

The South Africa Essay

By Craig Robertson

Part 1

Is it a mission trip or a missions trip? Regardless, it was a long day of travel. The plane from Atlanta to Johannesburg was crammed packed. All types of people going everywhere. I had these big ideas that I would read and write, but I may have written a paragraph and I read a page or two. I watched half of two movies and all of one, which was about a guy who got trapped while rock climbing and literally had to cut off his own arm to survive. It was amazing, but gruesome. The entire group is tired, but we are glad to be in Africa. From the plane, Africa looks brown. I slept a little, but not much. The Delta flight attendants said that the fifteen hours we were in the air is the longest direct Delta flight in the world. I feel like we are about to start a great adventure. I pray for a paradigm shift- like I am moving out of the desert and into the second half. It feels good. This is probably the biggest adventure I have been on since I traveled Europe in law school. The South African airplane is new. We are seated across the aisle from two nuns, which is always good. They almost look like twins. The African women on the plane are very pretty; they are thin and have great skin and symmetrical features. The coffee I had at the airport was incredible –double cappuccino with a sugar that was rough cut, but white. As a group we are still trying to feel each other out. I don't know everyone's name yet. My friend Don is leading the trip. He and I talked about having everyone share their story the first night. I will look forward to hearing why everyone decided to come on this particular mission trip –or is it missions?

I sat next to Angie on the short ride from Johannesburg to Durbin. She is one of our team members and lost her husband to a brain aneurism six years ago. Psalms 146 was laid on her heart then and in response she came to Africa. It reads like this:

Hallelujah! O my soul, praise God!
All my life long I'll praise God,
singing songs to my God as long as I live.

Don't put your life in the hands of experts
who know nothing of life, of salvation life.
Mere humans don't have what it takes;
when they die, their projects die with them.

Instead, get help from the God of Jacob,
put your hope in God and know real blessing!
God made sky and soil,
sea and all the fish in it.

He always does what he says—
he defends the wronged,
he feeds the hungry.

God frees prisoners—
he gives sight to the blind,
he lifts up the fallen.

God loves good people, protects strangers,
takes the side of orphans and widows,
but makes short work of the wicked.

God's in charge—*always*.
Zion's God is God for good!

Hallelujah!

I felt great when we woke up this morning. While everything was really quiet, it sounded like Africa. Not safari Africa but more like jungle Africa. This part of the city is very lush. We are in a compound of sorts that is about three or four acres I would guess. The bread and breakfast is on a hillside outside of town. A place called Hilton. When I saw that word in the address when I was completing my immigration card, I left it out because I thought we were just staying at the American hotel chain. It is not. It has a little bit of an English cottage feeling. There is no air conditioning, but today there is a breeze. It is cool in the shade. This morning we made instant coffee- actually used some Starbucks stuff my wife bought. It was not bad. Everything is subtly different, but not so much so that the adjustment is difficult.

I am sitting under a Coca-Cola umbrella on a tile deck off the main house where we had breakfast. I can see the white buildings with green metal roofs in which we are staying. The rooms are small, but functional. They have two double beds and a smallish kitchen. The bathroom feels like it is more of a closet. The girls have nicer places.

The main house is white and has darkly stained windows and trim work with a red Spanish style roof. There is a small pool down a set of steps on the same level as the little cottages shared by the guys. The girls' place is on the next lower terrace. There was a little white girl swimming naked. She may have been a little younger than my daughter, Emma, who just turned six. The other guests of the hotel were playing with a Rugby ball. Right now, cricket is on the TV behind me. I think I would be good at cricket. The grounds are well kept. There is an avocado tree –or avo as they call it here, behind the main house. Supposedly there are monkeys on the grounds; I have not seen one, but I will be looking.

Our breakfast was cereal and breads with guava juice and some type of orange drink. There was also some deli meat. The juice was a little watered down and had an aspirin flavor to it. It was not good. In the city, everything is in bloom. There are a bunch of trees that look like live oaks that are dressed in purple. They are called a Jacaranda tree.

We are going around town in a small Mercedes. Apparently we got a free upgrade because the rental company was out of economy cars. They drive on the left side of the road in South Africa, just like in the United Kingdom. The city is very modern, but there are many people walking. You go through pockets that look more like what you would expect Africa to be. You can tell this is Sunday morning. As we drove to church we saw many people were traveling on foot dressed in their Sunday best. Some were in high heels. Some of the African women were holding brightly colored umbrellas.

This morning we went to the NFC church, which is a multi-site church a bit on the charismatic side. The fellowship spilled out into a courtyard. People were drinking coffee and juice and eating cake. When you walked into the modernish building that looks like it used to be something else, there was a wall of mirrors and an array of hanging lights in various groupings. Everyone meandered in and out – a very festive, community atmosphere. A girl immediately noticed that I was new and struck up a conversation. She was very welcoming and called me out as an American straight away. It's funny how people immediately notice that we are from somewhere else.

I knew every song that the worship team played. It could have been a service back home. There was a time when everyone prayed out loud for whatever it is that was on their heart. It created a buzz in the room that was not even slightly uncomfortable. I just listened. Our team had begun to drag a little due to the long travel before this point, but now there was a new found energy. The congregation was about half black and half white. There was an older lady that was twirling down front to the music with lyrics that talk about dancing before God.

The message was about our Creator wanting us to have a great name but being humble in our effort to achieve it. The pastor was a gifted teacher who poked fun at America more than once. They started the service with a conversation from an orphaned boy who walked to church three hours round trip. The boy, named Touch, talked about God striking down those who come against orphans. The pastor also mentioned Mother Teresa and how she achieved greatness by humbling herself. Jesus turned the path to greatness upside down.

The way up is down.
To receive is to give.
To live is to die.
To be righteous and Holy is to admit that you can't be.

