

A Distant Grief, by F.Kefa Sempangi with Barbara R. Thompson, Regal (Gospel Light Publications), Glendale, California, 1979 (15 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

Foreword

1. Comfortable Conformity to the World is Christ Denial

The frighteningly contemporary events in Uganda argue for this reality and warn all believers to beware the delusion of a status quo, this-worldly life-style. Comfortable conformity to the world in which we live today may be the most subtle form of Christ denial. -Richard C. Halverson [Page 11]

Chapter 2. Stitching: Save a Child

2. Giving from the Abundance of Your Heart

But Penina was still speaking. "The humble poor,' she said, "know a deep secret. They give from themselves, not from their surplus. They give from the abundance of their hearts."

These words from Penma caused me to look at Miriyamu with new eyes, and I was reminded of an ancient Baganda tradition. In our tribe when the table has been blessed by a rare food, like meat, each person takes a piece from his own plate and passes it to his neighbor, saying, Okudiza guba mwoya, omuga gudiza enyanja-"Giving flows from a good spirit as a river flows to the lake."

Giving, the proverb says, is not a matter of great possessions. It is a matter of the heart. The river gives of its waters to the lake even though the waters of the lake are many times greater. [Page 31]

Chapter 3. Are You Being Broken?

3. Only Repentance Removes Pride, So That There is Forgiveness

Later one of the founding fathers, Mondo, explained to me, "What we hear is not your sin, but God's work in your life. We hear you giving witness to God's power to break the chains of sin. Because we know that, left to ourselves, we can never go to a brother and confess to him, 'I have done foolishly, forgive me.' This only happens when grace takes over and pushes our pride into a tight corner."

Mondo went on to explain the power of the Spirit that is unleashed by repentance. When there is repentance, pride gives way and in its place is conviction and confession, and then forgiveness.

"Remember James 5:16," he said. "'Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.' It is not the man who has the correct exegesis of this verse who knows its truth. It is the man who confesses his sin to his neighbor."

Every time I met Mondo he would greet me with the threefold challenge:

“Are you repenting?”

“Are you walking in the light?”

“Are you being broken?”

His questions were intended to challenge the kind of fellowship I was having with the Christians with whom I was doing mission work. He suspected that we were using our concern for our mission project to avoid the real work of God in our lives. [Pages 37-38]

4. Ugandans Need to Take Their Church Under God’s Direction Where It Needs to Go

One day in September when my own heart was heavy with the church's struggles, I was visited in my home by Katongole Sabaganzi. Katongole was a distinguished man with a bald head and royal features. He had been a private advisor to the last Baganda king and he was well known as an outspoken critic of the westernization of Ugandan culture. On this day Katongole wore the long white traditional robe of Baganda men and we talked together for several hours about the present crises of the Ugandan church. The longer we talked, the more angry Katongole became. Finally, he could contain himself no longer. He stood up from his chair and, glaring with wisdom, delivered an impassioned lecture.

“The church has made many mistakes,” Katongole said, pronouncing each word distinctly. “We have had political independence for 10 years and the church is not yet free. But if after all these years of hearing the gospel we are still criticizing those who brought the message, that is the biggest mistake of all. It is not the fault of the signpost if the wayfarer sits beneath it. It is not the fault of the westerner if Ugandans do not take their church where it needs to go. It is time for us to take responsibility for our own house.”

Katongole took a deep breath and continued speaking. “We are like Samuel and Eli in the Bible,” he said. “For all of Samuel's life he worked in the Temple and all his life, Eli stood between him and God. Then when Samuel came of age God called him. But Samuel went to Eli. He knew that it was Eli who was the professional servant of God. He knew that Eli was the man with the vision. Samuel could not believe that God wanted to talk to him alone.

