

Unengaged No More

A Praying Grandma Rocks the World

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*Dedicated to my church, my family, and all the Grandmas
who have prayed for me over the years.*

Chapter 1

She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day.—1 Timothy 5:5

Time for tea. The kettle on the stove whistled for a response. A used Lipton tea bag rested nearby on an antique saucer, plenty of life remaining to plop it into service.

Gremma's droopy eyelids called for a bit of caffeine, especially to start the day. Her Swedish bones of 92 years had risen with the dawn again, a life of training from ages of Iowa farm work. But now Gremma's labor of love found application in new tasks. She no longer collected eggs, bottle fed baby calves, and weeded the gardens.

Gremma had moved into the town of Eagle Pond when Harland died, and she spent several hours a day in her lime-green, cushioned rocking chair. The comfort from the cushion and the strength in the wooden armrests reminded Gremma of her pioneering grandmother who left Sweden to live in America. When the winter days got cold, her mother's multi-colored knitted afghan, draped over the chair's back, was ready to serve. A little table stood alongside with a green candy dish, a panic button for medical assistance, a well-worn Bible, a pad of paper, and a pile of missionary newsletters.

When that stack of papers mixed with the fuel of prayer from a heart of faith, a spiritual fire erupted to battle with evil.

Those in heaven called Grandmother Christina a "prayer warrior." Gremma wouldn't call herself a warrior. She just prayed, knowing that prayer was used by God to thwart the plans of Satan.

When one of her six great-grandchildren asked, "Gremma, why do you pray?" Gremma replied, "Well, honey, I love to talk with God, and I believe he uses prayer to do amazing things."

Gremma grew up as Christina Olson, but for the past 20 years, most in the town of Eagle Pond called her "Gremma," a nickname that started with her first grandchild, Jay, who couldn't quite

pronounce “Grandma.” “Gremma” stuck. Even some of her closest friends replaced “Christina” with that name of endearment.

With her Iowa State Cyclones cup steaming with weak tea, Gremma shuffled into the living room and slowly planted herself in the rocking chair, re-adjusting her pink polyester pants and the flower-patterned blouse that politely covered her advancing mid-section. Age and a Midwestern diet had caught up with her. Cream of mushroom soup casseroles followed by Flavorite sandwich cookies from the refrigerated Christmas tin had graced Gremma’s table over the years, filling the hungry tummies of her family and guests. These days, Gremma didn’t cook as many casseroles, except for the funerals that seemed to be all too regular. Still, she loved those Flavorite sandwich cookies; a bit of white frosting flattened between a round, chocolate cookie on one side, a vanilla cookie on the other. Tasty, especially with tea, and about half the price of Oreos.

Although Gremma’s cooking patterns had changed, her hairdo had not. Every Thursday, her thinning hair got the weekly bouffant, a puffing from back-combing and 30 minutes under the hair dryer at Shirley’s Snips. Brown dye covered the grey as needed. It was a stylish ’do in the 50s, and it felt as right to Christina as did belonging to a community of “the widows,” many of whom kept Thursday hair appointments to share the news of Eagle Pond. The social time kept Gremma connected to news of weddings, funerals, and accidents. Last Thursday, Gremma’s spirit had felt the burden of various trials endured by others, and when she returned to her little one-story two-bedroom house, she had added two more people to her prayer list.

With the next hair appointment a few days off, Gremma cherished her extra prayer time this morning with her Father who loved her. Her graceful, rocking motion kept a gentle beat as words of praise to God flowed freely from her heart and onto her lips. Memorized Scripture blended into her prayers.

“Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.” She began with the Lord’s prayer before adding her own words, “O Lord, come in power, grace, and truth to the people of Eagle Pond. I lift up Verna to you, adjusting to raising a difficult child; and Della, whose son was seriously hurt in a motorcycle accident. Also, dear Jesus, may you bring hope and joy in your name to the Jaro people of East Africa. Come, oh Lord, come.”

Gremma was online in prayer at the speed of Infinity G.

Jesus, as always, heard Gremma’s prayer immediately. He smiled. He loved to hear his child talk with faith, and he delighted in her heart that loved him. Every word uttered in faith by his little Christina brought a pleasing aroma to him and would be used for final victory upon the Earth. Not one syllable of faith is wasted.

Victory on Earth had not yet come, however, and Satan, too, listened as Gremma prayed. In his disguise as an angel of light, Satan radiated handsomeness, his magnificent cream-colored wings helping him glide to and fro upon the Earth. But something in his appearance was off. Instead of a holy glow, Satan's eyes betrayed ages of lust, a longing for power that would never be fully satisfied. The destructive influence given to Satan by God was just that: Given. The days were evil, and God had given Satan influence on Earth for this time. Satan would make the most of it.

Satan quietly spoke as he stared at Gremma rocking back and forth, "The time has come for me to consider this old lady in Eagle Pond."

Chapter 2

The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.—Revelation 5:8

Many others watched Gremma pray. In Heaven, a great cloud of witnesses had packed-out Theater One, and their excited chatter spilled out into the lobby where self-serve popcorn machines blessed theatergoers with Heavenly Pop, lightly salted and beautifully coated in freshly melted butter. Generous buckets sat warmly in the laps of contented recipients. No lines of waiting, no cost, and no issues of calories or cholesterol. The beauty of transformation touched everything in Heaven—even the popcorn—and theatergoers greeted each other with the fullness of joy.

Today in Theater One, Jesus was hosting a live showing of Gremma's prayer entitled, "Jaro in the Balance." Everyone in the theater knew that the Jaro people of East Africa were on the Unengaged List because they did not have two important things connected to them: a person and a plan. No person had yet arrived with a plan to share the good news of Jesus and to plant a church that would burst into a thriving church movement. Thousands of Jaro people remained trapped in a worldview of fear, superstition, and charms where witch doctors demanded a family's wealth in exchange for empty promises at the price of a few shillings, a chicken, or a bag of dried corn. When a child grew sick, witch doctors became wealthy as parents reached for hope and lost resources.

God, and every one of his children, already knew the end of the story. People from all nations would join them at his throne joyfully sharing his presence and the incredible treasures of Heaven. However, the details of the stories were still in process; God loves the art of creating a story that shows his glory. Since sin continues to plague the Earth until Jesus returns, tragedy and triumph still share the big screen.

Those seated in the various theaters of the Mall of Heavenly Stories braced themselves for the experience of watching their Father at work. It never got old.