After church, we went to the mall to eat. It was like any other mall, except there was a real international flare to the patrons and there was added security in the parking lot. Every time we get in the car I feel like I am on a roller coaster- not because Pyron, our driver and my roommate, is necessarily a bad driver, but because I am in what we think of as the driver's seat without a steering wheel. The roads are narrow and windy. Flowers are blooming on the hillsides. It honestly does not feel like Africa – maybe more like what you would expect of a large city in the islands or something. Maybe I just don't know what Africa is, or maybe it's just South Africa.

We went by Tabitha after lunch. This is one of the non-government organizations we will be working with this week. Tabitha does relief work and takes care of children in crisis. The kids and workers were napping. Tabitha is in a more industrial part of town that is run down compared to the rest. There is barbed wire lining the top of the fences. A green gate guards the entrance. There are greenhouses made of plastic in the parking lot and they are growing long leaf spinach in lots of pots. There were about five or six total. They are also growing various vegetables in a small patch of ground between the parking lot and the wall to the complex such as tomatoes, cabbages, potatoes, peppers and others that I could not readily identify. The plants looked healthy and the tilled earth was rich. Big roosters behind a

fence guarded free range chickens. They were not exactly guarding the door, but they were definitely near it.

We did not stay long at Tabitha and headed back to our B&B. I am dragging some again, but the weather is so nice and the atmosphere is so festive that it is picking me up. Jet lag is a bitch. People are drinking beer and cokes in bottles. They are also taking shots. It's only about 3:30 in the afternoon as I type. Everyone is super friendly. I would love a glass of African red wine. They have a huge collection. I decide it is a bad idea, even though South Africans do not consider having wine as drinking.

After being tested by the devil in the dessert, Luke 4 describes Jesus' first public act of ministry:

Jesus returned to Galilee powerful in the Spirit. News that he was back spread through the countryside. He taught in their meeting places to everyone's acclaim and pleasure.

He came to Nazareth where he had been reared. As he always did on the Sabbath, he went to the meeting place. When he stood up to read, he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. Unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written...

The full passage from the Message of what Jesus read in Isaiah 61 is as follows:

The Spirit of God, the Master, is on me because God anointed me.
He sent me to preach good news to the poor,
heal the heartbroken,
Announce freedom to all captives,
pardon all prisoners.

God sent me to announce the year of his grace—
a celebration of God's destruction of our enemies—
and to comfort all who mourn,
To care for the needs of all who mourn in Zion,
give them bouquets of roses instead of ashes,
Messages of joy instead of news of doom,
a praising heart instead of a languid spirit.

Rename them "Oaks of Righteousness"
planted by God to display his glory.
They'll rebuild the old ruins,
raise a new city out of the wreckage.
They'll start over on the ruined cities,
take the rubble left behind and make it new.
You'll hire outsiders to herd your flocks
and foreigners to work your fields,
But you'll have the title "Priests of God,"
honored as ministers of our God.

You'll feast on the bounty of nations,
you'll bask in their glory.
Because you got a double dose of trouble
and more than your share of contempt,

Your inheritance in the land will be doubled
and your joy go on forever.

Because I, God, love fair dealing
and hate thievery and crime,
I'll pay your wages on time and in full,
and establish my eternal covenant with you.
Your descendants will become well-known all over.
Your children in foreign countries
Will be recognized at once
as the people I have blessed."

I will sing for joy in God,
explode in praise from deep in my soul!
He dressed me up in a suit of salvation,
he outfitted me in a robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom who puts on a tuxedo
and a bride a jeweled tiara.

For as the earth bursts with spring wildflowers,
and as a garden cascades with blossoms,
So the Master, God, brings righteousness into full bloom
and puts praise on display before the nations.

We are to preach the good news to the poor –he set the captives free, announcing the year of his grace.
We are to celebrate God's destruction of our enemies –comfort those who mourn and give them a
bouquet of roses.

Part 2

Story telling around the fire was incredible. We shared for hours. It was like a condensed version of the men's retreat about getting in touch with your life story that my counselor friend hosts in Holmes County, and which he calls Deer Camp. I had never sat in a circle with men and women in that open of an environment. God created holy ground around in that place. The firewood burned about as fast as we could put it in the rock lined pit. It was very smoky. Shameful historical details of lives lived were shared and chains fell off. At the end when we prayed, I had my eyes open. As the missionary we are supporting (named Jason) was closing, a shooting star streaked across the sky. I realized after hearing story after story of seemingly blessed Americans on a foreign continent that even under the most ideal circumstances, we all have our own brand of fatherlessness. Thank God there is hope and restoration. In Revelation 9, John talks about the battle for our souls being won:

And I heard a loud voice saying in Heaven, "Now have come salvation and strength, and the Kingdom of our God, and the power of His Christ; for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, who accused them before our God day and night.

And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.

First morning at Tabitha. A little girl was watching me write in my journal. She was chubby and wore pink slippers with plastic flowers. They don't fit her little brown feet. Her toes hang over the end. The workers have a devotional with singing each morning. They sing in Zulu to gather everyone. Seemingly by chance, one will break into song and the others will join. One of the workers called Pretty beams like a brown faced angel when she sings. All I could understand was "I need your touch." The furniture is covered by blankets. It looks old and dusty. We can hear buses out of the open window and men are yelling. A lady in a bright pink shirt holding a sleeping child prays in Zulu. Her words are rhythmic and she makes different popping sounds as part of her language. A little girl plays with fellow team member Lindsey's baby blue plastic watch. Our choir's hands go low and then they raise them high. The room smelled like urine, but it didn't matter. Jan (*pronounced Yan*) addresses the group. He works with his wife who runs the orphanage's school. He talks about removing doubt so that miracles can happen. He said they see miracles happen at Tabitha every day.