“This is how we Christians in Uganda act. God has called us to Himself, but our eyes have been turned to the West. Instead of hearing God's message to us as Africans, we

have heard an enculturated gospel. We cannot believe that God wants to speak to us in our own language. We cannot believe that He wants to speak to us alone!" [Pages 40-41]

5. Making Christ the Beginning and End of Our Expectations

The message that this brother brought was a hard one to hear but as I began to understand its meaning joined with my brothers and sisters in a new discipline of prayer. Together we determined to make Christ the beginning and the end of all our expectations. We determined to have no hope except that which was derived from Scripture. We learned that prayer was not a platform for self-expression but a self-emptying process.

As we humbled ourselves before God and sought to make His desires our own, the bond of love which grew between us spread outward to our families and to our friends. We learned to share the gospel within the context of our occupations and our culture. We began to understand that evangelism was not a program or a method, but a lifestyle of submission and service to others. [Page 44]

Chapter 10. Human Sorrow, a Distant Grief?

6. Evil in this World is Beyond Comprehension

In that moment I learned a new truth. I learned just as there is a boundary beyond which human beings cannot comprehend the glory of God, so there is a boundary beyond which they cannot comprehend evil in the world. There is a boundary beyond which everything is a senseless chasm. It is here in the nightmare of utter chaos that human feeling dies. It is here where death and terror seem to have full dominion, even the deepest of human sorrows becomes but a distant grief. [Page 114]

Chapter 11. We Are Going to Kill You

7. Distributing the "Living Bread" God Gives

Before the service, the elders and I met in the "vestry," an empty house by the compound, to pray. We felt deeply the hunger in the hearts of the people who had gathered for worship. We knew their desire to hear the Word of God and we prayed that their lives would be transformed by its power. As we poured our hearts out to the Father in agonizing intercession, desperate scenes from the previous weeks flashed again in my mind. I saw a face burned beyond recognition, and a woman huddled in a corner weeping. I saw a crowd of soldiers standing in the park cheering, and heard the sound of boot crunching against bone. I remembered the arrogance of the mercenaries, and the dreamlike deadness of my heart. Once again the triumph of evil overwhelmed me. I felt a deep fear. I myself had fallen, how could I hope to strengthen others? Who was I to feed God's children in this most desperate hour? What words could I speak? My brothers and sisters needed courage to stand firm in the growing terror. They

needed strength to sustain them in suffering. They did not need my sermon. They did not need my thoughts on the Resurrection. My father had been right. “In such times men do not need words,” he had said. “They need power.”

As I prayed for strength and wisdom, the words of Matthew 14:19 came to my mind. It was the same text that a brother from the Revival Fellowship had read to me many years before.

And taking the five loaves and the two fish he looked up to heaven, and blessed, and broke and gave the loaves to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.

With this verse, I heard the convicting voice of the Holy Spirit. It was Jesus who provided bread for the crowds. The disciples' task was only to distribute what their Master had already given them. It was God who sustained His people. He was not asking me to feed His children from the words of my own heart. He was only asking me to distribute the living bread He had put into my hand. [Pages 116-117]

Chapter 12. I Hear Their Screams

8. Betrayal in the Body of Christ Never Ceases

Even in the church there was no safety. I had learned in the past month that one of our most active members, a man on the committee of elders, was informing on our congregation for the government. He was a quiet, shrewd man, tall and well-built, and extremely skilled in working with his hands. Whenever there was a church project requiring manual skills, he was always the first to volunteer. I had never known him well but when I heard of his spying activities in our congregation I was deeply hurt. I went to Katongole Sabaganzi for advice and after I finished pouring out my frustration and disappointment, the wise man whose strong words had begun the Redeemed Church only shook his head. It seemed to me then that in the past two years he had aged a great deal. He, like Kiwanuka, had spent himself for the cause of Uganda's freedom and now something in his bearing spelled disappointment and defeat. While he was careful not to show his fears, I saw that a shadow of concern crossed his face. After a moment of silence he finally said, in his sad, wise way, “Kefa, there is nothing you can do. There is no community on earth where there is not a Judas.” [Pages 123-124]

9. Living in the Everlasting Now

The Nubian's testimony gave me the courage I needed to remain in the church ministry. My concern for my own safety became secondary to my desire to witness the power of God, and I knew that as a community of believers we of the Redeemed Church were experiencing His grace now more than ever before. We were learning to live in the everlasting now, to let Scripture alone form our expectations and to pray without complaining. It was no longer the days themselves that we desired, but the forgiveness

and the love of God. In the uncertainty of our day-to-day existence, we were being delivered from our reliance on methods, from the idols of self-trust and self-pity. We could no longer afford to ask converts, “Do you believe?” We asked, “Are you ready to die for Jesus Christ?”