Gremma's hunched-over frame filled the screen in Theater One. Her chair slowly rocked back and forth as she talked with God in the name of Jesus. Those watching understood that a supreme action movie was underway. No one was fooled just because the show's hero was a 92-year-old Swedish grandma sipping a cup of Lipton leftovers.

Gremma's powerful prayer crackled with life and energy. As Gremma's prayer rose from her heart and left her lips, it entered into Heaven and was transformed into incense, a fine powder shimmering with colors, energy, and purpose.

As Gremma's prayer transformed from faith to power, Jesus spoke to all those in Theater One, "Please welcome some newcomers to Heaven: Roger, Ellen, and these three beautiful little ones, Anna, Esther, and John."

Shouts of welcome and warm applause echoed in the theater as they stood. On Earth, they were a family of five who ended their time there when Jesus brought them home after a traffic accident.

Jesus continued, "Roger, please come forward and receive this golden bowl, your first task as an elder of Heaven."

Roger walked forward from the front row seats and received a golden bowl from the hands of his Savior.

Jesus's eyes sparkled with love and life. "Well done, good and faithful servant. On this day, you will stand next to me and collect the prayers of the saints."

Roger reverently cradled the golden bowl under his arm, and looked out at the glowing faces of those standing before him, now giving him a standing ovation. He had never received one of those. His beaming smile mirrored the faces of Ellen and the three youngsters standing next to her. Little John waved to him, and Roger returned the gesture.

"Today, the pleasing aroma of Christina's prayer has reached my throne," Jesus said. On cue, the shimmering powder of prayer drifted down from the starry sky above and into the golden bowl in Roger's hands. Suddenly the theater filled with the aroma of a flower's perfume.

"Wow ... Beautiful!" spoke Harland, a man seated in Row 28 who knew Gremma well. For 62 years, Harland had been her husband. "I had hay fever on Earth, so I could not smell Christina's garden. What flowers are we smelling today?" he asked the woman next to him.

“Blooming lilac. Wonderful!” enthused Jean, a master gardener during her years on Earth. “Look at the smile on Jesus’ face as he enjoys the fragrance and watches our pleasure at this moment.”

Jesus’ happiness was contagious. “My children,” he continued, “Gremma’s prayers are so pleasing to me! Roger will now take the bowl of her prayers and add them to the golden censer before my throne. When the time is right, an angel will add fire to those stored prayers and throw them down to the earth as part of my final victory.”

The big screen returned to one of the heroes in that fight for victory, smiling, rocking, and praying in her Iowa living room.

But our Grandma-Prayer-Warrior was about to be knocked down.

Chapter 3

Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. The LORD said to Satan, “From where have you come?” Satan answered the LORD and said, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.”—Job 1:6–7

God allowed Satan to have limited power for a season on the Earth. Gremma knew that Satan had been thrown down from the heavens to Earth to make war against those who believe in Jesus. Satan’s evil reign was worldwide, and he could travel and cause all kinds of trouble in a war that would continue until Jesus returned in power.

How could a weak grandma fight in this war? She had weapons, but not like guns and knives that require physical skill. Over the years, Gremma had learned to submit to God and to resist the devil by trusting Jesus. She was innocent in the ways of evil, weak in physical strength, but strong in the Lord. Since the battle belongs to the Lord, Gremma had all the strength she needed.

Still, Satan could hinder and harass Gremma and would do whatever he could to block missionary work among the Jaro people of East Africa. The eternal future of the Jaro was a click away from changing. Satan wanted to prevent that massive announcement from Heaven that another people group belonged to the Kingdom of Light.

Satan’s tempting evil had darkened the lives of many people on Earth, and one of them worked for the Neighborhood Bank of Eagle Pond. Ed Blither had completed a finance degree from the University of Minnesota 10 years ago, but poor grades and weak interviewing skills had limited

his job options. He landed in Eagle Pond, a frustrated young man looking for a way back to the big city.

As a loan officer for the bank, Ed kept an eye on housing and farm loans, often making door-to-door visits to let borrowers know the importance of timely payments. Last year, Gremma took out a loan to build a new garage, but due to a family vacation, she was a bit late on her last payment.

Ed pulled up to Gremma's house. Getting out of the car, he twisted his ankle on a rock in the driveway. He cursed, anger overflowing from a heart sickened by frustration and turning away from God's calling. Ebenezer Scrooge of the *Christmas Carol* had made a ghostly chain of evil selfishness and greed. Likewise, Ed's life had become a poisoned well of brackish water, deepening and growing more lethal over the years. He pounded on the door, ignoring the doorbell.

Gremma's attention to prayer abruptly stopped. "Oh dear. Who is it?" she wondered aloud.

Getting up more quickly than she should have, her knee buckled. She grasped for the arm of her chair, but missed. "Oh, Lord, help!" Gremma cried out, beginning to fall.

In the timeless space of Heaven, Jesus smiling on the big screen of Theatre One, responded confidently, "I hear you, Little One! The time has come to send the Angel Gabriel into this story."

"Yeah! Bring on the Gabes!" shouted a former Harley biker who loved Jesus. The tattoo on his right arm illustrated that reality: a red heart with the bold black letters of JESUS.

Ruby, seated near him, exclaimed, "Oh, I love it when Gabriel gets to make an appearance! His *Good News of Great Joy* film is a classic, showing right now in Theater 22. I think I will go to that one again!" Ruby smiled with anticipation at the opportunity to marvel anew at the birth of Jesus—God incarnate as a baby, born in a barn. On Earth, Ruby had led many Christmas programs at her church, encouraging hundreds of children over the years to be joyfully amazed at the manger story. Shocking and wonderful—worth seeing many, many times. Eternity was loaded with time, and Ruby would never tire.

Gabriel loved being an angel. He was created by God to shine with glory. Sure, he could fly and travel at supernatural speeds, thus the amazing white wings. But the bright, holy glow of his Creator was his distinguishing feature. The light radiated from his eyes and shimmered around his face and hands. His appearance brought humans to their knees, and, not surprisingly, gave Gabriel his famous opening line, "Fear not!"

"Fear not, little Christina," Gabriel whispered to her as he rocketed into Gremma's house.

As her knee buckled beneath her, Gremma's head fell toward the corner of the coffee table. A direct blow would end her life on Earth.

