

Into the jaws of the lion

I squeezed the light aircraft down through the only hole in the solid overcast sky, desperate to get below the clouds to establish visual contact with the ground below. I was lost, far from home and low on fuel. It was an international flight in our small single-engine mission plane, and I was on the way from one country to another when an instrument failure meant that I could no longer navigate without fixing our position visually. For that, I needed to see the earth below.

The little plane popped through the hole in the clouds and we levelled out below the low cloud base. I was relieved to see the ground again, but the satisfaction was short-lived when I realized that nothing below us was familiar to me at all. I had no idea where we were, but I knew one thing for sure. We only had an hour and fifteen minutes of fuel left in the tanks.

This well-intentioned mission trip had suddenly gone very wrong, and my heart raced as adrenaline kicked my brain into survival mode. We droned on over vast expanses of trackless bush, my eyes darting between the unfamiliar scenery and my now-useless maps. I was hoping and praying for some recognizable feature to tell me where we were. Flying low to stay beneath the clouds, we suddenly zoomed over a grass landing strip. My heart raced with excitement as I said to my passenger, "Werner, we'll continue for ten minutes and if I still don't know where we are, we'll come back to land here and ask!"

Landing during an international flight is not permitted – but this was an emergency.

We were soon back over the grass landing strip and I was preparing to land. I buzzed low over the landing area to chase the grazing cows away, routine practice in bush flying, but I was puzzled by the fact that the cows didn't move, and no one appeared to herd them.

"We'll have to land in the short part of the runway before the cows," I said to Werner. "And tighten your seatbelt. This may get rough!"

With the plane safely down, I taxied back to the start of the runway, ready for an immediate takeoff, and we climbed out. Seemingly out of nowhere, scores of young African children appeared and Werner, as was his custom in children's ministry, hauled balloons out of his pocket and began blowing them up and handing them to the kids. They squealed and shouted as they reached for the balloons and then, as one boy took his balloon, I heard him say, "Muito obrigado," which is "thank you" in Portuguese.

My heart sank, and I felt a cold shiver run down my spine. I realized in that instant that we had landed in the country of Mozambique, not only way off our intended course, but a country locked in a bitter and vicious civil war. I looked up and shivered again as I saw a band of 'comrade soldiers' walking toward us from the nearby bush. They carried AK47 assault rifles at the ready, with bandoliers of ammunition around their necks.

I knew we were in trouble.

We had landed at a military garrison in the remote north of the country and to make matters worse, we were in a South African-registered aircraft, which I knew would not be

well received. South Africa, at that time, was assisting the rebel army against the communist government forces. As I walked towards the soldiers, I breathed a silent prayer.

“Lord, we need your help – *now!*”

How did I get myself into this situation in the first place?

Chapter 1

An agnostic meets God - A baptism of laughter

An agnostic meets God

Nothing of my childhood in the sleepy, sun-baked backwater of Zimbabwe gave any hint of future adventures and global travel in the pursuit of God’s calling. Like any little boy in a tropical country, my days were spent finding new ways to torment my two older sisters, and happily shooting things with my trusty rubber catapult. Home, in Harare, was a happy, stable place, our needs well met by industrious parents who labored to build a successful motoring business and a comfortable family life.

There was plenty to do for a boy who loved all things mechanical, and I was driving at age 10 (sitting on an empty oil can to see over the steering wheel) and soon tinkering on cars of my own. Technical school and an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic had me on a steady track to working in the family business, but in one important aspect I was determined to walk my own path.

Ours was a typical church family, with parents who faithfully served in their local Pentecostal assembly. My mom, Alice, ran the Sunday school and had a finger in practically every church pie. Dad (known to all as ‘Uncle Japie’) was the vice-chairman of the church for many years, holding down the fort as pastors came and went, and was a devoted member of the Gideons. Church was an integral part of our lives. But as I grew into adulthood, I rejected the Christian message. It was full of holes, in my opinion, and I had great difficulty with the conflict of faith and reason. It seemed perfectly obvious to me that the faith I witnessed around me was unreasonable, and I became not only a firm agnostic, but a gleefully active one, an anti-evangelist with an axe to grind.

