

A Privilege From the Almighty

by Helen Roseveare

The privilege of serving God is an unbelievable gift that allows us to be co-laborers with Him in His work, and we must say thank you to Him in difficult situations by understanding His sovereignty.

Duration: 29:41

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, John 3:16, Hebrews 13:8

Topics: "Testimony"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a story about a man named James who trained as a medical evangelist. James faced many challenges, including the need to upgrade his general schooling and pass his exams. Despite these obstacles, James worked tirelessly and put everything he had into his studies. The speaker also recounts a dangerous encounter where he was threatened with a spear, but God protected him. Additionally, the speaker mentions how James started a youth club and taught the children about Jesus, even though they were unruly and messy.

Transcript

I suppose we can all look back and thank God for the day by his grace when we came to know him as our own personal saviour. Certainly for me I can never ever forget it was a new year's day, it was a wonderful day to start with, and the sheer unutterable tremendous joy that flooded in to think that God loved me. He died to save me from my sins and it's just so tremendous.

I know it's the night when I first came to know that God loved me that I asked him then for the privilege, if he could let me have it, of being a missionary. I never knew any other missionary call, I tried, and I was a missionary training college and they all had nice testimonies and verses of scripture to say how they got there, and in despairing I said, God surely at least you could give me a verse of scripture, it would sound better. Well it didn't work that way for me, it was just a hard urge right from the beginning that he so loved me, there was nothing that I wasn't willing to do, God willing, to go out to share him with others.

And we look back and we thank him for the privilege of being allowed to serve him. It is a privilege isn't it, it's an unbelievable privilege that almighty God invites you and me to be a co-laborer. He didn't need to, he didn't need you and me, except that he of his own sovereignty has sovereignly chosen to limit himself to you and me.

That he chooses, that he can't love your next door neighbor except through you, it's unbelievable. This is God's way. We can thank him for the privilege.

We can thank him, looking back over this past year, for a degree of whatever success you have seen in the work that he's given you to do. Whatever it may be, I can look back with tremendous joy and thank God for the tremendous privilege of serving him for 20 years in Africa, and of course in many ways a success story, yes, tremendous satisfaction of the joy of being allowed to serve others, and seeing a church built up, and many many hundreds hearing the gospel day after day through the witness and ministry of Atherton Medical Auxiliaries that we've had the privilege of training in the Central School, and one thanks God. But I want just to add perhaps what to me is the most important point, and as some of you look back over this past year, it may be you're wondering just for a moment in your own personal heart, in your own personal lives, can you honestly say thank you to God? Perhaps there have been difficulties, problems, things haven't gone just as you would have liked them to go.

Perhaps the success hasn't been quite what your next door neighbors have been. Can we thank God then? I think perhaps it was one of two major lessons that God taught us during the rebellion and five months of captivity was the tremendous privilege that he offered us of being able to say thank you to him in situations where others who did not know God would have thought that a thank you was not a suitable word. I can thank God now tremendously that perhaps at one of the very worst moments for me during the rebellion, the first night I was taken by rebel soldiers and very brutally beaten up, swung on the ground and cruelly kicked, and through the midst of that night in all its darkness and its wickedness and its cruelty, brutality, its unutterable loneliness, in a moment when one almost felt, in almost a wonderful second, had God failed you, had he deserted you, was he really there any longer, and suddenly into it all there was God in a vitally real way.

He was there with me and he simply said, you asked me for the privilege of being a missionary, this is it, don't you want it? He reminded me, he said these aren't your sufferings, they're not beating you, these are my sufferings, all I ask of you is the loan of your body, and suddenly in the midst of it he gave one the ability to say thank you God. I think for me perhaps it was the main secret he taught me, was saying thank you to him for things that we don't yet understand, for what we're giving thanks. Shortly afterwards during the rebellion I'd been taken away, I was in another prison, and things had become very intensely cruel, and the day came when two rebel soldiers came for me in the prison where I was held, they asked for the doctor, and the rest of my companions hid me, I was not known as a doctor there in order to protect me from the wickedness.

