

November 2016

Dear friends,

From time to time we have conversations in ministry that help us to see afresh why we are here in Zambia.

One of my (Dustin's) students recently asked to talk with me in my office. I was a little surprised when he arrived and said he actually wanted to discuss what salvation means. He's soon to graduate and be ordained, and my experience in America and in Egypt was that pastors and future pastors tend to know fairly well what they think about salvation. But this student was really wrestling with the topic, on account of what he had gone through in his various practical ministry experiences. He told me that, based on his experience, all across Zambia are thousands and thousands of people in his particular denomination who doubt that they are on the path of salvation, or that they are born again, because they continue to be poor, or because they have not been healed from their diseases. My student said many have also lost confidence in the pastors of their churches, because if their pastors were the real thing, then the people in the pews would be doing much better financially.



Justo Mwale students are eager to take part in dialogues about the sometimes complicated relationship between Christian faith and Zambian culture. (Photo by Johanneke Kroesbergen)

We then talked about what happens in the New Testament, and what Jesus says to people when they become disciples. Any promises of material wealth? If anything, it sounds like the opposite: "Take up your cross and follow me..." And when Paul's letters speak of knowing Christ, does he say it will lead to prosperity? Well, no. It leads to becoming more like Christ.

My student said the whole subject of salvation is so confusing here because people have heard it preached over and over that the sign of being a child of God is an increase in physical property, or a growing bank account, or at least more money in one's pocket. I agreed that the subject isn't simple, because surely God wants Africa to be developed economically, and for people's financial situations to improve. (I also thought to myself: Surely God does not want so many people to die of diseases which would rarely kill if only they lived in Europe or America.)

After a while, my student volunteered, "Maybe salvation is really about a relationship, a relationship with God." I felt thankful to hear him put words on that for himself. And I told him I felt very, very disturbed and sorry to hear that so many people think they are outside the reach of God's grace, solely because they continue to be poor. If anything, their neediness places them more at the center of God's concern.

After my student left, I also felt thankful to be involved in theological education in Africa. The faith is so new where we serve, and traditional African ways of viewing gods and religion remain so fresh, that it really is hard for people to think of the purpose of Christianity *not* being their personal economic advancement. And it's very hard for people not to view the pastor of their church as their link to the supernatural realm, from which financial prosperity and physical health flow. These ideas are not entirely wrong. But they need to be sifted through in light of Christian and biblical theology. So I feel blessed to get to open the Bible with pastors and future pastors here on an almost daily basis, and walk with them as they see truth for themselves, and sort through it for themselves, and figure out what they will preach and teach.

Meanwhile, I've had other conversations in my office lately in which two different students volunteered to me that, as children, they normally went a few days per week without a meal. While growing up, because of broken relationships in the home (in addition to poverty), one of them never had a meal on the same day he took a school exam. He was always forced to go without food on test days. The other who recalled childhood hunger talked about how painful and powerful the temptation is to steal in order to keep a sister out of prostitution, and how it's so easy for a basically good person to land in prison because he's trying to make it possible for a sister not to become a prostitute.

I could name other things I've heard, but perhaps this much will suffice. Conversations like these cut into my heart. They also make it understandable that so many people would wonder how the gospel can be "good news" if it does not mean an increase in property and money, if it doesn't mean that one will be able to keep his sister from selling her body, and if it doesn't improve one's ability to have a meal on a given day. In Africa, the "good" in "the good news" easily translates to money and property in this life.

Would you please pray for the ministry of Justo Mwale University, as we sort through such serious questions about Christian faith in the African context? Our students from seven African countries will go forth to be leaders of very large churches and of whole denominations. Now is such a formative time for them. We are thinking through significant topics, and much is at stake: Will millions and millions of people across sub-Saharan Africa become disillusioned with the Christian faith? Will the churches teach and preach biblical and Christian truth? What will the Christian faith look like in Africa's future? And what difference can Christians make in Africa's development of its infrastructure and economy?

Thank you so much for your partnership with us. We are so grateful to get to continue doing the ministry that we do. We'd love to share as well about our extremely interesting conversations with the American YAVs (Young Adult Volunteers) whom Sherri mentors and coordinates, but you can access some of their experiences and perspectives for yourselves by clicking on the "Blogs" link on [this page](#) and scrolling down for the 2016-



Zambia YAV Kim enjoying a chicken the YAVs were given during their in-Zambia orientation village stay. (Photo by Olivia Orth)

2017 Zambia YAVs, or by checking out the yavzambia page on Facebook. We also invite you to consider a year-end gift and the prospect of supporting us regularly in 2017 (click [here](#)). And please, we feel such a need for your ongoing prayers!

Grateful to be yours in Christ,

Dustin and Sherri Ellington

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Presbyterian church, village style: The Zambia YAVs at a small village prayer house during their in-country orientation.



Clayton and Chris, Dustin and Sherri...back in June when we were all together. Clayton seems to be thriving so far in college, though we miss him in Zambia! We so appreciate your prayers for our family as well as the ministry.



The YAVs and their hosts fetching drinking water during YAV Zambia orientation's village stay. (Photo by Mabuchi Dokowe)



Students line up to purchase the new book, *Prophecy Today: Reflections from a Southern African context*, written mostly by JMU's faculty.

(Photo by Johanneke Kroesbergen)