



SOUTH SUDAN MISSION

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The elderly Sudanese woman opened her gnarled, weathered Bible and with great care and reverence turned to the Book of Isaiah. Chapter 59, she told me, was her favourite biblical text. Quite surprising as one might have expected her to pick one of the more commonly cited and well known “cherry-pick” passages so often used to provide superficial encouragement when needed. The passage begins with “Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear...”. Ah, one might say, that sounds positive. But wait, it continues: “but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you...”.

That is a bit less encouraging! And there is more of the same, as you read through this wonderful passage: talk of God’s wrath, and His hatred of sin, and vengeance to be repaid to His adversaries. This woman has seen many things that you and I cannot begin to imagine. She, more than most, has intimate knowledge of what it is like to feel abandoned by God. And yet, as the chapter ends, we read these amazing words: “And a redeemer will come from Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression...”. A passage with a promise to the people of Israel, and one that this faithful woman holds dear.

This encounter took place during a recent food relief trip with CityHope Disaster Relief (CHDR). Fourteen tonnes of food aid was to be distributed to people in need in war-torn Juba, South Sudan, the result of months of preparation and a partnership between CHDR, Christian Broadcasting Network SA (CBN), ACROSS (South Sudan), and CAPRO (Calvary Ministries).

Our team visited an area on the outskirts of Juba, the capital city of South Sudan. The people receiving assistance were refugees from an outlying area called Wonduruba, where fighting had forced them to leave their farms, homes, livestock and even families.

The food distribution was to take place on the second day of the trip, and so for the first day, a meeting with the community was planned at a local church. We were warmly welcomed and very well looked after by our hosts, who were overjoyed at having foreign visitors to their home. In fact, one outstanding feature of this colourful and friendly people was that, despite the severe hardships and suffering that they had encountered in their lives, everything that they did was accompanied by obvious contentment and joy.

During the meeting at the local church, we had been asked to preach on forgiveness. The emphasis was of course how to forgive

others since most people there had direct personal experiences resulting from hate, persecution and injustice. We taught, as best we knew how from Scripture, about forgiving others in the context of such difficult circumstances. After the meeting, a young woman came to us asking for prayer. She was clearly distressed but, after talking with her for a while, it became clear that she was not at all concerned about the wrongs that she might have experienced. Instead, she was asking how she could be forgiven for the wrong she had done! This was quite striking to me. In a situation like this where most people were asking how they might forgive others, this woman realised that she herself had sinned. Not only had she sinned against people, but in a much more profound way, she had sinned against God. I was reminded of Psalm 51:4, where the writer, speaking of God, says: “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.” Awareness of the weight and guilt of our own sin is a gift from God since it is this conviction of sin which drives us to the cross of Christ. Indeed, we cannot truly receive His forgiveness unless we first understand the desperate situation we are in as a result of our sin. This young woman, with tears of grief streaming down her face, had received a revelation of how desperate her situation was, and how desperately she needed forgiveness and restoration (“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation...” 2 Corinthians 7:10). We were able to guide her toward an understanding of the gift of grace and forgiveness of sins available to her through the atoning sacrifice made by Christ on the cross. She received the Good News and placed her faith and trust in Christ. What a wonderful thing to be there, to be used by God and to see firsthand a new birth in Christ.

The following day, the food aid was transported from storage and brought to the distribution point. In the 37 degrees heat, the process of distribution took about three hours. Once again, we were struck by the obvious joy of the people we met and interacted with. This is something one so often sees in places where people have so little material wealth, and yet their faith and strong community ties produce a solid joy and contentment.

Thanks to the wonderful team and support from our partners, this was a very successful trip, both in providing food and the Gospel, a privilege that we as Christians share.