My lingering doubts about being involved with the church were erased one Sunday morning when Katongole spoke to the congregation. He stood up just as the service was about to begin and immediately a deep hush fell over the compound. By that time our church attendance had swollen to over 14,000 people, but Katongole had an orator's voice and seemingly without effort he made himself heard throughout the compound.

“Many of us do not have long to live,” he said, “and we need to hear the words of our Lord.” He read from Revelation 11 and stopped at verse 7:

And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them.

“By these words we are comforted,” Katongole continued. He stood tall in the dignity of his age and position, and I could no longer see any trace of defeat in his bearing. “God has called us for a mission and we are prisoners to His gospel. We live only by His predetermined counsel, and we do not need to worry about dying. We will not see death until we have finished, our testimony. We are comforted but we are challenged. We are challenged by the believers who have gone before us in the fight against Satan:

They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony, they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from demise.”¹⁶

Brothers and sisters, we must not love our lives too much, and we must not shrink from death. The message we carry is a greater treasure than our earthly existence. We must be ready to die for the testimony of Jesus Christ.”

When Katongole finished speaking there was a long silence throughout the congregation. From my seat on the podium I looked out over the compound at the hushed crowd and saw a sea of somber, expectant faces. The people were waiting, that much I knew. But whether they were waiting for the present storm to pass or for a future storm to come, I could not tell. [Pages 129-130]

Chapter 13. Return to Amsterdam

10. Passing On Your Gifts to Someone Else

“Kefa,” he said, “there is nothing you can repay. Perhaps you are thinking now that giving is a two-way street but to tell the truth it is a flowing river. It does not stop or return but only passes on. Someday soon Penina will be well and you will have your own opportunity. But it will not be an opportunity to repay those from whom you have received, it will be a time to pass your gifts on to someone else.” [Page 133]

11. Apathy from the Western World and the African Continent

My only disappointment was found in the school library where I scanned daily the international newspapers. No mention was ever made of the slaughter in Uganda. The sounds of widows and orphans which were heard so clearly in the confines of our small country were not heard at all by the rest of the world. When Idi Amin was mentioned, it was as an international buffoon whose strange exploits bemused the civilized world. The United States ambassador to Uganda, Dr. Thomas Melady, tried to convince his government to make an international issue of Amin's genocide, but the American embassy was soon to close without fanfare, and only on the grounds of a potential security threat to American citizens.

Most disturbing to me was the response from our own continent. The tenth anniversary celebration of the Organization for African Unity (OAU) was held in early August and Amin was received with cheers and laughter. Black Africans saw him only as a brave man who stood up to white imperialists; they could not see him as a genocidal tyrant. Only Presidents Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia opposed his regime.

Without support from the western world and with the people of Africa closing their eyes to our suffering, there seemed to me little hope for rescue. Our own legal army had been without weapons and leadership for two years, and coups attempted from within the ranks only served to cement Amin's power. Even his strongest opponents came to suspect that Amin's claims for himself were true: he was invincible, no one could harm him. [Page 136]

Chapter 14. We No Longer Follow Kefa

12. In spite of Our Wounds, We Serve Him to the End

By midnight over a dozen elders had gathered and there were nearly as many chickens as people. Many of the men came with battered and disfigured faces. I found it difficult to look at them or to speak comforting words, but Kiwanuka immediately took things into hand. With his charming and imposing humor, he tried to make everyone forget their wounds.

“If we are wounded for Christ, Christ is the healer,” he said, smiling broadly in his enthusiasm.

