

Chapter 13

“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”—Nehemiah 1:11

Jay didn't consider himself a motorcycle enthusiast, but he had to smile as he sped up and down steep river beds, spraying mud and water dramatically from the wide tires of his Suzuki 250. Jay may have been the first *mzungu* to explore this biker's paradise. Keeja held on tightly, wishing for the slowness and safety of his heavy, Chinese one-speed bicycle.

Adventures in mud had not brought them here, though. They were on their way to a secluded village, home to a cousin of Keeja's and of the Jaro people. Jay and Keeja had a plan to visit an influential elder of the Jaro who was familiar with the old ways and possibly influential enough to make a gospel entrance to this unengaged tribe.

“Oh, God, grant success today and mercy in the sight of this man, just as you granted success to Nehemiah when he asked for the help of the king,” prayed Jay. He had asked Gremma and many others to pray for this meeting, too, and he hoped that they were seeking the Lord's help with him.

Arriving in the village, they asked directions to the elder's home. When they found it, they parked the motorcycle, stretched their legs, and looked around. The compound—two mud-brick houses and a cow pen—was surrounded by mango trees and a fence made of thorn branches and reeds. A wooden gate closed off the circular zone of dirt where cows and goats slept. The main building of mud bricks was circular in the Jaro style, topped with a thatched grass roof. The other mud-brick building served as a pantry for dried corn, red beans, dried sweet potatoes, and *ndengu*—a type of chickpea.

A young man came out to greet them, and Jay and Keeja replied in the Jaro language. Keeja was fluent, and Jay knew some greetings and a few other words. For Jay's benefit, the men switched the conversation to Swahili as they exchanged the news of the day.

As in English, the standard social replies suggest that everything is “fine,” but the real news comes out in the conversation that follows.

Keeja was a relative to this household due to his sister's marriage, so Keeja and the elder's son went through the process of finding out the relationship.

The elder's son began, "Who is the father of your deceased sister's husband?"

Keeja replied, "Msumba, a retired teacher."

"Oh yes. Msumba is a nephew to my father's younger brother," added the elder's son.

Once that connection was established, they knew how to greet each other and how to relate to each other's family. Because Keeja's connection came through a younger brother, Keeja was expected to give a gift to this family to show honor to the older brother. Fortunately, Jay and Keeja had arrived with some bars of soap and bags of sugar, which were happily received by the homestead.

The elder's son welcomed Jay and Keeja to the chairs and set up under the compound's biggest mango tree.

"*Asante*," Jay replied politely, and he continued in Swahili. "Is the elder at home?"

"Yes. I will tell my father that we have guests," he replied. The elder's son went into the large, circular home.

In another home far away, Gremma was up early—a mug of tea in hand—rocking slowly back in forth as the words of her prayer overflowed from a heart of faith. "God, I come to you in the name of Jesus, and there is no greater Name. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, who intercedes for us at your throne. Jay has requested that success be given today and that you grant Jay and Keeja mercy in the sight of the elder. Many years ago, you showed your goodness to Nehemiah in this way, and I know that the king's heart is a stream of water in your hand. May your kingdom come today; your will be done. Glorify your name, O Lord, for you are worthy."

Although Gremma could not see her prayer reach Heaven, the Lord Jesus and all those in Theater One had a beautiful view of the colorful powder drifting down from the starry skies and into the golden bowl. The sweet smell of roses filled the theater.

Jesus smiled, and his kind face filled the screen. "Thank you, little Christina, for your words of faith. I have seen before our Father, at my throne, that your prayers have pleased him. Hold on in faith as you trust in the timing that we have determined before the world began."

After Gremma completed her prayer, she sat down silently before God. She didn't hear the words that Jesus spoke in Theater One, but peace came upon her, and she, too, smiled. She knew that her prayer had reached the throne of grace. Now, it was time to wait on the Lord in the strength that he provides.

The Jaro chief emerged from his round home with a small, tightly woven basket cupped in his hands. Long greetings and introductions followed. Keeja remembered to greet him according to the established relationship of a younger brother greeting an older one.

After a bit of sitting, Jay's missionary training brought him to his learner role using his main tool, the question. "What is in the elder's basket?"

"Homemade beer," Keeja replied as the elder smiled, showing a few gaps in his teeth. Keeja continued, "It is brewed from the first corn harvested this season. The corn harvest this year is below average, but the family has some land near the river, so they will have enough corn to feed their family. Not all families in this area are that fortunate, though. The soil quality, low rainfall amounts—they provide an adequate environment for millet, not corn."

Jay understood the context of Keeja's words. When corn was introduced to the Soloma and the Jaro people many years ago, it quickly became a dinner favorite because of corn's sweet flour taste and smooth texture. Corn was more pleasant to the tongue and easier to digest than the tougher millet. So, when rains were plentiful, people feasted on corn. However, as more trees were cut down for firewood and not replanted, rainfall had become less consistent, bringing many challenges to those relying on corn.

