

Chapter 9

For he [Christ] must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. — 1 Corinthians 15:25–26

Keeja and Jay arrived at the village funeral. Two teenage boys greeted them and parked their bicycles in a shady spot.

Before leaving his bike, Jay removed a plastic bag from the rack. The sack held a water bottle, a small Bible, and a Ziploc baggie of roasted peanuts—part of his Missionary 101 survival gear. The kit was complete with a Leatherman multi-tool and small Mag light strapped to his belt. Although the flashlight was small, the top unscrewed, revealing a light bright enough for nights with no electricity. Often, the light became a focus for a devotional pointing to Jesus as the Light of the World. On late-night village returns, the flashlight lit Jay’s way forward along sandy pathways.

The community had been preparing for the funeral long before the two bikers arrived. The smell of boiling beef from wood-burning fires filled the air. Groups of women stirred pots and tended fires. Others mixed large metal pans with *ugali* or rice. Some pigweed had been found near the river, so small bowls of greens were stewing with tomatoes and onions.

Most everyone would eat meat that day, and guests would get the “special parts”: braided intestine, liver, tongue, kidneys, and more. As a *mzungu* from a foreign land, Jay had grown accustomed to a bountiful bowl of cow-part-delicacies delivered to his platter, servings he slid toward Keeja who received them with equal gladness.

Happiness was hard to come by on this day, though. Keeja’s deceased sister had been carefully wrapped in white cloth like her husband had been upon his death two years back. Her body was kept in the family’s home until the day of burial. Neighborhood men had kept their cultural obligation to dig a grave on the family property. In fact, all neighbors were expected to attend the funeral and to pay a few shillings to help with funeral expenses. Often, families had little savings, so they relied on community help for funeral costs.

When it came time bury the body, elders lit torches of fire, reached down into the grave, and moved the flames from one end of the dirt hole to the other. From Keeja’s explanation, Jay learned that the Jaro believed that fire would burn away evil spirits that might haunt his sister’s eternity.

Community members lowered the body into the grave, placing it on a small shelf dug out to hold her. No wooden casket carried Keeja's sister to her grave, just two men putting her into the dirt shelf before others took turns scooping and scraping soil to cover her. No words were spoken. No songs were sung.

No one living in this Jaro village knew Jesus and the hopeful words that he shared while walking on Earth. "I am the resurrection and the life," Jesus had said. "Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."

As Jay waited around hoping to develop an appetite for the food he smelled, he watched the elders walk their torches through the home of Keeja's sister. They, too, had the hope of burning away evil forces that might linger after her death.

Keeja approached Jay, introduced him to a Jaro man, son to an elder of a distant Jaro village. Keeja explained, "This is the son to one of the chiefs of the Jaro people, and his father is very familiar with the old ways of the Jaro culture." Greetings ensued.

"I'd love to learn more and maybe make a visit some day," Jay told the son of the chief.

The chief's son gave the expected cultural response in the word of welcome, "*Karibu*."

"*Asante*," Jay answered, acknowledging the welcome with equal cultural appropriateness, already thanking God for this tiny crack of light. "I will get all the prayer warriors working on that—Gremma, Pastor Matt, and everyone back in the office."

The office of Africa Ministry Partnership, or AMP, faithfully staffed many prayer warriors, not to mention those on the prayer chain living at AMP's agency retirement community. Jay & Ann enjoyed visiting those grandmas and grandpas in Florida, listening to their years of African service fueled by a passion for Jesus. Even at an advanced age, they continued to live out AMP's motto, "Power in Partnership."

Jay silently prayed that more of the power of Jesus would change this village and those who had been standing near the quiet grave.

Even in a place that looked so bleak, God was at work. A door of hope for the Jaro people began to open. Those in Theater One smiled as a burst of light appeared in the darkness where there had been none before. The light of hope surged into the starry sky above Theater One, colorful ribbons of green and purple glowing like the Northern Lights of Minnesota on a cold, clear night. But on this day, the flash of hope was just a glimpse. Darkness descended upon the Jaro again.

The Harley biker slapped his knee. "Oh come on, baby! I want to see more of that!"

Jesus replied, “Although it won’t be on this day, you will see more, my son—and soon.”