Then they said there is a Greek woman downtown, desperately ill, she needs the doctor. I thought I couldn't hide, I moved forward, I went downtown with those two soldiers. You never knew with the rebel soldiers whether it was true or not, you didn't know to what you were being taken, it might have all been a false pretense.

The actual fact I was taken down to a house where some 70 Greek prisoners had been rounded up. They'd had a terrible day the day before, been very cruelly beaten. Up until that moment the Greek trading community had bought their freedom, they thought they could buy their way right through to the end, they never thought the rebels would turn on them, and so they were even less prepared for what happened, and again amongst them there were practically none that had a personal faith in Christ.

They had no resilience, they couldn't take the responsibility. I was taken into the room where, the house where they were held prisoners. They all knew me, I'd been their doctor for 12 years, I'd brought all their babies into the world, I'd done their operations.

I loved them and they loved me, but as I walked in that day not one looked up. They were in utter despair, they were totally helpless, they had nothing with which to meet the situation. They sat there in, cowed by the very force of the wickedness of the rebellion.

I was taken through to a sort of central room, it's the way the Greek homes are built out there in Africa, and this woman was lying on a bed and I knelt beside her to examine her. And then we started an amazing situation. I spoke to the woman in Swahili.

I then translated what I'd said, I said, where's your pain? I translated what I'd said into Bangala, which was the language of rebel soldiers. I then said the same thing in French. Rebel soldiers knew enough French to know that was probably what I'd said.

I then said something entirely different in English, taking for granted that the rebels would presume I'd merely gone on to fourth language, same words. And in English I said to the Greek men who knew English, translate me into Greek for the women who did not know English. We carried on a conversation for the next twenty minutes in five languages.

And three times I spoke medically, where's your pain, how long have you had it, where does it hurt? And the fourth and fifth language I had the privilege of preaching the gospel. At the end I said to her, I'm going to pray for you now, I'm not going to close my eyes, I'm continuing to examine the woman, just pray with me. And some of those Greeks found their way that day to accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior.

But listen, why were they willing to listen to me? Why had they listened? Only and solely because they knew that I had suffered as much as they had suffered. And when I went back that day, and the soldiers, I went on to another camp with more sick people, when the soldiers took me back to our campsite where we were imprisoned, I looked back and understood then why God had enabled one to say thank you at the time of suffering. He had a plan.

Had I not suffered, those Greeks would never have listened to what I had to say, it would have meant nothing. But because I'd been through all they were going through, they said what she said is real. As we look back over last year, whatever last year has held for you, not only the good but the difficult moments, can I ask you each one to try and face up to God and say thank you.

Then I would ask you to look out onto the world of need today. Two thousand seven hundred million, they're figures that for most of us folks we just cannot conceive of it. Some of you handle figures more than we do and perhaps means a little more to you than it does to us, particularly when you talk about publishing quarter of a million books.

I've not got up to that level yet, but two thousand seven hundred million people who have never yet heard of Jesus. When we look out on the unbelievable unreached masses, you'll realise that your task, my task, has hardly begun. We're only touching the fringe of what needs to be done.

You look out onto the Muslim world, one-sixth of the world today Muslim, following Muhammad. One-quarter of the world today living in a communist dominated land, in a land where there is no freedom, where they cannot sit like this and talk as we are talking now, where everything is dominated by fear. And

to the west, the unbelievable indifference, wherever you go.

It's one of the things that has hit me most since I came back from Africa. In Africa, if I walk down a jungle forest pathway, I happen to be white. And in the area I live in, I'm probably about the only white.

So if anybody met me, well of course she's white, she must be a missionary there, of course she'll talk to me about Jesus. It's too easy. I mean that's what I prayed for, wasn't it? To talk about Jesus.

So I go into a village, I start playing a piano accordion, today you start strumming a guitar, and in 10 minutes there's 200 people. If you stay for an hour, there'll probably be a thousand. Any excuse to leave work, and they'll sit there for five hours while you talk to them about Jesus.