"Your work is not done here yet," Gabriel spoke as his strong right hand cradled Gremma's head and pivoted her falling body away from mortal danger. Even so, the speed of her fall brought Gremma crashing to the floor, shaking the green glass lid to the candy jar on the side table. The yellow and brown shag carpet cushioned her fall but left a nasty carpet burn growing on her cheek.

"Uh Oh, my. Help!" Gremma called out, too far from her chair to reach her emergency panic button.

As she lay on the carpet, Gremma called out again, hoping that the person who knocked on the door could hear her. Silence. Gremma tried to drag herself back to her chair, but she didn't have the strength. *I will rest a bit before trying again*, she thought.

In Theater One, the audience gasped as the action unfolded. They knew that God was pursuing good and that he would not give his glory to another. Still, the drama brought surprise when pain and hardship, sometimes small and sometimes large, came to God's children. It wouldn't always be this way, though. Some day, Jesus would return, and sin, pain, and tears would be no more. The surprise felt among the theatergoers, however, was not laced with anxiety or sadness. There was only faith and persevering joy that comes with confident anticipation.

"This isn't the end of the story!" said Mary Anne.

Pauline added with a twinkle in her eye, "I wonder what God will do next!"

"Hold on to Jesus, Christina," spoke Harland with tenderness.

Meanwhile, on Earth, Satan had watched Gremma fall, too. "Maybe she's dead," he hoped.

Chapter 4

"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"—Romans 10:15

After five years, Jay, Gremma's grandson, felt more at home among the Soloma people of East Africa. He didn't always like how they lived, but he loved them because Jesus did. Jay and his family had survived the first years of culture shock and could now function in the two languages of the Soloma people, Swahili and Soloma. Jay and his wife, Ann, could mostly decipher how to

behave in the market, in the neighborhood, and in the villages nearby. Soloma culture felt closer to home, but it was still a long way from Iowa.

Jay and Ann loved international food, a taste acquired as Iowa State Cyclones in Ames. Friday night dates helped the two Iowans broaden their palates beyond casseroles and Jell-O salads. The cilantro and hot peppers of Tex-Mex brought smiles to their faces, shocked taste buds accustomed to cream of mushroom soup and Velveeta cheese. Thai curries overwhelmed their senses, bringing laughter to their lips chased by several glasses of water. A Do-Biz monster cookie ended the meal well, the sugar bringing relief to their burning lips, still tingling a bit, now ready for a first kiss on the steps of Friley Hall.

Two weeks after graduation, a wedding and a hog roast brought many “Iowegians” to the family farm. Swedish and Danish family members showered the couple with gifts and prayers. The gifts went into storage because God had answered the family prayers of blessing by sending the newlyweds to Africa. God had called them and made their feet beautiful to bring good news to many.

Now, Jay and Ann and their two young sons lived in a culture that valued one spice —salt—and plenty of oil. Jay fondly remembered his first visit to a Soloma home, where he met his good friend Keeja.

“Welcome to the table—*Karibu mezani*,” Keeja said in Swahili. Jay responded with “*Asante*,” the appropriate Swahili response of thanks. He joined Keeja in chairs woven from local vines near a simple table under a shade tree. Keeja’s wife arrived with a pitcher of water to pour over the hands of the two men and then to pray aloud for the meal.

She returned into their home made of cement block and roofed with metal sheets to retrieve a platter and a bowl. The bowl contained steaming food, which began as diced tomatoes and onions stewed with a handful of salt and a generous slather of cooking oil. After these were boiled into submission, she added pigweed (a local green in East Africa but removed from bean fields back in Eagle Pond). The platter carried the daily bread, *ugali*, a stiff porridge made of corn flour and boiling water.

“Have you eaten *ugali* before?” Keeja asked Jay.

“I have a few times,” Jay said. “But I am still trying to get the hang of it.”

“OK,” Keejabegan instructing. “Grab a small bit of *ugali* with your right hand. Blow on it if it is still hot, make it into a little ball, and push in an indentation with your thumb. Now it is ready for dipping into the stew. When you pop it into your mouth,” he admonished, “be careful not to lick your fingers too much since those same fingers will return to the community *ugali* and stew for the next bite.”

Keeja explained things well to the new missionary, so Jay often returned to Keeja's home with questions and for fellowship. Since Keeja followed the ways of Jesus, Jay learned much about the Soloma people, engaged with the gospel but still unreached. As an unreached people, some Soloma people followed Jesus, but the numbers were too small to establish a healthy foundation for church growth. The work was underway, and Jay and Ann were in East Africa to help establish gospel churches and then move out of the way for national pastors to lead by faith in Jesus.

However, in some villages not far away, the Jaro people kept their doors closed to missionaries, remaining unengaged. The Jaro stubbornly held onto the old ways of power. Politicians from the capital cities of East Africa drove their Mercedes onto dusty roads to negotiate with Jaro witch doctors, gladly paying to bring curses upon their political rivals.

Satan's influence was strong among the Jaro people. Lies had become deeply embedded into the culture and the hearts of its people.

Gremma stood in the gap, interceding for the Jaro people. But at that moment, one of their best prayer warriors lay prostrate on her living room floor.

Chapter 5

We wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.
—1 Thessalonians 2:18

Gremma was praying as she fell.

God was listening and watching. No prayer given in faith, regardless of size and style, is wasted.

Still, Gremma had to wait for an answer, but this time only a few minutes.

Another grandma pushed opened the door and found Gremma on the floor of her living room. "Gremma, are you OK?" Carly asked, rushing to her side. "Let's get you off the floor! What are you doing, you crazy woman! You're scaring me!" Gremma's Eagle Pond classmate from the class of '44 transitioned her tone from shouting to lecturing.

Carly's gray, naturally curly and wind-blown hair bounced freely with her animated speech. "I told you that you should be living in Greenview Terrace!" Of the class numbering 56, seven still lived, but only two remained in Eagle Pond, Gremma and Carly.

“You are lucky I stopped by, or you would be rotting right here in your living room. Let me help you up, so you can tell me what happened.” Carly leaned over and braced Gremma’s arms, helping her up from the floor. Gremma leaned on her friend as the two found their way from the living room to the red metal chairs around the little Formica-covered kitchen table.

“When will you be smart enough to listen to me and move out of this little death trap of a house?” Carly continued. Despite Carly’s lecturing tone, Gremma heard the love and concern emanating from her edgy friend.

“Who was that knocking on my door?” mumbled Gremma, groggy.