We were briefed by Issy, the assistant director of Tabitha. The director is out with back problems. "The kids want to love, but lack basic boundaries on occasions", she said. I experienced it firsthand. All of them want to touch; they want to hold hands; they want to be held. It makes you ache on the inside. They have a problem with some of them overeating. Children who have suffered starvation don't understand that there will be a next meal; you have to remind them. They recently lost a child who was HIV positive to chronic ear infections. The shock of the loss is painted on everyone's heart. She was the very first baby at the clinic, and now she is gone. The doctors only gave her three months to live, but God gave the world eight years. She will be a princess in heaven for sure. "I keep dishing out food for her", Issy says.

All of Africa has been ravaged by HIV. We will be visiting the epicenter of the world crisis. We learn that an especially difficult problem for children is the gap in ARV medication between the young and teenagers. There is no gradual increase in the dosage, it simply doubles. The drug is very taxing on their little bodies. It is worse than chemotherapy or radiation.

The school downstairs has three classes and twenty-four students. The oldest are in about our equivalent to third grade. The school looks like any other, yet poorly equipped. The kids loved playing cricket. They use an old tennis ball instead of the harder cricket balls so they do not break out windows on the building which is not very far from where they play. They loved teaching me how to play – especially when they learned I could easily pound the tennis ball over the cyclone fence topped with barbed wire that surrounded their parking lot of a playground. It would have resembled a prison yard, except that the children had the run of the place. When my "six" went flying over the fence to their applause, a host of little orphans went under the fence to locate it in the bushes on the other side. These kids - HIV and poverty and all - were as happy as any at home. They beamed with pride to show me their puzzles and games that would cost almost nothing in the United States. I felt ashamed of my gluttony. Their sports equipment was terrible. I will fix that before I leave. I showed them North America on their laminated world map. I placed a blue star as close to Mississippi as I could get it. It really covered up a good bit of Alabama and Louisiana as well. At that moment I realized just how far I had traveled.

The kids on the playground were mostly boys with the exception of one “colored” girl. “Colored” - that’s how they refer to people of mixed black and white race. Her name is Robin. She is magazine pretty and not an orphan. She is among the eight other kids that are dropped off in the morning by a caregiver. Because of the poverty and lack of quality schooling in the area, the orphanage school is considered desirable.

The boys were starved for touch. They rubbed the hair on my arm as if they had never seen a man before. Even more curious was the hair that peeked out above my v-neck collar. My bracelet (made by Mollie Ann) says “Dad” out of wooden letters. Questioned by the group, I was asked, “What does that mean?”

“I am a father”, I replied speaking to about three boys.

“Ah, and you have a wife?” One of the taller boys said in a tone looking for affirmation as he discovered I was wearing a ring.

“Yes, yes I do.”

“Where is she? Is this your wife?”

They pointed to Angie, also married and with a ring, but obviously to someone else. At this moment I realized that these young boys had no concept of family or family structure. No idea of the role of a man or a woman in society. Many of the workers do not have husbands or they have been widowed by AIDS. It was a sobering exchange that made me swallow hard. A sense of burden swelled inside my body, starting at my wedding ring as the little brown hands -older appearing than they are due to the medicine -examined the jewelry that I almost never take off.

As we continued, the boys beamed as they showed me their books from Australia and their playhouse that resembled a makeshift homeless structure that you may think of seeing in a New York City alley or in the movie Slum Dog Millionaire. This playhouse was a micro example of what the rest of the week has in store for us. I left the boys to their study and joined some of the other team members that were playing with the younger kids on what looked more like a playground you would see at home, except that there were close lines and a barbed wire fence. The caregivers, who mostly only speak Zulu - several whom are HIV positive - were sitting under a tree on a plastic bench and singing. They would break into dance for no apparent reason. One woman with boyish hair wearing a blue apron with a red undershirt was especially fun. She was high on life. I later found out that her husband was dead from AIDS, and she was having trouble with her meds. In the community in which we are serving, they bury between 150 and 300 people each week. The population is dying.

After a lunch provided to us by the saints that make up some of the Tabitha team, we packed food parcels for a distribution on Friday in Sweetwaters. Our lunch included various rolls and packaged cheese with a few varieties of strange looking deli meats. We also had iceberg lettuce and sliced tomatoes with an array of chips that had flavors like beef and spare rib. Tea is also served. I prefer the one they call Rooibos, which supposedly is used for a substitution for breast milk in the poorer areas.

Tabitha estimates about 4,000 children are living without parents in child-headed households. They do not have the life skills needed to survive on their own. The supplies were neatly packed into boxes that were easy to transport, but our job was to remove them from the expensive cardboard and place them into cheap plastic bags. The cardboard boxes would be returned to the grocery warehouse and repacked with the same contents for a later distribution. The contents from which a family of up to six was to survive for a month included the following:

- 3 chicken bullion cubes
- 1 bag corn meal
- 2 packages of sugar
- 1 medium bag of brown rice
- 1 box of salt
- 1 bag of oxtail soup
- 1 box of tea bags
- 3 white candles about 18 inches long
- 1 bar of green soap used to wash clothes
- 1 bag of spices
- 1 can of pinto beans
- 1 can of tomatoes
- 3 cans of sardines

Sometimes they supplement the parcels with the greenhouse grown spinach. I packed the boxes slowly and deliberately. The others worked more quickly. We created a makeshift assembly line where we had five people removing the contents from the boxes and placing them in the bags with the others acting in supporting roles. My body moved in slow motion as I realized the magnitude of the hunger problem in an area that lies within minutes of homes and restaurants as fine as you would see anywhere in the world. I took time to smell the spices and the soap. I wondered whether if one of our families had to live on the contents of this small package for a month if the way we think would change? I wondered if I would remember this sobering process within a week of stepping foot on the ground back home.

