

Chapter 7

*“Now the LORD said to Abram . . .
‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’”*
—Genesis 12:1–3

Carly and Gremma had indeed prayed for the Jaro people at church on Sunday. Pastor Matt, an Iowa boy now in his forties, loved to see his little flock at Eagle Pond Community Church bow their heads in prayer from their corner in the world. Their blond-brick church shared a two-block area with four other churches, apparently a planned district of some sort from a past city council agenda. The Community Church congregation grew to 120 members, and they used to meet in the theater space of the Eagle Pond Elementary School.

Twenty years ago, the elders voted to purchase the old Congregational Church, a generous offer from the Congregationalists in a friendly transition. A few grandmas and grandpas from their aging membership joined Pastor Matt’s flock while others found churches elsewhere. During the past two decades, the parking lot expanded and a multi-purpose room increased the outreach to young families and youth who heard the Bible taught clearly and saw neighbors loving one another.

God honored his word, the Spirit worked in hearts, and the church grew.

A few days earlier, Pastor Matt had emailed Jay & Ann that he would lead the congregation in prayer that week for the Jaro people.

Jay replied, “Please show this picture of a family of three, sitting under a mango tree. This family is special to Ann and me because the mom is a sister to Keeja, a Soloma friend of mine. Keeja’s sister married a man of the Jaro tribe, and life has been hard for them, especially since there have been two years of little rainfall in their village.”

Their worn clothes and thin bodies in the photo illustrated Jay’s words. For Pastor Matt, Gremma, and several others, that picture on the big screen in church on Sunday reminded them that the Jaro people were real. Although the Jaro would be represented at Jesus’ throne in Heaven, no one knew, except God, whether this specific family under the tree would be saved from an eternity of suffering. Pastor Matt hoped that they would embrace the good news of Jesus. As he stared at the image of the little family under the mango tree, his heart felt a burden for the Jaro people, a family of the Earth not yet blessed by God as one of his own.

“Jay & Ann have asked us to pray for the Jaro this week,” Pastor Matt told the congregation Sunday morning. “We know that the Jaro of East Africa are unengaged. There is no missionary among them and no known plan to plant a healthy church. Today, they are among the more than 950 people groups that are unengaged in the world. Thousands of Jaro families have not heard the good news of Jesus Christ. May God grant us faith to believe that it doesn’t have to be this way and that our prayers can make a difference so that the Jaro people become part of God’s family.”

“You can see,” Pastor Matt said, turning toward the screen, “that Swedish Jay stands out a bit in the photo. He is the only foreign *mzungu* face in the group, and the only one smiling. Jay told me that many in rural villages do not smile in photos, even though they love to laugh and dance. This little family, however, has many reasons *not* to smile. Even as I speak, Jay and Keeja are biking to a village funeral.”

Half a world away, on sandy paths in East Africa, two bikers pedaled along. Keeja led the way, knowing which cow path and which dirt road would bring them to the Jaro village, three hours away. It was slow travel. He and Jay would have to carry their bicycles on their shoulders wading through a stream where the bridge was out.

People groups are unengaged for many reasons; geographic isolation is one of them.

As they biked along, Jay saw an opportunity to learn. “Keeja, tell me more about your sister’s story.”

“OK,” Keeja paused, wondering where to begin. “It hasn’t rained much these past few years. My sister’s family did not have enough corn and beans to get them through to the next harvest. Her husband, desperate to feed my sister and their baby, traveled to the city to find work, perhaps as an all-night guard for a home or business. He resorted to selling sunglasses along the road, hawking his product to drivers stuck in traffic jams. He scratched out a few shillings, sending the vast majority back to my sister with the help of a bus driver. To save more food money for his family, he slept in the urban slums, sharing a shack constructed of cardboard and rusting metal sheets. He got sick, lost a lot of weight, and a water-borne illness caused severe diarrhea. His body lost the fight, and he passed away. Slum neighbors wrapped his body in white cloth and sent him back to his grieving community.”

“I am so sorry, Keeja,” Jay said.

The two pedaled in silence for a while. Jay thought about the story, and he guessed that the father probably got AIDS when living in the slums for so long away from his wife. Without strength and faith in Jesus, the temptations to be unfaithful in marriage caught up with many men living alone in the city. The reality of AIDS was still difficult for families to talk about, and Keeja may not have known if AIDS had killed his brother-in-law.