“Someone from the bank who said you weren’t home,” replied Carly. “I asked him if the doorbell was broken. He didn’t know! Can you believe it? He goes door to door for a living and doesn’t know how to ring a doorbell. No wonder our country is going down the toilet! I tell you, whether those knuckleheads are blue, red, or no color at all” Another lecture was underway.

“What was I praying about?” Gremma wondered out loud. “Oh yes. The Jaro people! Jay told me that this was an important week for them.”

“Good heavens, you just about killed yourself, and now you are rambling on about those Jaro folks. Here, let me brew you some tea,” offered Carly. “Or better yet, maybe that fall knocked some sense into you, and you will join me for a good cup of coffee.” She lifted her black & gold Iowa Hawkeyes travel mug. “How about some lovely, Honduran light roast? I’ll split mine with you. Freshly roasted this morning at Eagle Java.”

“No thank you. Tea is fine. Please use the tea bag on the saucer next to the kettle,” instructed Gremma.

“Blech,” grimaced Carly. “Someday, yet, you will be persuaded to join the ranks of reason!” Carly sipped from her Hawkeye mug.

“Carly, I was about to pray for the Jaro people of East Africa. Would you join me?” asked Gremma.

“I suppose I could,” replied Carly. “But didn’t we just pray for them in church yesterday?”

Gremma knew that her friend struggled to believe that God used prayer to do amazing things, but she wasn’t going to give up on sharing God’s blessing with Carly. Gremma slowly stood to turn down the volume on the Minnesota Twins baseball game chattering on the radio on top of the refrigerator. She would catch the end of the game later.

“Let’s pray,” Gremma said, and the two bowed their heads.

In Heaven's Theater One, theatergoers cheered as a burst of colorful powder of prayer rained down into Roger's golden bowl with the smell of fragrant lilies.

Most of the iridescent powder came from Gremma's prayer. Carly's heart of faith tried to start up, but it sputtered and choked on the anxieties of all the things on her to-do list at her farm. *I have to get busy*, Carly thought.

Chapter 6

Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass, which is alive in the field today, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you, O you of little faith!"—Luke 12:27–28

As the two classmates bowed their heads in prayer, Gremma began from Psalm 67, "Let the peoples praise you, O God. Let all the peoples praise you.' But the Jaro people do not yet praise you, O God. Let them hear of your Son Jesus in a way that will connect with their minds and hearts so that they will worship you. For you, O Lord, are worthy to be praised. You are worthy to be worshiped by every people group on Earth because you, Jesus, were beaten so that we may be healed. You took on our sins so we can be forgiven. You died so that we might live. You were raised again so that we may enjoy your presence forever"

Carly listened as Gremma lifted up words of hope for the Jaro people. Clearly, Gremma's passion solidly rested on what Jesus did on the cross. No sin was too big, no people too stubborn, and no one too lost to be rescued by Jesus. Carly tried to participate in prayer with Gremma, but she could only muster a few tired phrases. Of course, she prayed in church, but often Carly had mumbled empty words in a crowd, her heart far away, often daydreaming while reading words written by another. She just didn't have the passion and the heartfelt words that Gremma had. How could she get there?

Carly loved her rural life near the waters of Eagle Pond, and she reminded her family often, "Don't you dare move me into Greenview Terrace. I will escape, come to your house, and let the air out of your car tires!"

Family members took that threat seriously and kept a close eye on this Annie Oakley of Eagle Pond, fiercely independent and rumored by the local salesman to be quite capable with a 410 shotgun. When the representative for Greenview Terrace Retirement Center came calling to meet a solicitation requirement from his boss, he breathed a sigh of relief to see that Carly was too busy mowing her lawn to get a sales pitch. Her riding Snapper mower crunched sticks and

spewed forth grass at high speeds. Carly considered sticks as fertilizer, and she happily did her part to break them down and beautify her expansive lawn. Stick destruction from the Snapper required frequent blade sharpening, but sons in the area kept her crunching away. Mr. Greenview Terrace cringed as the branches exploded and blasted from the Snapper, and he quickly returned to his car, not sure if that last loud crack emitted from the Snapper or the 410.

When Gremma visited Carly's farm, Gremma's grandson Jay loved to tag along. Ten-year-old Jay ran into the woods bordering Eagle Pond—a mighty explorer courageously discovering the wild. He sneaked up on deer, but his favorite adventure placed him in the driver's seat of an aqua rusting race car dumped among the trees by one of Jay's uncles. Jay imagined the roar of the engine as he and his Race Car #5 crossed the finish line to the checkered flag, barely defeating the rusty '57 Chevy and the Ford Galaxy 500 dumped nearby.

The Chevy had been out of service for many years, and now Carly loved driving her four-door Buick Skylark along the gravel roads bordering Eagle Pond. She counted the deer, and the number of the graceful creatures often led her report at the coffee conversations in Eagle Java with the widows who gathered there.

Carly's family hunted deer, but their passion was duck hunting. During his lifetime, Carly's husband, James, had been known for his ability to imitate the mating call of a mallard duck, coaxing green feathered fliers from the skies to glide downward toward the decoys floating happily below. James's wall proudly displayed a male mallard with two spit curl feathers and a band of steel on its leg that bespoke the journeys of its lifetime.

Not all birds were admired by Carly, though. A raucous gang of 20 crows claimed the tree right outside Carly's bedroom window, creating an obnoxious concert hall. A loud chorus of "Caw!" woke Carly at sunrise one time too many. After another rude awakening, Carly slid open the bedroom window and blasted away with the 410. Wisely, the surviving crows selected a new concert venue.

During the quieter moments on the farm, Carly felt God's presence as the sun rose and set, coloring the sky. Cool breezes brushed the coneflowers and blooming milkweeds while tiger swallowtails and monarchs jumped from blossom to blossom. Her favorite prayer to God was not an articulate, passionate recitation of Scripture, although she did love many Bible verses. Carly's most authentic prayer overflowed from gazing at her Father's creation: "Thank you, God."

Little did Carly know that an authentic prayer of thanksgiving wields great power to transform lives—a lesson about to be tested.

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 “Amen” 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.

Chapter 8

“Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil ... praying at all times in the Spirit.”

—Ephesians 6:10–18

During this time in human history, Satan and his evil team have travel privileges. They go to and fro on the Earth using various means to discourage, tempt, and disrupt—costs still being felt from the apple-biting disobedience of Adam and Eve. Satan’s abilities are limited, and our Father has him on a leash. Evil continues, but only so far. Some day, when Jesus returns, all creation will be changed, and Satan and his team will be cast away into a lake of fire forever.