And everywhere, people will accept the Lord as Savior. You cannot take a meeting today in Zaire, you cannot preach the gospel in Zaire today without people accepting the Savior. There's a wonderful, tremendous move of the Spirit.

But back here, the sheer, unutterable indifference. Speak to the person who sits next to you in the bus, and look at the way they look at you, and when they get up and walk away and find a seat somewhere else, you realise what they think about you. It's the indifference that's so hard to break through, and the defiant.

I went and did a thing perhaps as rash and foolish. I think perhaps I know better than to do quite what I did again. I went and spent a night in Soho.

I wanted to see for myself. I wanted to sense the awfulness of our own great city here in London, and to see hundreds of our own teenagers and young twenties in the unutterable filth and rottenness and bottom level there. To try to reach out to them, and the sense of total defiance.

They didn't want anything I had to offer them. This is what's around you. This is your public.

These are the people you're trying to reach. And there comes the moment you say, can God? Can He? We are so few. It is wonderful to see such a crowd of you, and to know that you're all involved in Christian publication.

But even so, can we begin to reach the tremendous public that's needed? And when we start on this, can God business, it's just to encourage your hearts. I think of two soldiers, or three soldiers really, two particularly, and God graciously let us see them come to the Lord through giving them a copy of John's Gospel. I was called out on a Sunday afternoon, quite early on in the rebellion, and outside the back door of my house were three men.

The centre one was obviously the leader, the man on my right had a spear in his hand, the man on my left had a gun flung over his shoulder. They started arguing with me. They wanted money.

Very heavy streak of Gaelic in me. We don't part with it easily. And the man in the middle got mad, and he turned to the man on my right and said, strike her down.

He wasn't standing more than a yard from me, and he raised his spear to drive it through me. I can't tell you what you think in a moment like that, I don't know. You're not thinking at all, you're paralysed, you're numb, you're scared stiff.

Every instinct in you of self-preservation, raise an arm to take the blow, you wonder if you'll live through it or if you won't. There was one selfish prayer in the back of my heart, I used to pray, please God, if he's going to kill me, may it be the first blow. I'd seen so many mutilated, I felt I couldn't stand it.

And then after the agonised wait, the sudden realisation that nothing had happened, I turned and looked at the man, and he stood there with anger in his eyes, there was no question about it, he wanted to kill me. He was unable to move. He was fixed, rigid, as he stood there.

The leader got mad and turned to the second man and said, strike her down. He raised his gun to bring the butt end of his gun down across my head. Again the instinctive action to take the blow as you could, again the quick prayer that God would see you through somehow, would you or would you not live? Again the agonised pause, and then realising nothing had happened, and turning and seeing, and again, he stood there, we used this verb lady, we didn't know what else to say, we didn't know what God was doing, he was fixed, he could not move.

And suddenly, God does something to you in those moments, and I spoke to the leader, I said, you're wasting time. My God in me is stronger than your God in you. You'd better go round to the front of the house and we'll talk it over quickly, quietly.

I backed through the door into my house and got the door shut between me and them before my knees gave way and I crumbled up on the cement floor and thanked God for his unbelievable goodness and grace to me. I called my house lad and together we made them coffee and we went round to the front, sat at the front veranda. I had the joy of leading those two young soldiers to the Lord Jesus Christ, and they left the veranda with copies of John's Gospels in Bangala, in their own language, in their pockets.

They went away. Now one of those men we've met since, the other man apparently, both the other men were killed, one of those young men is alive today, he's a catechist at the church, he's gone on, just through the reading of St John's Gospel, given out to us free, redistributed to them free as they came from those of you who made them available to us. Yes, God can, God can reach out to the unreached.

As we look forward and accept the unbelievable challenge that lies ahead of us, untold opportunities, do you know, I do believe strongly there are opportunities ahead in the next 10 years that we've probably never known before. Opportunities both in writing and in radio. I believe they're the two great weapons that we have today for what lies ahead.