I worried that he was too loud for the thin walls of our hiding place, and I wondered if the elders resented his words because he had not suffered with them. Instead, they all nodded their heads in agreement. Each one seemed filled with peace and one young man spoke for them all. “Yes,” he said, “and now, more than ever, we will serve Jesus Christ until the end comes.” [Pages 146-147]

13. Defilement of God’s Word to Remove God’s Restraining Law

We sat together in the living room, listening to their experiences, and as each one shared about his time in the dungeons, one elderly man broke down in tears. He apologized to the rest of the elders, and then turned to me. The elders had agreed, it seemed, to say nothing of a deep disgrace they had experienced, but now he felt compelled to speak.

“When we went from church to the barracks,” the elder said, “the soldiers ordered us to throw our Bibles in a pile. We obeyed, there was nothing else we could do. When all the Bibles were in one place, the soldiers gathered round them and urinated on them. The whole time they were laughing and using abusive language, and when they had finished, they were red-eyed and staggering. It was as if they had made themselves drunk.

“These men,” the elder said, finishing his story, “drink a lot of gin to work themselves into a frenzy for killing. But after they had defiled the Word of God, they did not need to drink. And that's when they began beating us.”

The story which the elders feared would discourage me lifted a great weight from my heart. Since our arrival at Entebbe Airport it had seemed to me that every single one of Amin's men was searching Uganda, hoping to destroy me and my family. Now I saw that it was not me who Amin was out to destroy. It was not the elders or the church. It was the Word of God. The soldiers had urinated on the Bible to remove from their lives God's restraining law. [Page 147]

14. Persecution for the Hope That is in Us

“It is because of the Resurrection that we are free,” Kiwanuka said, speaking with a noble dignity. “We are not slaves to this life or to our fear of death. We are slaves to Jesus Christ and He has risen from the grave.”

One of the elders who had been in Makindye Prison nodded his head. His face was covered with bruises and his nose was broken. “We are persecuted for the hope that is in us,” he said. “Our hope is the Resurrection. We have nothing to worry about, Christ will fulfill our claims.” [Page 149]

Chapter 16. Only Four Days Ago

15. **Jesus Christ Came to Share in Our Pain and Suffering**

Samuel died at dawn. I sat by his bed and wept, and then, sick with fatigue, I walked down the hospital corridor towards the door. As I passed through the waiting room I was stopped by a poor elderly woman who asked me if I was ill. I looked at her resentfully, but the humility and tenderness of her expression made me answer politely. I told her of Samuel's death.

“You know,” she said, taking my arm, “through many losses of family and friends and through much sorrow, the Lord has taught me one thing. Jesus Christ did not come to take away our pain and suffering, but to share in it.”

Now, almost a year later, the gentle words of the woman took on new meaning. I saw that in my grief over Kiwanuka's death I had come to think of myself as more reasonable than God, more compassionate. But God was not mourning for His people from a distance. His own Son had suffered the defeat of physical pain and death, and still suffered with the suffering of His children. We did not weep alone, Jesus Christ wept with us. And our sadness was only for a season:

He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.²⁶

What Kiwanuka and thousands of other martyrs had sown in tears, they, and the church with them, would reap in joy. [Pages 175-176]

Notes:

16. **Revelation 12:11**

See Revelation 12:11

23. **Passivity in the Face of Slaughter**

This resistance to flight, well-known to those living under tyrannical regimes and almost incomprehensible to those living in the comfort and security of democracy, was explained by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in the *The Gulag Archipelago*.

Sholzhenitsyn, commenting on his countrymen's passivity in the face of Stalin's slaughters, say: “Universal innocence also gave rise to the universal failure to act. Maybe they won't take you?” Maybe it will all blow over?... Since you aren't guilty, then how can they arrest you? It's a mistake. They are already dragging you along by the collar, and you will keep on explaining to yourself: 'It's a mistake! They'll set things straight and let me out!' (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1973), p. 12, I-II

26. **Psalm 126:6**

Psalm 126:6

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