But on this day in Eagle Pond, Satan continued to wreak havoc from his regional headquarters in the Neighborhood Bank. Many offices play cheerful music in the background as the day moves along. Here, in Ed’s office, there is no music, only the ongoing hum of complaining and whining, usually centralized at Ed’s desk. Satan loved to hang out nearby. The complaints rang out like music to his ears.

“Can you believe the irresponsibility of these people?” Ed began, speaking so that other desk-dwellers nearby could participate.

“Crazy,” another added. “People expect us just to give away money, throwing out loans like parade candy. Do you have another defaulter?”

The economy had been harsh to farmers the last few years. Land values had soared, but prices for corn and beans had fallen by half or more. Farmers who took out loans to buy land found themselves with empty billfolds at harvest time while trying to make payments to bankers pressured by profit-driven board members.

“Yep,” replied Ed. “I think I know this old lady, too. She lectured me the other day for not ringing a doorbell at the Olson place. She’s a wild nut case, that one. Now I see that she is stealing money from our bank. But justice is on the way. She has missed two farm payments in a row and ignored our warnings. It is time to foreclose her property and take away her farm. Well, I guess I will show her that I can ring a doorbell,” Ed smiled at the thought of it.

It didn’t take long for Ed to make the drive to Carly’s place, a few turns in town and a half mile on gravel, just north of the meat-packing plant. He pulled into Carly’s driveway, got out, and took

a look at his car to see if any rocks had spit up from his tires and dinged the paint job. He hated driving on gravel.

“Dumpy little town,” he muttered. He had hoped for a position in Des Moines or Minneapolis by now, but the waiting continued. Perhaps a few more well-handled foreclosures would get his boss’s attention.

Satan was along for the ride, and he grinned at Ed’s assessment of this Iowa town. He enjoyed Ed’s company, and he looked forward to witnessing the destruction of morale that would come with Ed’s visit.

Ed rang the doorbell. “See,” he thought with sarcasm, “I am a professional, capable of doing my job.”

Carly glanced out the window, recognized Ed and wondered, *What does he want?* “Yes, may I help you?” she asked, opening the screen door.

“My name is Ed Blither and I am here on bank business,” the banker announced, a note of pride oozing in his voice. “I have an official letter for you. Please sign here that you have received it.” Ed handed Carly the clipboard and pen.

Carley signed, accepted the letter.

“Have a nice day,” Ed concluded, then retreated down the steps.

He knew that the letter would *not* give her a nice day, but it seemed like a polite way to end a conversation. He wished that he could see Carly’s reaction as she read the letter but settled for imagining the shock and pain to follow. As Ed drove back to his office, he smiled.

So did Satan.

“Noooo!” Carly, shocked, slumped into a metal kitchen chair, the open letter in her hand. Absorbing the life-changing news was hard. “They can’t take the farm! I thought I had been making the loan payments to the bank!” The print on the page in her hand said otherwise. “Oh please, God, I don’t want to lose my home and the farm. Please help!”

God’s help was requested in East Africa, too.

As Jay biked to another funeral, he prayed and hoped that Gremma’s prayer communication was online today. Jay attended about one funeral a month in his East African community, compared to about one a year when he lived in the USA. It never got easy.

The setting on the big screen in Theater One resolved back to Eagle Pond and the lime-green rocking chair. Empty. It was Thursday morning, so Gremma was under a hair dryer at Shirley's Snips. The unlimited camera coverage of Heaven panned to Main Street, then inside the salon where the whir of the big hair dryers swelled into the soundtrack.

In the theater, the polite slurps of cherry Coke and munches on popcorn quieted as the suspense built with a question in the minds of the theatergoers, *Will Gremma pray?*

Only Jesus knew how Gremma would respond. Jesus loved interceding with God for Gremma and millions of others on the Earth.

Jesus spoke, and the quiet of the theater was complete. "Remember my people, little Christina."

Gremma walked a journey of integrity in her faith—a style loved by Jesus. Even under the hum of the hairdryer, Gremma felt the nudge of the Holy Spirit.

"Dear God," Gremma prayed, "Thank you for your steadfast love that endures forever. I ask you to add more love among the Jaro people today, especially for little Penda, Keeja, and Jay and all of the community attending the funeral. Lord, I know that hope is hard to come by in that village right now, but please change that. May little Penda, especially, feel your love. Amen."

A collective sigh echoed in Theater One. Gremma was plugged in again at infinity G, and her message reached the throne of Jesus. He loved to hear from his children and to act for those who wait for him.

Indeed, the Lord was about to act for his glory and to unfold parts of his plan for the Jaro people.

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.”

Chapter 10

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.—James 1:27

“*Tumeshiba*,” Jay said as he and Keeja finished their meal, proclaiming that their stomachs were full.

An East African cook feels highly complimented with a report of a full stomach. Foreigners often ramble on about the food’s taste, texture, or appearance, but those things aren’t critical for her family to sleep through the night. Too many nights, mothers send their children to bed hungry due to poverty.

To arrive back in Keeja's village before dark, Jay knew it was time to say their goodbyes and thank you's and to begin the three-hour bike ride home. Keeja and Jay asked around for little Penda, and a grandma brought the little girl out from among the women who had been sitting under one mango shade tree while the men sat under another. A few of the oldest residents sat on chairs, rocks, or logs while most of the adults and all of the children sat on the dirt, freshly swept that morning.

Penda, dressed in a traditional *kitenge* wrap of orange and yellow, held her grandma's hand as the two walked slowly toward the bicycles. In her other hand, Penda gripped a small, blue plastic bag smudged with dirt.

Keeja walked toward the little girl. The grandma recognized him, so she ordered the girl to greet her Uncle. "*Mkie*," the older woman commanded.

Penda obeyed with a respectful greeting and curtsy, her eyes looking to the ground.

Keeja greeted back and expressed his condolences with the traditional words of "So sorry." Although the two words were expected to be spoken, they overflowed to his lips from a heart that felt true compassion. "*Pole sana*," Keeja said, taking the little girl's limp hand in his.

"*Asante*." Penda knew the word of thanks expected to be spoken in times of grief. At four years old, she had already sat with the village women at too many funerals.

