who support, encourage and pray for them—to be his hands in doing those things in the world that are important to him.

When Christ ascended into heaven, he left behind only two things for the fulfillment of all his aspirations for the world: his Spirit and his followers. With the Holy Spirit we have been commissioned to demonstrate Christ's love for all the world: to disciple the nations, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to heal the broken and even to rescue the oppressed. When we sing that all children are "precious in his sight," we must not forget that he, of whom we sing, has declared himself to be the God of justice. Scripture describes the one who follows God:

He will deliver the needy who cry out,
 the afflicted who have no one to help.
 He will take pity on the weak and the needy
 and save the needy from death.
 He will rescue them from oppression and violence,
 for *precious is their blood in his sight.* (Psalm 72:12-14,
 emphasis added)

The Scriptures promise that "a scepter of justice will be the scepter of [God's] kingdom" (Psalm 45:6). And while the kingdom of God will be complete only in the coming of Christ, today our great joy and privilege is to work as collaborators with the Creator in extending his kingdom over one more life, one more family, one more neighborhood, one more community. The people of God will find in Christ the

compassion and courage to engage the call to justice, for we know God *promises* that we who do not “become weary in doing good . . . will reap a harvest if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:9).

WHEN WE SEE INJUSTICE, WE HAVE A CHOICE

Many who lack faith will shrink away from the distant, dark world of injustice. Still others will water down the Word and imagine that they can love God without loving their brother, or wanting to “justify” themselves, they will invent elaborate quibbles with Jesus about who is and is not their neighbor (Luke 10:25-37; 1 John 3:10, 16-18). To these the Lord says:

When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen. . . .
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:15, 17 NRSV)

Others, by contrast, recognizing the voice of their good Shepherd will respond with joy: “Here am I. Send me!” (Isaiah 6:8). They will embrace the orphans and widows of the world, as their Savior did. With the hurting, the oppressed and the abused in mind, these people will come to the Master with their meager offering, their widow’s mite, their inadequate loaves and fishes, and simply say, “Jesus, can you do anything with these?” And while the men “close” to Jesus will scoff, “How far will they go among so many?” Jesus himself will say, “Bring them here to me” (John 6:9; Matthew 14:18).

To be witnesses to the love of Christ in such a large, brutally unjust world seems overwhelming and beyond our calling. Even so, Jesus speaks to us. When he departed this earth for heaven—so suddenly, so mysteriously—he left much unexplained. But he wanted us

to know one thing: we will receive from him power, the power to be his witnesses in word and deed “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8-9).

For the little Filipino girl abducted into prostitution, for the Pakistani boy chained to a weaving loom, for the Latin American widow pushed off her land and even for the African father rotting in his prison cell without a charge or a trial, we share Christ’s saving love on the cross and the servant love of our hands. As it was in days of old, “it will be a sign and witness to the LORD Almighty in the land of Egypt. When they cry out to the LORD because of their oppressors, he will send them a savior and defender, and he will rescue them” (Isaiah 19:20).

“Here am I, Lord. Send me!”

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