By the time we finished packing the boxes, the kids were out of school and again ravenous for our attention. I could not walk past a child who did not reach out for a hug or want to grab my hand and take me somewhere. The color of my skin, whether my face was shaven, what I wore or anything else about me did not matter. I was an adult human being and that was enough for another life to yearn for my love and approval. The afternoon tour was of the chickens and roosters and the box in which eggs were laid. I was again impressed with the little gardens that were located around the facility. They had a large mulberry tree and the chickens periodically laid eggs, of course. Their spinach is highly nutritious and easy to grow. Titus 3:14 provides a challenge. "Our people have to learn to be diligent in their work so that all necessities are met, especially among the needy, and they don't end up with nothing to show for their lives."

Issy invited us to gym with some of the kids who piled into the back of Tabitha's only vehicle, which is a small Ford truck with a double cab and a camper shell over the bed. We loaded about 6 kids and one of our team members into the back. They hung out the windows and made faces at me as I took pictures. The little girls are stunningly beautiful. Their smiles are exponentially more infectious than HIV. The road to the gym was very African –people walking with umbrellas and ladies carrying multi-colored bags on their heads without effort. While seemingly in some back alley where you could be gunned down by

guerilla fighters, the gym was huge and as nice on the inside as any in the states. A towering rock wall guarded the north side of the building. Athletic instructors lined up the multi-racial participants. One little Hindu boy had a bright orange spot on his forehead. The kids from Tabitha stood out a little. They were all wearing rubber crocks, which they piled up next to their juice before bouncing onto the mat. Issy explained to us that she would love to take more of the girls to gym, but the owner had been nice enough to provide five scholarships and there was no money for the rest. The cost is \$100 per child per year. While their classmates had proper tumble outfits, most of the orphans wore shorts and t-shirts. It did not hamper their enthusiasm. As I took pictures of one of the girls stretching with a white girl with long blond hair dressed in red, she looked at her and questioned in her adorable South African tempo, "Is that your dad?"

My new little friend just smiled.

The business-man-I-can-fix-it side of me decided that I could easily raise \$1,000 so that all of the orphans that wanted to go to gym could go, dressed in new clothes. I surmised that a short video on one of my websites could raise the funds in a matter of hours. I was later reminded by Jason that we must consider transportation, lack of workers, the cost of petrol and a host of other issues. My enthusiasm was slightly deflated, but I quickly understood.

Issy, who is single, adopted a little black angel named Esther. She was the class pet of the instructor. She would be anyone's. She had on a proper blue outfit and knotted hair. Issy beamed as she spoke about Esther. She paid for Esther's way so as not to take a scholarship away from one of the other children. She explained that Esther's mother was 14 at the time of her birth. She suffered from mental difficulties and had three children in three years, but one was aborted when the young mother was six months pregnant by a drug that almost cost her own life.

I asked Issy about what it would take for the children to be legally free for adoption. She explained that many are without proper documents and that while there are social workers, there is limited transportation for the amount of work required for just one child. It takes many hours of investigation to create documents for children who have dead parents or parents that are mentally incapable due to the effects of the powerful ARV medications. The government dynamic and eleven national languages make foster care and adoption almost impossible. The government also wants Zulu children to be with Zulu families, but there are few Zulu families willing to take on another mouth to feed. I paused to reflect on the miracle it took for my friends the Kinsleys to bring home their son Alphonse from the mission field. Don looked at me and reflected that "Africa is a 150 piece puzzle."

"Make that a 1000 piece puzzle with a few pieces missing and without the box," I added.

Part 3

Today I woke up about 3:30 a.m. to the sound of rain on the metal roof of our guest cottage at the Old Berkshire. I could not go back to sleep although it was the perfect slumber weather with rain and the hint of jungle. The temperature has cooled considerably. I got up and went looking for monkeys at daylight, but even they were smart enough to be elsewhere.

Today we are to be with iThemba, which means "Hope" in Zulu. iThemba was started in conjunction with the Baptist church in Hilton. They work out of a small portable building on the church's gated grounds. Hilton is the Beverly Hills of this area. Our guide for the day was a girl with dual citizenship in

South Africa and the United Kingdom. Her name is Debs. She told us her story and I liked it so much I asked her to tell it again. She was working in the UK in the pharmaceutical industry analyzing computer data. She hated it. As we snaked up and down the hillsides dodging cows that roam freely on the roads, she explained that she was tired of making the rich richer. After a two week mission trip to an orphanage in Brazil, her distaste culminated for her vocation and she decided to complete a six month internship at the orphanage and see what happened. Due to circumstances caused by internal changes in the Brazilian mission, the door was closed. She had gone to college with Stu, the founder of iThemba, and after reading an article in a British newspaper about a grant that his organization received, she reached out to him via email. He just so happened to be traveling to the UK for a fundraiser that very day. While far from a trained teacher, she lights up when she talks about her work. During a pause in the conversation in route to Sweetwaters, she popped a Zulu disk into the radio of her very modest vehicle. She reflected, "I wanted my life to count for something, you know?"

My words cannot give justice to the amazing work and organization of iThemba. Our focus today was on the Asidlale or "Let's Play" component of their ministry, which is an educational support program for early childhood development centers and preschools in the Sweetwaters community. Sweetwaters is the carnage created by apartheid (*a political system in South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s that separated the different peoples living there and gave privileges to those of European origin*), poverty and HIV. South Africa has many similarities to Mississippi, but we called our's segregation, and it ended thirty years sooner. The crèche had probably 35 kids aged two to five. Handwritten signs near the door were written in English and spoke about one's right to privacy and the inability of the school to deny children from coming to the center that were HIV positive. I don't know if the signs were posted for us or the mostly illiterate young Zulu women who drop their children off every day. The place is called Nkululeko or "Freedom" and is on the side of a hill. It looks like something you may see riding through the Mississippi Delta, only worse. There is no heating or cooling. The building is more like a barn than a preschool. The children are bundled in jackets and wearing hats, but their shoes are in a line by the front door. When we arrived, the children were quietly listening to the teacher, named Nombuso, who was instructing the class in their native tongue. My southern mouth cannot make the pops and ticks mixed with letters, so I cannot correctly call many of the children by name.