Flexing my intellectual muscles, and armed to the teeth with a solid doctrinal arsenal from years of church, I liked nothing more than arguing Christians under the table. I still maintained many Christian friends, but as far as I was concerned, none of them had the guts to ask the hard questions I was tackling, and which the Christian faith - I felt - could not answer. And so I went my own way, crafting an airtight personal philosophy that seemed unchallenged by those I presented it to.

As the years went by, this neatly packaged agnosticism became firmly entrenched, and I thought it unshakable. It wasn’t as though I felt any great need for God anyway, since I had my own life nicely in hand. By now I was running Matthews Garage with my father and

enjoying life thoroughly, with motor racing on the weekends and plenty of friends to drink with. There didn't seem to be anything missing, but unbeknownst to my oblivious young self, God was quietly working in the background, and was about to get my attention.

Way down South, in the city of Johannesburg, my sister, Louise, was staying with family friends. I'd met Pastor Oliver Raper's gorgeous daughter, Evangeline, when she visited Harare with her family some years before. I was 18, she was 19, and after making hopeful eyes at her, I'd said to Louise, "If she'll wait for me to grow up, I'm going to marry her!" Now, three years later, this paragon of beauty and intellect was on her way to surprise me on my 21st birthday. My teenage self's saucy pronouncement turned out to be prophetic, and we quickly fell in love. Many eagerly-awaited letters, long-distance calls and expensive plane trips later, we were engaged.

For the life of me, I don't know why this pastor's daughter, herself a Christian who loved the Lord deeply, was willing to commit to a life with an outspoken agnostic. She says she knew from the start that I would ask her to marry me, and that she would say yes. Nevertheless, my heathen state was of deep concern to her, and she wrote a heartfelt letter to me, saying, "How can you commit to me, a frail human being, and not commit yourself to God?" I replied, "I can see you. I can't see God!" But, thank the Lord, she stuck with me and began praying fervently, not knowing that she was joining my mother's faithful intercession of many years.

No doubt the Lord knew that the one thing a young man in love with a beautiful woman cannot do, is to say no! So, when Evangeline called to say that some friends, a couple newly returned from Bible school in the States, were coming to Harare, and asked me to go and support them at the local church where they were preaching, I didn't hesitate.

"Sure!" I said, "Why not?" I still had Christian friends, amazingly, and I wasn't against going along for a midweek meeting. Anything to please 'Evangeline-the-Favorite'!

Off I duly went, to the homey, very traditional Pentecostal church, with long wooden pews and orange-tinted windows. It was all familiar to me, having grown up there, knowing all the faces. Jannie Pretorius, the newly-minted preacher, got up and spoke about Samson, and how he went against God's plan. I listened, mentally tearing holes in the sermon as he spoke, dismantling the message, as was my way, chuckling inwardly at the philosophical mistakes that seemed obvious to me. Then he turned it into a Gospel message and gave an altar call.

"Yup, that's standard practice," I thought. "Pulling on the emotional strings now." I wasn't antagonistic, just pretty sure I knew what the lay of the land was; their good old church tactics were not fooling me.

The sermon was finished, and I was more than ready to leave, but the preacher kept going on and on with the altar call. It was getting uncomfortable, and I thought, "What's wrong with this guy? Can't he see nothing's going to happen?"

Up at the front, Jannie persevered; "I'm not going to close this altar call. You need to come forward. You need to kneel here and receive Jesus." Moments stretched into awkward minutes, and I checked surreptitiously from side to side, but nothing was happening, and he just would not stop. What was this guy's problem? Enough already! "You need Jesus. Come to the front and receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior," he insisted.

Eventually, it started to get through to me. Something inside me said, “Go on and do it,” and my horrified response was, “No way!” I broke out in a cold sweat and shuffled nervously in my seat, drumming my fingers on the pew in front of me. And then I just couldn’t stand it anymore. To my own surprise, my internal voice said, “I’m going to do it!” I jumped up, went straight to the front, and knelt at the altar. Instantly, I burst into tears, crying like a baby, which was not my style at all. Where was this coming from? What on earth was happening?