“So, my sister became a widow with a 2-year-old daughter,” continued Keeja. “She did her best to raise their little girl, Penda. My sister spent long hours in a sweet potato field weeding and shaping potato beds. When harvest came, her efforts earned her fresh potatoes for a few months, followed by months of sliced potatoes dried in the sun and made edible when boiled in water. You and I have eaten those before.”

“Yes,” Jay replied. Jay recalled that he liked fresh sweet potatoes much better than the dried version. “Did they have other food, too?”

“Not really,” replied Keeja. “Since she was a widow and part of the Soloma tribe, her Jaro neighbors didn’t help much. And because of the lack of rain, they didn’t have much to share anyway. When she got sick, her strength was already low due to a poor diet. Neighbors called the witch doctor to bring charms for her wrist, roots to bury around the mud-brick home, and some potion to drink. The hospital was two hours away by rented vehicle or 10 hours by bike. Neither choice was seriously considered—the vehicle too expensive and her body too weak for a bike ride. A bad cough turned into pneumonia, and her jagged breathing became silent, leaving Penda an orphan at 4 years old.”

Again, Jay was left with just a few words, his heart burdened. “I am so sorry, Keeja.”

After some quiet biking, Keeja continued, “Penda’s grandma on her father’s side lives in the Jaro village and was asked to raise the little girl. However, the grandma is very old and poor, so she asked if I would. Today, we will bring Penda home with us, I hope.”

Jay knew that these family negotiations could be stressful and perhaps expensive. Sometimes, family members demanded money to release a child. “I will help any way I can, Keeja,” Jay offered, “including being an uncle to Penda when she comes to your home.”

Penda is the Swahili word for love, and Jay would do his best to love this little girl who had faced so much tragedy. As they continued to bike, both men prayed silently for Penda and for success in their journey to bring her home safely.

Back at Eagle Pond Community Church, others were praying, too.

Pastor Matt led the way. “As Paul writes to the Corinthians, ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.’”

A ripple of “Amens” affirmed the truth of God’s word.

“Our hearts are burdened,” Pastor Matt continued, “by this loss and pain. It hurts so much to know the mother and the father in this photo are now gone, and a child is orphaned. Please,

God, comfort Keeja and little Penda as they grieve. May the hope of Jesus break through to the Jaro people so that they will know that death is not the victor. In Jesus name, we pray, Amen.”

From his vantage point in Heaven’s Theater One, Harland proudly watched his Christina turn to God in the midst of the congregation. “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord,” Harland said.

Those next to him shared a quiet “Amen.”

One of them, Marge, turned to a Heaven newbie sitting next to her. The look on his face said he had not guessed at this turn of events in the story on the big screen. A master quilter in her lifetime, Marge loved the tapestry metaphor to explain action on earth. She gladly brought the newcomer up to speed.

“God weaves a tapestry of stories,” Marge explained. “The tangled knots and snarls on the backside are often all we could see when we were on Earth. Of course, up here, we can see the front of the tapestry beautifully displays his glory in a magnificent design.”

The newbie nodded. “It’s a metaphor.”

“Yes, we called it a ‘metaphor’ on Earth. But here in Heaven, we get to watch it happen in real time! Just watch. When God turns his work over, the tangles and knots transform into a light show among the stars, flashing his glory to the Earth below. You’ll see.”

On cue, the big screen of Theater One showed the backside of a tapestry, a snarly mess of threads, knots, and colors. The death of Penda’s parents was represented by a blotch of red and green tangled knots.

A moment of silence came over the theater out of respect for the two lost souls who would not be joining them in Heaven. But the faces of the theatergoers glowed with anticipation, awaiting the transformation of the tapestry.

On screen, the matted mass of snarls flipped over, spraying into 3D a multi-color display of lights that rose from the screen to fill the starry sky above. An arc of green light intersected a blaze of red, colliding in a shower of glory. At that moment, everyone in Theater One instantly comprehended the connections between pain and beauty in the story they just heard. Although those on Earth did not understand how God would glorify his name in an orphan’s life, the beautiful story was illuminated in the starry sky of Heaven.

Gasps of “Oh!” and “Praise God!” rose like a doxology in the theater. Faith had become sight, and hope for the future existed as a celebration in the present. The citizens of Heaven grinned seeing that little Penda’s future life would be one of significance and joy.

Harland reacted with the crowd, “Ooh! Ah! The work of God is vastly better than any fireworks show I remember on Earth!”

Down in Eagle Pond and East Africa, more fireworks were about to begin.