It is true that today more people are born into the world every day than are being converted to Christianity. Despite the enormous church growth in Brazil, in Zaire, in Indonesia, in areas where there's an explosion in the church, despite all of that, nevertheless, population is growing faster than we're reaching them. And somehow we've got to find new tools and new weapons.

And somehow we've got to find how to exploit these tools. And I strongly believe that both writing and radio are not yet been anywhere near exploited to reach out. When you think that in the world today, 50% of the world today, well the figure I had was that they were under 18 years of age.

I was told at a date that in fact they're now under 16 years of age. This vast big crowd in Zaire today, when you think that 12 and a half million of our 25 million people are under 12 years old, because we've doubled our population in 12 years. This is a great mass of young people.

If one adds to that the fact that I'm told that probably nearing up to 80% of the world's teenagers are now literate, that goes against a lot of things that other people say. It's quite an enormous figure. I know there are vast areas where they're still illiterate.

But there's an enormous crowd of literates. And you know what hurts us missionaries? The vast number learn to read in mission schools. And who provides them with literature to read? If you're out on the mission field you'd know the answer at once.

The communists. It isn't us. The literature that pours into the hands of our young people.

I see it. I sought the mail for my students in the college where I teach. 72 students.

Week after week to every single student by mail. Postage stamp and all. There comes the communist literature.

Every now and again. Perhaps a packet to one student to distribute but we're more careful with how we use our finance for postage. We haven't begun to touch the problem.

And the tragedy is the lack of writers. I think one of the things I see as the biggest need, a tremendous opportunity, is for journalists, folk who train, folk who know how to write, to get out there and become nationals. You know, to live amongst them.

Live right down in amongst them. Speak their language. Live with them for five, ten years.

It takes time. And then train nationals to write. The translation work's not good enough.

Translating our idioms into, it isn't idiomatic at all. It's rubbish when it comes over in their language. But learning what their idiom is in order to present it in their story.

Oh how we need to pray as people interested in books that God will raise up folk who could really cash in on this vast source of new readers all around the world who are reading communist literature. Because we haven't got the finance, the personnel, the vision to accept the challenge. I don't know what it is.

I leave it to you. You folk know far more about it than I do. I don't know whether it just needs some enormous fund that nobody has enough money to put into it that would somehow subsidize books out to our people.

We don't know. They subsidize Bibles to our people. Bibles in Zaire now cost I suppose the equivalent of one pound fifty.

But you know that's a workman's, that's two months salary for a workman in our part. And you may have a wife and five children to feed and to put through school. And to give up two months salary, and they do it.

They do it. The word is so precious to them out there, they'll do it. There aren't many back here would give two months salary to a Bible.

But you know we're going to have to somehow find a way of a vast source of subsidized books for the third world while the readers of today, who may very well be the leaders of tomorrow, if they're not going to be only trained in reading communist literature. Can you look forward and accept this tremendous challenge? I think of one young fellow, James. One day I get around to writing James's story.

It's worth writing. It's a tremendous youngster. He came to our college to train.

He had no right to be in our college at all. He hadn't done any of the things he ought to have done. He couldn't speak French.

He hadn't been to secondary school. He didn't have uniform. He hadn't got his teeth.

He was altogether wrong, but he had a fantastic Christian testimony. And my African chaplain said to me, Doctor, you cannot turn him away. I said, goodness sakes, we can't take him in.

He said, there's nothing else you can do. So James came in through the back door and he did four years work with us to train as a medical evangelist. But in the same four years he had to do a tremendous amount of schoolwork to upgrade his general schooling.

He wouldn't be allowed to take his medical exams. He hadn't got his O levels and he had many. He had to get through four O levels at the same time.

He was working day in and day out. He was working frantically hard. He came to us last year at school.

And it was going to be a real fight for James. He was really going to have to put everything he'd got into it if he was going to get his exams. And I tell you, he was making me put everything I got into it too because he was always on my doorstep asking for extra classes.

The first Sunday of the new college year in October, there was a notice given out in chapel. I confess, I don't think I was listening. I was probably ticking off the school register that my students were where they should be.