Jay went through all the greetings with the grandma. He gave his *pole sana* to her, too, receiving the obligatory *asante* from the lady who was Penda's biological grandma, mother-in-law to Keeja's sister. Her deeply wrinkled face and sagging shoulders expressed her loss—a son, a daughter-in-law, and now a granddaughter who had to leave. The empty corn bags in her storeroom and her weak body could not fulfill the dearest wish of her heart.

As Jay shook hands with both, he noticed the chilled, heavily calloused hand of the grandma and the tiny hand of her granddaughter. His eye focused on the little bag in Penda's hands.

"What is in your bag, Penda?" asked Jay.

Penda pulled out a small doll made of mud and sticks. Little bits of shredded red, plastic bag stood for hair.

"Nice. What is the name of your little doll?" asked Jay.

"*Amani*," replied Penda, "but I call her Ani."

Jay smiled and held back some emotion watching the little girl smooth down the plastic hair of her doll named Hope. “Dear God,” he prayed silently, “please grant this little girl an extra portion of hope in this hard season.”

“She has a baby. See?” continued Penda. Jay and Keeja looked more closely, and they oohed and aahed as Penda opened up a scrap of purple and yellow cloth draped around the doll’s back. Inside was a tiny ball of mud. Penda made eye contact with her Uncle Keeja for the first time, waiting for affirmation that he had seen the baby.

“What is the baby’s name?” asked Keeja.

“She doesn’t have one. The baby likes to stay with her mama,” answered the little girl.

Keeja and Jay exchanged a look of compassion for this child who wished that she, too, could be close to her mama.

Their quiet moment ended as another man approached to greet them. Earlier, Keeja had pointed him out to Jay—the local witch doctor who now owned Keeja’s sister’s last two chickens. Keeja gulped. He hoped that he and Jay could exit the village without conversing with the man, but it was not to be.

An icy breeze kicked up a little dust causing Keeja to shiver and Jay to sneeze.

Satan had just arrived at the Jaro village, his massive cream-colored wings folding in as he surveyed the funeral scene, content that the local witch doctor’s work continued to build walls of fear and despair. Invisible to the humans nearby, Satan looked on as Keeja, Jay, and the witch doctor went through their greetings.

“A waste of time,” muttered Satan, who was ready to fight to keep Penda under his reign.

Chapter 11

And the angel answered him, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”—Luke 1:19

Jesus stood in Theater One and facing the many children he loved seated before him. The theatergoers never tired of seeing their Lord’s face flowing with steadfast love and faithfulness.

“It is time for Gabriel to appear in Africa,” Jesus proclaimed.

Cheers erupted, and the Harley biker stood with excitement, some of his popcorn flying into the air and landing on the floor. No worries. A few red squirrels scampered between the rows enjoying the Heavenly Pop with the crowd of humans. The Harley biker patted the two squirrels below his seat as they munched away on popcorn that had flown their way.

“Hey, Mike and Ike! Good to see ya!” Nothing is wasted in Heaven, and all of God’s creation lives in harmony.

On the big screen, everyone watched the scene in the Jaro village unfold.

The local witch doctor addressed Keeja while Jay listened. “I think it may be best if your niece stays here in the village of her birth.”

Keeja dreaded this thought, knowing that Penda would be an impoverished servant or worse in this village. In many places, large sums of money exchanged hands with promises to give children education and work in the city. Tragically, many of those dreams crashed to nightmares as children become trapped in a dark world of hard labor or prostitution.

Keeja knew of these risks, and he quickly prayed. “God, please help!”

“This child is one of ours,” the witch doctor continued, his eyes darkening. “Come over here, little one,” he ordered.

Penda looked from the witch doctor to Keeja, not sure what to do.

In that moment of Penda’s indecision, the Angel Gabriel silently glided into the Jaro village, coming to rest on his feet right behind Keeja. Gabe’s face shown with holy light, and he stared down Satan, who stood directly behind the witch doctor.

In Theater One, the audience could tell the spiritual battle was invisible to the humans in East Africa.

“Before time began, God chose little Penda to follow in the ways of Jesus. Back away, Satan!” Gabriel commanded. Gabe’s white wings had stayed fully extended, and they glowed with power from on high.

“I want her as one of mine,” Satan responded, nervous and a bit surprised to see Gabriel showing up. “Why is she so important?”

Gabriel responded with the authority of Heaven. “You will not hinder this child. God has determined that this girl will be a great teacher of the Bible among the Jaro women.”

Like God's promises to Jeremiah, Jesus had declared to Gabriel some of the plans for Penda's welfare—not for evil, and to give her a hope and a future.

"Well done, Gabriel," Jesus smiled. "I am pleased to act in response to the prayers of my daughter, Christina."

Returning home from Shirley's Snips, her freshly coiffed hair crackled with hairspray, Gremma felt the joy of the Spirit as she settled into her rocking chair and continued in prayer. "Dear God, I come to the door and knock again requesting that you bless Jay, Keeja, Penda, and the Jaro people. I know that you are not bothered to hear from me again, and I know that Jay needs you on this hard day. Please bring glory to your Name and strength to your people. You are the Light of the World."

In the Jaro village, Keeja's confidence grew with a surge of spiritual strength as he replied to the witch doctor, "Penda is my niece. I will care for her well."

Satan broke contact with Gabriel's piercing gaze and retreated—an icy rush of cream-colored wings furling into flight. Satan knew his limitations. There were still many other places where his ways could prevail.

"I see." The witch doctor paused. "The child may go," he announced, not sure why he changed his mind, but he saw the determination in Keeja's eyes.

Keeja's stomach relaxed a bit, and he quickly helped Penda perch safely onto his silver-colored bike rack. Keeja got onto his bike and began to pedal away. Jay followed on his own bicycle, both eager to leave before anyone challenged them further.

Penda kept her arms wrapped tightly around Keeja's waist as he spoke foundational truths she would recall many times later in her life.

"Penda, you may not understand at all what I'm about to say to you, but I pray that God will bring back my words to you at times when you are ready for them. I love you, and I am honored to be your uncle. More importantly, our God who made the heavens and the earth loves you more than I do. His love is steadfast, and he will never die. I am sad today because of the death of your mama, my sister, but I am walking through this day knowing that God loves me and you, and he has good plans for us."

Penda took in the words. But she responded with a blank stare and silence as she held onto her Uncle Keeja, now her parent.

"Thank you, God!" exhaled Jay. "I didn't know if Penda would be coming with us, and I am so glad that you, God, answered our prayers this way."

Back in Heaven's Theater One, excitement and praise to God echoed among the seats.