Jannie knelt to pray with me, and I didn’t notice a thing as the church quietly emptied behind me. After a while, my tears dried, and I walked out into the night, by now alone, and utterly bemused. I couldn’t fathom what had happened, and told myself that I’d surely be okay in the morning. Why I should have had such an emotional outburst, I could not explain, but I was quite sure that a good sleep would take care of it. But morning came, and I was not “okay.” I was not “normal.” It wasn’t that I was unhappy – in fact, I was *really* happy. But I felt different. Something fundamental had changed inside me, and my philosophy could not explain it. I had no answer, and I couldn’t argue it away, as I was wont to do with doctrinal questions, because I could *feel* that something inside me was different.

“Well, it’s emotionalism,” I thought, but that didn’t hold water, because there I was, sitting at breakfast and not feeling emotional at all. As the day went by, and that feeling remained, I realized that something in my spirit had truly changed. How could that be? I didn’t change myself. That change must have come from outside of me. God was not the disinterested, somewhere-out-there entity of my agnostic philosophy. God, for reasons yet unknown to me, was interested enough to reach out and change the heart of an unbelieving young man, in a little old church, in an ordinary town, deep in Africa.

Days went by, and it became clear that this change, this deep-down shift in my spirit, was here to stay. That understanding crumpled my agnostic philosophy, because I had experienced something that I could not explain away or even begin to quantify. I couldn’t shake it, because it was real. “I was wrong,” I thought, “God is real, and He does reach out and touch us. And if I was wrong about that, what else am I wrong about?”

Of course, I had to tell Vangi (my pet name for Evangeline), and I sat down to write a letter, since international phone calls cost a fortune back then. Still not comfortable with saying something as Christian as “I got saved,” I started my letter with, “I must eat humble pie, because something has happened that I can’t explain...” The Lord surely heard her prayers, because three months later, she walked up the aisle to wed – not an agnostic – but a young man now committed to her and committed to serving Jesus.

A baptism of laughter

That first year of following Jesus was a busy one, between getting married to Evangeline, running the family business and being thrown in the deep end at church. Our pastor had no qualms about putting a new convert to work, and before long, I was on every church committee but the ladies’ group. While I was perfectly happy being of service as the youth leader, I remained a quiet, reserved person in the services. While Vangi privately and fervently prayed for God to move my heart and do something for me, I felt I barely deserved

to be included. After all, I had spent years actively arguing against the Word of God, delighting in breaking down people's faith. I felt I really didn't have the right to be joyfully praising along with other, better Christians.

I can see now that much of this was a young man's pride, but at the time, I had once again rationalized my relationship to God. My reserved demeanor in church I attributed to being like my introvert father. This went on for about a year, until Vangi and I went to the annual church camp, a 5-day event deep in the bush at Macheke. In between the camp-style meetings, many an hour was spent sitting around the fire, talking in depth about God, praying for one another, and experiencing the move of the Holy Spirit together. That was something I was present for, yet separate from.

Then one evening, a well-known guest speaker by the name of PD Le Roux launched into his message without the customary scripture reading. "You are the righteousness of God!" he thundered, and he held forth on this topic with gusto for a while. "What nonsense," I thought, listing to myself all the bad that I had done, all the arguing and the running away and the persecuting of others. "This is blasphemy! This is rubbish! He can't say that. It just isn't true!" But then he pulled out his Bible, and delved into the message, fully backed up with chapter and verse, showing how grace, grace and only grace presents us as the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus.

I was deeply rattled by this message, so directly in conflict with my false humility. Vangi could tell from my body language that I was upset, even angry. After the meeting, with this powerful word buzzing in my head and stirring up my spirit, I sat near the fire again, thinking about the preacher's words. Others were praying for each other, ministering in the Holy Spirit and laying hands on one another. Right there, I made a simple decision; to take part, to get involved, to hold back no longer.

Immediately, the power of the Holy Spirit fell on me, and I was flat on my back on the grass, laughing and laughing and laughing. I laughed for two hours, so hard that my stomach muscles were stiff the next day. When friends asked me later what I was laughing at, I told them as much as I could remember. "The devil! I was laughing at the devil!" The devil would fool me no more with his lies of inadequacy and guilt.

From that moment on, my life was changed forever. No more quietly going with the flow. Now I was filled with the joy of the Lord, baptized in the Holy Spirit and eager to hear from God. I went from being content with the ordinary to leaping into "life more abundantly." The adventure of a lifetime, of recklessly following the call of God, had just begun.