Monday morning, James met me outside of school and said, Doctor, what are we going to do about the Vandals? I said, I beg your pardon. He said, what are we going to do about the Vandals? I said, James, I haven't a clue what you're talking about. It's time for school.

We went into class. You don't put an African off like that. When we came out of school, there was James.

What are we going to do about the Vandals? I said, James, you'd better explain yourself. Well, James was given out in church yesterday. I said, what was given out in church yesterday? He said, the pastor asked us to pray about the Vandalism.

It was true, we were suffering from Vandalism. Church windows were being broken. Desks and forms in the schools were being smashed up.

And I looked at James. I said, let's not do it, Officer. It's a church affair.

James, junior student, looking at me, a senior missionary, said, aren't you a member of the church? I agreed, grudgingly, yes, and I fed to breakfast. Next Sunday, I paid more attention to the notices. Imagine my horror when I heard the pastor read out, Tuesday evening at seven o'clock in the new nursery school auditorium, there will be a meeting for all Vandals under the age of 15.

If this was given out in your church, I wonder how many Vandals would be there to hear the notice. Tuesday evening, I went down just to see that there was order and to wonder what would turn up, expecting half a dozen young ragamuffins come for a joke. I had to make my way through a sea of

youngsters to get to the doors to unlock them.

They swarmed into the hall before I could ever get the lights on. We seat 120. About 180 kids rushed in.

They sat three to every two chairs. They were the dirtiest, scruffiest set of youngsters I've ever met. They were all chewing mangoes.

You have to know a mango to see the point of the story. They spat out the sticky skins, and they spat out the sticky stones, and then they wiped their sticky fingers down my nicely whitewashed walls. And the noise, I said, James, what on earth are you going to do with them? He said, I'm going to tell them about Jesus.

And every Tuesday night throughout that school year, James took that crowd of ragamuffins. He turned them into a youth club. He used what literature he had, which was one copy in his hands.

He had nothing to give the children. He taught them hymns and choruses by heart. He taught them Bible stories.

He taught them Bible verses by heart. There's nothing he could give them. There's nothing they could afford to pay.

He turned them into a Sunday school. About the fourth week, there was a lot of noise outside during the club. He said to me, Doctor, will you look after them when I go outside and see what's going on outside? I confessed, as soon as James left the room, there was as much noise inside as outside.

I did not know how to control 108 kids. At the end of the meeting that evening, James came up to me and said, Doctor, what are we going to do about the senior vandals? I said, James, enough. He said, Doctor, outside when I went out there, there was a whole crowd of young men, 18, 24, 30 year olds, and they're all saying it's not fair.

You're telling the children about Jesus. Why aren't you telling us? I said, James, listen, you cannot put any more in your timetable. I cannot put any more in my timetable.

We are absolutely working to capacity. Doctor, he said, are you really telling me that you won't tell them about Jesus? I suppose you won't be surprised when I tell you that on next Sunday in church it was given out. Thursday evening at seven o'clock in the new nursery school auditorium, there will be a meeting for all vandals over the age of 15.

Well, if juniors come, that's one thing. You don't expect the seniors. But by then, I'd learnt to see a James.

I went down Thursday evening. Every seat in the hall was taken. There were 120 young fellows there between 18 and 30 years of age.

I think it's one of the saddest groups I've ever had the privilege of ministering to. They were dirty and scruffy, yes. Many of them had been drinking heavily before they came.

Most of them were smoking. You don't ask in our part of Africa what they're smoking. We found out later that probably about 40 percent were on drugs.

I said to James, what are we going to do? He said, you are going to tell them about Jesus. And so we did, Thursday by Thursday. As you know, at the end of that college year, 80 of those young men had accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as their saviour.

They were off drugs. Many of them had been to baptismal classes and are now church members. They needed literature.

They needed to be taught. They needed something to follow from. They have, practically speaking, nothing.

There's so little available and there's practically nothing they can afford to buy. They're there. The youth are there.