The children were engaging. Their clothes appeared that they have not been washed in months. They were not as clingy, however, as those worn by the orphans at Tabitha. Several disgusting outhouses lined the edge of the property. Because it was raining, when I would see a little one slip out the back door, their little brown feet were covered with shoes again.

The crèche is the best in the community, but would have been long sense shut down in America. Debs beamed when she talked about the progress the school has made, but iThemba only works with eight of the approximately two hundred schools.

At snack time, the teacher arranged several blankets on the cold concrete floor. Brightly colored packages of chips, pretzels and corn puffs appeared from their school bags. The children would gather into groups of five or six and they dumped all of their snacks into one pile. They do this because all of the children do not have food. It was an incredible display of community. They literally shared everything they had. They beamed with life as the munched and smacked.

One of Jason's favorite things during his extended stay in South Africa over the summer was Life Group, where he connected with other believers from church. Everyone wanted to go. The meeting was held in the home of a man name Andrew, who is probably in his late sixties. He was the most inviting and welcoming man I have ever met. Jason said that at church one day he was approached by Andrew and asked if he would like to join his Life Group. "Thanks Andrew, tell me some of the details."

"Well, I'll get back to you with those because I am only conceiving of it now."

The meeting had about twenty-five people. We had picked up some quiches and pies that we brought. They served sweets and tea. There was a twisty donut thing that had been dipped in sugar, a powdered sugar covered dumpling sized pastry with a cream center, candied pineapple and a cake that tasted like a Twinkie. Some of the characters in attendance could have been the subject of an indie film. There was a lady who worked in an auto shop who came to group with oily hands and a shirt with her name on it, an impish little bearded man that called himself Stitch, and a couple with their two daughters among several others. Two men had prepared to share. They were eager to hear from us about who we are, what we do and why we were in Africa. I told the group about 200 Million Flowers, my new non-profit adoption ministry. Although we had just met, they asked if they could pray for the organization at the end of the night. I eagerly agreed.

The first man who shared talked about the power of authenticity in our lives, where the inside self and the outside self meet each other. He intertwined biblical references with his own story of sexual abuse, bullying and immorality using the context of spiritual warfare and the character of Satan as the accuser, prince of darkness and father of lies. Christ is the opposite. The answer for him has been to turn on the light by being authentic. Secrets and darkness give Satan a foothold. As a "Christ killer", one already knows the worst thing there is to know about me, so what do I have to hide now?

The second man who shared was a lawyer and a non-salaried staff member of NFC. He talked about Erastas, a little known figure in the Bible that is mentioned three times in Paul's letters. Erastas was the city treasurer—a regular bloke that God thought enough of to name him in the Bible three times.

Prayer time was the highlight. Everyone prayed at the same time. I thought it was so cool, just like I did when it happened at church. At least two men began to whisper in another language. I thought it was African. Jason later told me they were speaking in tongues. If three years ago you had told me I would be on a mission trip to an African orphanage 9,000 miles from home and I would be praying with a bunch of people speaking in tongues, I would have called you crazy. Another interesting part of the time was the component of prophecy. If moved, a person would speak to another about what they believed the Spirit was saying. It was experienced by two of our team members. When there was a pause in the praying, the leader asked for everyone to continue and they did. When they prayed for 200 Million Flowers, all I could do was turn my palms to the ceiling. I felt the power of the Holy Spirit. The plight of the orphan was intensely lifted to God, and I will always remember it.

Part 4

Nothing has gone exactly as we planned. Sleep is a necessary but sometimes a limited commodity. My body has not adjusted. The mind swimming with images of despair coupled with hope are dizzying. David, my roommate, has been my comic relief. In his deep southern drawl that reminds me of home, commentary about his socks and the day's events are sometimes surprisingly astute and reflective. Looking around our room, we are reminded that we are in Africa. The electrical system is primitive and

the appliances are a little different – not other planet different, but certainly other continent different. For no apparent reason, sometimes the power will just go out, even if the weather is perfectly clear. The system will just overload. Locals say it will be out for days, but we have only experienced a few hours.

Our mission this morning is colored blue. Breakfasts are beginning to run together. Most days it is cereal, breads, fruit, yogurt and deli meats; but one morning - I cannot remember which - it was English-style with eggs, mushrooms, sautéed tomatoes and sausage. It was really good. We pile up into the cars and head to Tabitha in our usual caravan. We take multiple small cars so we do not draw attention. Crime is terrible in Africa. Everyone with money lives behind gates and walls, and there are car guards at the malls and restaurants. When we arrive back at Tabitha, the kids are dressed in their best. They are hyped, but orderly. Each child was being placed in groups by the color of a star marking their foreheads. The teacher explained this was so they could look out for each other. It was another several picture of community.

Reflecting on the contrast between the children at Tabitha and in the crèches, I have settled on the reality that the children at Tabitha, while certainly in the same stratosphere of being underprivileged, have tasted love like candy. They crave it. While there is a deep sadness in their little brown eyes, there is a glistening of childlike hope that seems to grow. Twenty-three souls piled into two compact cars and a small truck with a covered bed. The vehicle looked like it had never been cleaned, but there are much bigger concerns than clean cars. I was driving for my first time in Africa. I'm not a good driver in America; so we tried to make our multiple near head on collisions fun. The kids in the back had smiles that were larger than their faces. None of the children had ever been to a movie. Never. The girls said the kids piled into the back of Tabitha's covered Ford Ranger sang the entire way. "Down by the river, where nobody goes, there's a big fat mamma, washing the clothes."