"When will he drink the homemade beer?" asked Jay, back to his training and the art of using questions.

"He won't," answered Keeja.

Jay looked confused, a common expression for a *mzungu*, and Keeja spoke rapid Jaro to the elder. The elder mumbled a quick reply. Jay understood only bits, but it was something about ancestors.

Keeja asked the elder a question, "May we go with you?"

"Yes." The elder replied. "But first we must eat."

Ugali and stewed pig arrived. Soon stomachs were full, and the men said so. *Tumeshiba*.

The men stood, and a granddaughter hustled over to pour water from a plastic pitcher onto their hands to wash away bits of *ugali* and greens, catching the wastewater in a plastic bowl below. The men thanked her for the food.

The elder led the way, walking along a well-worn path to a bigger path until all three stood at a village crossroad where two main dirt roads intersected.

The elder paused and stepped forward as Keeja and Jay watched. Jay felt a bit nervous, wondering what he would see next, but also honored to get a front-row seat. Jay knew a few words of the Jaro language, but the elder used vocabulary way beyond Jay's reach. Keeja was able to follow and translate.

The elder began, "Fathers and mothers of the past, I have come to remember you. I stand on the crossroad to offer up a sacrifice—the first brew from our harvest. We are thankful. Also, I am pouring out this sacrifice on the crossroad to ask for your goodness. We have done many wrongs this past year. Please take these away from us. Please do not let the cursing of your anger bring trouble into our lives. Instead, give us a blessing. We know that we deserve your cursing, but we beg of you to bless us this year."

Jay's eyes grew wide and a chill brought goosebumps to his Swedish arms. "God, could it be?" He prayed. "Might it be that you have prepared the Jaro to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ through this ritual?"

Another elder arrived at the crossroad and greeted him, acknowledging the sacred act just performed.

As the two talked in Jaro, Jay shared his excitement with Keeja.

"Keeja, I think that God made a way for us to share about Jesus with the Jaro! Did you see it?!"

Keeja inclined his head, intrigued. He nodded, "Go on."

"I believe that in their ancestor-honoring ceremony, God has hidden a spiritual key to helping the Jaro people unlock truths about Jesus. We just watched an elder pour out a sacrifice on the crossroad, as Jesus poured out his blood on a cross to forgive our sins. Instead of getting the anger that we deserve, God gives us blessing, as he asked of his ancestors. But Jesus' sacrifice is once and for all, not dependent on an annual harvest or work done by human hands."

Keeja was grinning now.

Jay continued, "God has provided the sacrifice, and his blessings are given to all who believe in Jesus and follow him as Lord and him alone. This foundational story could form the plan we need—the plan God may use to plant the first church among the Jaro people."

Keeja's eyes were fully opened to the parable God had just enacted at the crossroad.

As the three walked back to the home of the elder, Keeja explained the story of Jesus. "So, my father, the Maker of Heavens and Earth has a story for you and your people to hear that is like

the sacrifice you have just made. May we have your permission to come to the villages of the Jaro to tell them this story of God?"

A cold breeze brought dust into the faces of the men. Jay coughed, and the Jaro elder rubbed his eyes from the grit blown into his face.

"Do not let them come!" whispered Satan, desperately trying to knock this conversation off course.

The Angel Gabriel unfurled his wings to their full length, his face glowing with the bright light of Heaven. "No! The course has been set from eternity past," Gabriel pronounced. "The will of God be done!"

Satan looked away, blinded by the radiance of God's glory reflected on Gabriel's face.

There was silence for a moment.

Then the Jaro elder spoke. "Yes, my son. Please come. Do tell us this story of God."

The big screen of Theater One resolved into a close-up of Jesus's hands operating the slide-bars on an audio mixing console. His nail scars were prominent. As Jesus levered bars forward, the music of angels swelled to fill Theater One in heavenly surround sound.

Theatergoers held their breath in anticipation of a majestic sound heralding major events that would resonate for all eternity. At the climax of the angelic music, the massive sound boomed into the theater, echoing throughout Heaven: CLICK!

The name "Jaro" registered in the great book of peoples who would worship at the throne of the Lamb.

Those sitting in Theater One jumped out of their chairs; an exuberant standing ovation erupted.

"Yahoo! Yeah! Amen!" shouted the Harley biker of Heaven, fist-bumping all within reach.

Vibrant singing broke out in Theater One, joined by a chorus of multitudes throughout Heaven. The adoration was for Jesus, whose smiling face filled the big screen.

"Worthy are you to take the scroll and open its seals!" their anthem of praise rang out. "For you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation!"

The Jaro people now had a person and a plan. The gospel of Jesus Christ would grow and be fruitful among them.

The Jaro were unengaged no more.

Satan, defeated on this front, flew back to Eagle Pond. "Maybe I can salvage something there from this mess," he muttered.