"All right!" shouted the Harley biker of Heaven who jumped around, slapping the backs of his neighbors.

A victory had been won, but the theatergoers knew that this Jaro region was in Satan's territory, and he was not about to give it up easily.

Chapter 12

When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God as he had done previously. — Daniel 6:10

Gremma had never seen Carly so quiet. She just sat at Gremma's kitchen table, both elbows on the Formica, rubbing her temples, hoping to take away some of the pain. The farm had been in the Cosgriff family since 1874, but now the land was being taken away. And on her watch!

"Come on, Carly, let's eat a bit of casserole and figure out what to do." Gremma dished up a scoop of tuna and noodles, knowing that comfort food from a friend has medicinal value.

Carly took a nibble with her fork and set the utensil back on her orange Fiestaware plate.

"What are we going to do? I blew it! I messed up with the bank. I guess I was too proud to ask for help." Carly's tears began again. She reached for a Valu-More napkin in the wooden napkin holder with a little Dutch girl painted in red.

"I have been praying for you and this situation," Gremma began. "Do you believe that God is listening, Carly?"

"I suppose," responded Carly with little enthusiasm. "Why is this happening if God is listening? If God is supposed to love me?"

Instead of answering directly at this moment, Gremma chose to go to one of her favorite Bible stories. "I know that you love the story of Daniel in the lion's den, and so do I. The government suddenly turned against Daniel with a new law that he could not pray to God. He prayed anyway, was arrested and tossed into a pit with lions. This past week, I listened to a podcast sermon from a pastor in Ames on the story. Even though I have heard the story many times, I had not paused before to meditate on Daniel 6:10. May I read it to you?"

“Sure,” replied Carly with a sigh.

Gremma read the verse aloud and continued, “I remembered in the story that Daniel kept praying even with the new law. But I had forgotten the part that Daniel ‘gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.’ What a great act of faith! The government was messing up his life, and he may even die, and he was still thanking God in his prayers!”

“OK, Gremma, I see where you are going,” interrupted Carly. “I don’t think I can do it. How can I give thanks to God as the farm is being taken away?!”

“It is not about thanking God for the evil,” explained Gremma. “It is thanking God that he will work out good in this situation. Daniel still prayed and didn’t give up. What do you say—shall we pray?”

“Might as well,” agreed Carly. “It can’t hurt.”

Gremma encouraged her to begin.

“OK,” Carly closed her eyes and started. “God, this is hard. I don’t know why the farm has to be taken away, and I want to trust you in all things—even to learn to thank you when things are hard. I am trying to believe that you are working for good at all times. So, I guess, I thank you in this prayer that you’re at work, even if I cannot see it. Please help me to believe. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”

“Well done, Carly!” exclaimed Gremma. “Now comes the patience in suffering that is part of following Jesus. I will continue to pray for you as you wait for God’s answers.”

Those in Theater One could wait for a long time. In Heaven, there was no “time” at all. And patience no longer meant “long-suffering,” because there was no suffering. In Heaven, waiting on the Lord was a full-time state of joyful anticipation, similar to the feeling of seeing presents wrapped under a Christmas tree. A little boy couldn’t have the present now, but it had his name on it. He knew something good was coming.

Although Christmas celebrations were loved in Heaven, not everyone on Earth joined the parties. Like Scrooge of old, Ed didn’t get into Christmas much. The holidays interrupted work, and he’d rather be working. Ed loved his job best when he could feel the power of enforcing the law. Like people should repay loans in a timely way.

He got back to his office to tidy up his paperwork. “Another day of fighting for justice,” he said to himself.

He glanced at the copy of the foreclosure letter he had hand-delivered to Carly. Then he looked again, more slowly. “This can’t be!” Ed looked again, this time reading more slowly. He pounded his desk in anger.

Ed had gone to the wrong address.

Cursing, Ed yanked open a desk drawer and took out a piece of blank letterhead.

He grimaced as he composed a letter to Ms. Cosgriff, helped a bit by knowing that he would be making an appearance at a different farm. *The life of a justice superhero is busy and demanding*, he thought.

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.

Chapter 14

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.”—Genesis 50:20

Carly loved taking long morning walks at the family farm, winding her way through a grove of walnut trees, eventually arriving at the mailbox at the end of the lane. This morning, her slumping shoulders did not lift her face to look to the singing cardinals above.

Lavender lilacs and multi-colored tulips had given way to the bright splashes of red, orange, and white of the lilies and the green shades of the hostas. The cherries had ripened to deep red; green apples had begun to weigh down the branches of Honeycrisps and the Zestars. Carly didn’t see any of it. She trudged forward, a dark cloud of anxiety following her to the mailbox.

Carly sorted the day’s collection of grocery fliers and letters with cellophane windows. Another day with no mail from friends or family for encouragement. Instead, Carly stared at another letter from the bank.

“Probably,” she said to herself, “more bad news—like the day they are foreclosing.”

On the walk back to her house, Carly tore open the envelope open and braced for the worst.

Dear Ms. Cosgriff,

An error occurred in addresses. The foreclosure is intended for 535 C Avenue, NOT 525 C Avenue.

Your payments are current. No action on your property will be pursued at this time. May this be a lesson to you to make payments promptly. You can see that your bank takes these matters seriously.

Sincerely,

Ed Blither
Senior Loan Officer

Carly grabbed the black metal railing on her cement steps, slumping to sit at the top.

“Thank you, God!” she spoke aloud with the utmost sincerity. “I know you answer prayer. Forgive me for doubting you.” Carly looked up in the sky through tear-filled eyes, past the white clouds and into the expansive blue beyond. “Thank you!”

In Heaven, Theatre One grew silent again. All faces turned to Jesus who now spoke.

“You are very welcome, my little Carly. I see your heart of faith, and I am pleased.”

On cue, a small puff of colorful powder materialized, drifting into the golden bowl as the fragrant aroma of peonies pleased theatergoers.

Carly quickly stood up. “Oh! I must go and share this with Gremma immediately,” she thought as she grabbed her ample brown purse and headed to the Buick Skylark.

While Carly drove to town, Gremma had opened her email and found a long letter from Jay.

Dear Gremma and Carly,

Thanks for praying. God was at work here long before Keeja and I made our visit. *[Jay shared the story of the sacrifice at the crossroads.]* Thank God with me—the Jaro people are now engaged! I will write to Pastor Matt soon, so everyone at the church can celebrate with us.