If they saw a police car they would say "Police, Ah Ah Ah."

If they saw a motorcycle, "Mo-to-cycle, Ah Ah Ah."

If they saw an ambulance, "Am-bu-lance, Ah Ah Ah."

Eric, the teacher who lives at Tabitha and works with the older kids, turned away from the screen and joked that the movie would be played on the back wall of the theater. They knew better. When the movie started, their eyes were glued. It was like the pearly gates were opened and they had seen heaven. What will it be like when these orphans really see heaven and they take their crown from God? The only brief interruption was the popcorn, candy and orange Fanta. The Fanta created the need for the toilet, but they were hurrying.

I grew up watching the Smurfs, but watching these kids watch the Smurfs was better. On the way back, the tune of their song changed to the annoying Smurf song, made more tolerable by their excitement and accent. I took pictures of the Tabitha truck in front of us while I was driving by sticking my arm out of the sunroof with Angie's camera. My favorite image is of the truck driving through a row of the purple painted Jacaranda trees that are now beginning to shed their blooms. When Pyron got his group out of the car, he turned up the radio and the kids from his car joined with the others and were dancing to the techno thump of Party Rock Anthem. The beat and the kids were jumping.

The afternoon plan was to be back with iThemba and see the mentoring projects in the community. We heard from field workers Mlo, Sizwe, Bex, Lindelani and Syv on this foggy afternoon. I have never been to Seattle, but I would imagine the weather we have experienced is comparable. The workers are on the frontline in Sweetwaters. It sits in a beautiful valley as multi-colored houses zigzag along the hillside. Animals roam freely and clothes are dried outside on sunny days.

The field workers share Christ and serve as healthy role models for the kids in the community. The children they help are often unfairly burdened as the leader of their homes. Most have little or no food, and the food they do have is typically sugar and starch with a few vegetables they grow. No meat. Many are being raised by their Grannies because their parents are dead. Burials take place outside the homes. These brick-marked piles of earth are constant reminders of the fatality they soak in daily.

Voodoo-style ancestry worship is tangled with Biblical principles, and turning to Christianity will mean being ostracized by family. In the Zulu culture, if one breaks the ancestral chain, they are told their siblings will be lost. Ancestors, not Christ, are perceived to be the bridge to God, and animal sacrifice is widespread. Many of the homes have the horns of goats butchered in the name of religion over the doorway. One can feel the evil that radiates from the valley. Animal skins made into bracelets presented by Zulu witch doctors snake around the wrists of the elders. The young iThemba workers, mostly in their twenties, lead small groups and have activities with the children and youth. They are Christian soldiers no different than those we sent to Korea, Vietnam, Iraq or Afghanistan, but theirs is a spiritual battle and their mission has eternal significance.

After they shared in a group setting, I had one-on-one time with Syv, which is short for Syvion. Syv is a senior field worker originally from Swaziland, an easy car ride to the north. He is paid the equivalent of about \$1,100 per year and speaks Zulu and English fluently. He is dark skinned and wears a Pain Stewart style hat. The children benefiting from his ministry come from extreme poverty where crime, teenage pregnancy, illiteracy, AIDS, drugs, alcohol abuse, and death are an everyday struggle. The burden is heavy in his eyes. As it does periodically, the attorney surfaced and I questioned him about his family and his background. Syv is divorced. Every time there was conflict at home, his wife would pack up and leave; and as this pattern repeated, he eventually did not go after her. He is engaged again to a girl from the community. Syv is handsome and carries himself with dignity. The biggest issue in Sweetwaters, according to him, is the lack of role models in the lives of the children, who are seeking acceptance through immoral behavior. It sounds familiar. I was curious how people afford drugs in this impoverished community, and he explained that they grow their own marijuana plants and create a potent drug by combining it with crushed ARVs and rat poison—a Zulu crystal meth. I prayed for Syv. I prayed for his marriage, for the youth of Sweetwaters and for his perseverance. He smiled big.

After leaving the church grounds, we piled back into cars and headed to Sweetwaters to see the ecofriendly community center iThemba is raising money to construct. They need \$450,000. I was in the car with Debs again. I have noticed that while many of the white girls we encountered are pretty; they give very little attention to their appearance. Debs life is lonely. She loves her work and interacts socially with coworkers on occasion, but her family is in the UK and she is single. She reads and watches television shows over the Internet in the evenings. She has thought about adopting, but she seems discouraged at the difficulty of the process. It sounds familiar.

When we arrived at the site of the new community center in Debs tiny Jazz, it was raining and our view of the valley was obscured by the fog. I have never been in so much fog. The ground is compacted red clay that sticks to my shoes. In this type of weather at home, we may have gotten stuck in Pyron's truck,

but Debs little compact car somehow got us where we were going. The chief of the Sweetwaters tribe donated the land to iThemba, which would be like if the Choctaws gave land to First Baptist Jackson- basically unprecedented. We were told God stories all week, and this was one of them. Someone had put a metal structure on the property that looked like a huge cargo shipping vessel with a window that could be raised like a concession stand's back home. It was painted with happy, colorful pictures that were faded from the weather. We were invited by the staff of iThemba into the box and joined hands in a circle and prayed for the community center.