Can you raise up somehow and take the challenge? Finally, can we look up and take courage to what lies ahead? The challenge is there. The opportunities are there. How are we going to meet it? Can we claim Christ's promises? He says Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Can you and I accept the challenge that he can do it for us? I want to tell you one small story in closing. I had to work fairly hard to find a story that wasn't yet in print. Probably will be, I hope, when I next write something else.

Just to show you that God can and God can meet your problem in the same way. He's the same God. One night, I'd been working in the maternity.

Despite all we did, the mother we were working for died. We were left with a little tiny premature baby and I knew the problem was to keep that baby alive was going to be to keep it warm enough. I sent a few of my midwives out to get the boxes we put our babies in.

Cotton wool, we wrapped them in. Another went out, fill a hot water bottle, one went out to make up the fire. One female midwife came back and said, very sorry doctor, boiled the kettle, took the hot water bottle, filling the bottle when there was a sudden bang, burst hot water bottle.

It's no good crying over burst hot water bottles in Africa, they don't grow on trees and we've no chemist shop down the jungle pathways. It's alright to put the baby as near to the fire as you can, reasonably do, and you sleep between the baby and the door to stop the draft. Your job is to keep that baby warm.

Next day, I went over to have prayers with our orphanage children at midday as I always did. I had about 80 orphanage youngsters and some of them gathered round for prayer time. Gave them different things to pray for.

Amongst other things, I mentioned this tiny baby and our difficulty keeping it alive. I probably mentioned the burst hot water bottle. I told them it was a little two-year-old sister who was crying because her mummy had died.

During prayer time, one of the children, Naomi, a little ten-year-old, prayed. In the usual very blunt way of our African kiddies, please God, send us a hot water bottle. If it's no good tomorrow, God, the baby will be dead, so please send it this afternoon.

And then she added by way of corollary, while you're about it God, would you send a dolly for the little two-year-old so she'll know you really love her? My problem as always with the children was, could I

honestly say Amen? I didn't truthfully believe God could do it. I know God can do anything but. And we all have the but.

We all have the bit where we put on the limits. I'd been out there over three years at that particular time. I had never ever received a parcel in Africa.

They just didn't come in those days to Africa. And anyway, if anyone from back here sent me a parcel, who's going to put a hot water bottle in? I live on the equator. Midway through the afternoon, someone came to me.

I was in school teaching the pupil nurses. They said, there's a car outside your house. I went over to my house.

The car had gone. When I got there, there's a large 22-pound parcel, all the way up to the United Kingdom stamp. I think I felt the tears then.

I felt, I just couldn't open it alone. I sent three orphanage children. The children gathered around me and we opened it together.

On the top, there were lots of these lovely bright knitted vests that they love and I gave these out to the kiddies. Then there were knitted bandages for the leprosy patients. They looked a bit bored.

There was a large bar of soap and they're probably more bored. And then there's a big box of mixed currants and raisins. They rise it up, they make a nice batch of buns for the weekend.

Then I put my hand into the parcel and I pulled out the brand new rubber hot water bottle. I think I cried. I had not believed that God could do it.

I didn't ask him to. I didn't have any faith in it at all. Naomi was in the front row of the children.

She rushed forward. She said, if God sent the hot water bottle, he must have sent the dolly. And she dived into the parcel with both hands and the bottom of the parcel she dug out the dolly.

She never doubted. She looked up at me with bright eyes. Please, mummy, can I go over with you to the maternity and take this dolly to that little girl so she'll know that Jesus really loves her? That parcel had been on the way for five months.

The Sunday school class in Bromley had parceled it up five months before. The Sunday school teacher had accepted from God the challenge to put in a hot water bottle, even for the equator. An English child had put in a doll for an African kiddie.

And it came that afternoon because a ten-year-old prayed believing. And her belief did not limit God. Can we together look up into the face of Jesus for the coming year and ask God to help us to take off the limits and to believe him that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.

And he can do for you and for me here in England, just what he's doing for Africans way there in Africa, just what he did for the Lord Jesus Christ. If you see on earth in Palestine, he has not changed. He's the same God looking unto Jesus.

Amen.

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