Love you both,
Jay

“Hallelujah!” cheered Gremma. “I can’t wait to tell Carly,” hoping that this wonderful news would encourage her friend. Carly needed it. Gremma had gone to Eagle Java this morning and bought a cup of Ethiopian Yergecheffe which was now sitting on the Formica table across from her. Carly would probably arrive with her own cup, but her coffee-crazed friend would drain two, given the opportunity.

Carly’s Buick sped into Gremma’s drive, spewing a little gravel. The car door opened, then slammed shut.

“Oh no,” Gremma prayed aloud. “Carly’s still struggling in a big way. Oh, Jesus, help her!”

Jesus and all those in Theater One smiled, watching the drama unfold.

Jesus spoke, “I have been helping, Little One.”

Head nods and smiles affirmed the many “Amen!”s rolling off the tongues of theatergoers.

Gremma’s front door swung open, no doorbell-ringing, no hello-ing. Carly didn’t even give an insulated Hawkeye mug a rest on the table.

What is going on? Thought Gremma.

Carly held up a piece of mail, and words burst from her glowing face: “The farm! It’s OK! The bank delivered the letter to the wrong address. God answered our prayers!”

“Praise God!” Gremma replied. “Sit down. Tell me all about it!”

Carly sat down at the kitchen table and, with without even thinking about it, took a sip of the coffee in front of her.

“What, did you go out and buy me a cup of coffee?! You were worried about me weren’t you?” she chided Gremma.

Faith and confidence glowed on Carly’s face as she spoke. “God was at work. He *did* answer our prayers. I hope I can remember this. I feel like sometimes my head is too thick and my faith too weak.”

“I wonder if God is at work in other ways in this event?” Gremma asked.

“Well, I was thinking about the same thing, too, as I drove here,” continued Carly. “I know the family that will be foreclosed—the Johnsons—Chris and Barb, those three little ones. With so much rain these past few summers, they haven’t harvested much corn from the fields near that creek. Maybe we widows can plan a fundraiser to help them save their farm?”

Gremma smiled. Indeed, God was at work in this hard event and silently thanked God for a front-row seat to watch this transforming moment in Carly’s life. Now it was time for Gremma to share her news. Her smile broadened, squeezing together the many wrinkles on her joyful face as she began telling the good news of God’s work among the Jaro. She loved sharing God’s answer to prayer.

Harland, watching his Christina from Heaven, smiled, "When you get to heaven, Christina, we will watch this movie together, loving this God-story and so many more!"

At Christina's kitchen table, this time, Carly was the initiator, "Let's pray, Gremma" she said.

The two grandmas held hands, letting the tears flow freely. Carly began, "God, thank you. Those two words seem so small, kinda like my faith. Sorry about that. But thank you, thank you for making a way for the Jaro to hear about Jesus and for giving me the farm. I pray that so many more people will see how you answer prayers. I don't want to forget this moment. I want to feel this way more and more."

Gremma tightened her grip on her friend's hand and spoke the words repeated time and time again in Psalm 136: "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever. Amen."

"Whew. I'm a mess," said Carly as she wiped away a face full of tears. "Good Lord!"

"That he is, Carly. That he is!" smiled Gremma.

The tea kettle whistled its readiness, and Gremma stood, bracing herself on the kitchen table before making the slow journey toward the sound she knew so well.

"This time I will brew a fresh tea bag and get each of us TWO cookies," Gremma said, laughing. "We have much to celebrate!"

The End

Concluding Comments

Engaging a people group is worthy of a celebration, no doubt, but much hard work remains. A person and a plan have emerged among the fictional Jaro people, but a church is not yet planted that is healthy enough to reach its people with the gospel. In this story, the “person” was actually two people, Jay and Keeja; and they had an entire mission agency and a band of prayer warriors behind them to make a plan. The first part of the plan had taken shape in God’s timing, and a metaphorical pearl had been discovered that would become a foundational story, with God’s help, to lead many Jaro to Jesus.

With this book, I joyfully join Don Richardson with the call to this generation to “Get out there and discover the God-stories and redemptive metaphors that our Father has planted around the world.” His book *Peace Child* has inspired many, including me. The story of the elder at the end of this book is based on a true account that I witnessed among the Sukuma people of Tanzania in the year 2000.

I am thankful for the course “Perspectives on the World Christian Movement,” taught around the world and also available online. This course is instrumental in developing the concept of a “people group” and possible strategies to take the gospel to them. Many churches offer the course, including the church where I serve, Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Additional information on the “Perspectives Course” can be gained at www.perspectives.org.

I add my voice to [Paul Eshleman](#)’s and the many others who have taken up the call to Finish the Task by engaging the unengaged people groups around the world. For more information, visit the website, www.finishingthetask.com. Valuable research is underway to determine unengaged peoples which can be accessed from the Joshua Project (www.joshuaproject.net) and the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Church (www.imb.org).

In so many parts of the world, orphans are thrown into a world with so few resources. Sometimes another family member makes room for the orphan, but often that child is treated like a servant, not a child. Large orphanages have shown to be inadequate for the long term. Since the large orphanages are often managed and funded by people of another culture, children are unlikely to retain the culture of their birth, and they struggle when they graduate back into society. Orphans may have been given so much by donors who mean well, but they can grow dependent, expecting to have things given to them when times get hard. Many countries are moving to family-based care instead of the larger orphanages.

An encouraging trend is growing where a mom and dad agree to raise an orphan—or a few orphans—as part of their family with the support of a local church and generous donors inside and outside the community to help with housing, food, school fees, and more. Many orphaned children have been helped when the local church is actively involved in teaching their people about God’s heart for orphans and how to raise all children in the Lord, recognizing the special

emotional healing needs of children who have been abandoned. For more information on Christian orphan care, please go online to CAFO (www.cafo.org) and Orphan's Joy (www.orphansjoy.org), where I am honored to serve as a board member.

This is a work of fiction based on truth and realities. The word of God is its foundation, and that is a bedrock of faithful truth. My own imagination has pondered God's truth, especially in relationship to heaven and the spiritual realm, and I encourage others to be regular Bible readers and to imagine heavenly realities with joy, grounded in the Word. I pray that my creative moments will not lead anyone astray from God. Instead, may this story draw many closer to our Father through Jesus who is preparing a place in heaven for all who believe. Jesus tells us, "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (John 14:1–3).

"The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the LORD."

—Proverbs 21:31

All Bible verses are from the English Standard Version (ESV).