The little kids at Tabitha are called Gummies. While most were initially believed to be HIV positive, in reality, there are only a few. All have incredible stories. Each is as different as the children themselves. Tabitha kids are typically found by "mobile moms" that care for the child-headed households in Sweetwaters or by the ladies that are providing much needed medical care to the sick. Siblings buried alive by their mentally ill mother have been rescued. A child left at the foot of her dying Granny's bed is now thriving. Sammy, a fat, happy little girl is a walking miracle. She is running and playing. Brandy Hester tells her story on the website of Restoration Hope:

Sammy was left orphaned when her mother died from AIDS. Sammy's only remaining relatives took her in, and she was added to the already overwhelming number of children in their care. When their resources were exhausted, Sammy's providers had to do the unthinkable. She was placed in a corner and left to die a slow death of starvation -a little life ebbing away in a corner of a dark mud hut.

John 1:5 says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." That beautifully describes the turn in Sammy's story. God's light came to Sammy in the form of a woman bent on saving lives. As she peered into the darkness she saw a one-year-old child literally weighing only pounds and breaths from death. Her medical training told her this child was too far-gone, but the Light inside of her refused to believe that. Sammy was brought out of that darkness and slowly nursed back to health.

On the surface, taking a group of preschoolers to McDonalds would seem like a minor deal. You may think traveling over 9,000 miles for such a thing is absurd. I would have totally agreed before our time in South Africa. A big part of our mission is to build relationships. You cannot build relationships over the phone or by sending a check. It takes physical presence. While stories of poverty and the complicated dynamics of the global orphan crisis have great value, until you have wiped its nose it is only words on a page or images on a screen. The workers need to know their vocation has value. The children need to know there are Christians who would leave their families and their world to go on a long journey just for them.

The kids savor their food. They lick the ketchup from its little white container. On other days, the caregivers must be very careful that certain children do not overeat because of the psychological trauma caused by starvation. Today is not one of those days.

While the kids are eating, a couple of the guys and I take Tabitha's truck to fill it up with gas. It takes over \$100. Gas stations in South Africa are all full service. While we are there, we have it detailed. The truck has never been washed. Stains from years of service remain, although a team of six men hand washed the vehicle. We are proud to have served them in this small way.

After we returned the children to Tabitha, we drive outside of the city to spend the afternoon shopping for souvenirs. Weather permitting, we will spend Friday in Sweetwaters, which I am told will be emotionally taxing. As usual, Jason chooses an incredible location to eat. I feel guilty, although the food is cheap by American standards. The setting is beautiful. Eating out in Africa is an event. You are never rushed. No one is trying to turn a table. Our setting is picturesque. The sun has come out and there is a slight breeze. A waterfall can be seen in the distance. Zebras graze through the meadow. Strange flowers decorate the exterior of the cottage converted to a restaurant. There is a lemon tree behind the building. Like the people, the wild African lemons have a thicker skin than we are accustomed due to their harsh climate.

Part 5

Today will be our heaviest day. We are going to the heart of Sweetwaters to visit the Hope Center where kids from the community live that cannot go home. They also distribute food on Fridays. We have a window in the otherwise terrible weather to get in. Narrow dirt roads and the hilly terrain make travel difficult. Before we go, we head to Tabitha to participate in the daily worship. Everyone attends. The children carry plastic chairs on their heads and line them out for us. The singing is transcendent. Hands are raised in the air and the smiles are big. The workers are angelic. Their worn shoes hardly touch the ground as they clap and sway. The children join the celebration.

My new friend George has expressed interest to Jason in making an extended visit, but he is not sure what he could do to help. George is twice divorced and lives alone. During a break in the singing, George is encouraged by Jan that the children have cherished his fatherly influence. Jan does not know that George wants to come back, and this was not a part of the scheduled program. It was prophetic and Spirit inspired. An elderly man investing in the lives of kids in the African culture is rare. God is stirring something. I would not be surprised if George ends up living in South Africa to be a father figure for these fatherless children. What a great story.

All nine of us pile into Tabitha's newly cleaned truck and head for the community. We dodge cows and people as we make our way to the center. The valley smells wet, like red earth mixed with death. We pass women carrying children tied to their backs with blankets. Makeshift convenience stores look more like childhood lemonade stands, only less colorful and more serious.

When we arrive, we are introduced to Zanele. She lives at the Hope Center and runs the operation. Her spirit is infectious. She acts bullet proof. We are given a tour of the center. There is a window that is accessible to the community where women who cannot care for their children can leave them. The child is rested on a pink Care Bears blanket and a bell rings. It is called a Moses drop. I have conflicting feelings when I looked at it. I imagine what is going through the minds of the mothers who place their children through that window? What a selfless act. The children live across the compound in what looks like a shack. Mud from the rain has splashed against the aqua blue exterior walls. The building is connected to a partially completed room made of mud. Laundry is drying on a small tree outside. Other clothes are being washed in an old bathtub filled with rainwater. Water is collected from the roofs of the building in large green drums. There are true, free range chickens running everywhere. Free range means that the chickens eat what they find, not corn. I always thought it meant that they were not in cages. The roosters are skinny and scary, like they could kick some serious ass in a cock fight. Trash is scattered about the grounds. There is a skinny dog tied to his house, which is made of mud bricks and a stick framed metal roof. He looks hungry. I am not going to get within ten feet of that animal. I look

down and realize that I have been walking over two graves in the middle of the compound. I feel sick inside, like the feeling you get when you have too much caffeine.

I have to duck my head to get through the front door where the children sleep. A woman is sweeping, so we take off our shoes. The interior is clean and there are bunk beds with a stuffed animal on each pillow. A partially burned candle sits next to a Bible written in Zulu and a broken mirror. There is electricity, but it is primitive. Clothes are piled in the corner of the room and the halls are narrow and dark.

We pile back into Tabitha's truck and Zanele joins us. There goes the car wash. Zanele leads a team of women who care for the sick and the child-headed households. She is going to take us to some of the homes under her care. Zanele has a cell phone that constantly rings. Many in the community saw the Tabitha truck this morning and are calling her Blackberry to express their needs. She speaks in Zulu, of course. We wind up and down the narrow roads of Sweetwaters. When we stop at the first home, I notice a barefooted little boy wearing blue jeans and a red and gray striped shirt. He looks at us with curiosity. The rain water at this home is collected in a barrel with no top. The home is constructed of red brick made of mud. Clothes are being dried on the fence. We pray for the young woman inside who is under several heavy blankets, although it is hot. She is in her twenties and dying of AIDS. Her lips are dry and her hair is tangled. Her eyes are yellow. I swallow hard and am glad when we say our goodbye.

The next home is worse and harder to access. We travel over a stream where you can see human waste. This home is composed of several buildings. There are caged puppies outside, but no garden like we have seen along the way. Another young girl is dying inside. I wonder about the moment she was infected. She has a jug of dirty water, pain killers, suppositories and cheap liquor next to her bed. Her caregiver is also HIV positive, but the ARVs are working and she can walk. They are glad we have come. The sadness is thick, but bright pink African flowers with narrow petals grow wildly and decorate patches of this dreadful place. Zanele engages in a serious conversation and we are led out of the home after Don prays for her comfort.

We are turned away at the third home. The patient is dead. The body is inside. A woman holds a toddler and her voice is melodic as she speaks with Zanele. The relief is palpable. They laugh with each other. The young woman, also called Zanele, died at 5:00 a.m. Her mother, who is left to care for the little boy dressed in all blue, yells for her neighbor in a happy tone as we leave the property. There is laughter after death.

The doorway to the last home is decorated by five sets of goat horns nailed to the white walls made of a stucco-like material. An evil oozes from the door that would be yellow if it had a color. The patient inside, age sixty-seven, sat in a wheelchair and wore a red sweater and a black hat. She spoke slowly as she fought the pain of the HIV and cancer killing her. The walls in her home do not go all the way to the ceiling. There is a bush hanging upside down from a string in the corner. She has dried skins tied around her wrist forming a bracelet, another sign of ancestral worship, which is as much of a pandemic as the HIV in this place. Zanele exercises her skinny legs before praying for her in Zulu. The woman cries out during the prayer and I put my hand on her shoulder, which feels like I am touching bone draped in cheap fabric. A rush of adrenaline washes over me. I feel like a soldier.

By the time we make it back to the Hope Center, people are already lined up at the gate. We have a room full of boxes to pack. The work feels more urgent than it did earlier in the week. The ladies who

work with Zanele were glad to have our help. It seems so inefficient to move the parcels from the boxes to the bags; but I did not question, I just put my head down to accomplish the task at hand. By the time we finished, there is a room full of bags. The distribution starts immediately. People are coming from everywhere. Each person is asked to sign a sheet of paper before they receive their parcel. Many cannot write their name and sign with an "x." There is an inordinate amount of left-handed people, I notice. There are many overweight women, not from overeating, but because of their diet of carbohydrates and sugar. Somehow they were able to balance these heavy bags on their heads with little effort. It was impressive. While most of the parcels were given to women, there were some men. Many of the girls were young. Some were pregnant. I catch the eye of a girl who couldn't have been more than fourteen who held the baby growing inside of her tummy. She turned her eyes down when she realized I was looking at her.

About this time the children who live at the Hope Center came home. They were a welcome distraction from the droves of people lined up to receive the food. Apparently someone at school had a tube of lip gloss, because many of the girls had shiny red lips. They smiled and blushed when we talked to them. One little girl had an eye that looked dead. I am told birth defects are common in Sweetwaters. When we finished distributing the food, the line was as long as when we had started. A man in a yellow sweater with a black hat looked at me as the line was finally breaking up at the news we were out of food and said in perfect English, "I'm hungry."

I put my head down.

We ate breakfast, loaded our suitcases and headed to Tabitha to say goodbye. When we arrived, Issy was busy getting the participants ready for a rare Saturday gymnastics performance. Life was moving forward without us. I presented the boys with the cricket equipment, which made me feel warm inside, and they divided the two sets between the older and younger kids as I had hoped. The children wanted to be held and tickled and loved, as usual. One boy who rode in the car with me to the movie demanded that I stay; but seemed to expect I would leave and he would never see me again. This particular child is HIV positive, but he is taking his ARVs. Even if I make it back to Tabitha one day, he may or may not be there. Living in an orphanage and taking ARVs is taxing on the mind and body.

Leaving Tabitha, we drove toward the Durbin airport with the intention of stopping off to see the Indian Ocean. From the road in the hills at the first glance of the sea, you notice large ships floating off the coast. It has an ancient feeling. The ocean is pale blue with hints of green. The waves violently crash against the shoreline made up of rocky boulders that are covered in patches of slippery green algae and exotic barnacles. A black man is posing for pictures in his red, jockey underwear. The sand feels like it is made up of tiny gravel, not nearly as fine as the white beaches of home. I roll up the pants legs of my jeans and take off my shoes to walk through the sand. I put them on again as I start my ascent to a high rock. Crabs scatter. When I reached my destination, a slight sense of fear mixed with awe and peace wash over me. Waives threaten to knock me off my perch. I sat and thought about my wife and daughters and how much I wish we could share the moment. I thought about the stars on the foreheads of the orphans, the children of the crèche mixing piles of snacks to share, and the beautiful young girl in red at the distribution center in Sweetwaters holding the baby growing in her tummy as she shamefully turned her eyes down. I thought about the amazing sacrifice of the workers from Tabitha and iThemba. I looked at the bracelet made by Mollie Ann on my left wrist. The wooden letters that spell "dad" are beginning to fade. I breathed deeply and thanked God for my life and whatever is next.