One must always have the habit of sharing and going to those who are afflicted.
—A Congolese Proverb

Struggling Brothers

And a teacher who struggles, too
by Kathleen Shank

Editor’s note: From Refugees International’s website at www.refintl.org: Kakuma Refugee Camp is one of the oldest and largest refugee camps in the world...Established in 1992, Kakuma sprawls over the desert of northern Kenya. Its 86,000 inhabitants come from nine different countries and dozens of different ethnic groups. Sudanese comprise about 70 percent of the refugees.

“The Nuer Sudanese woman and girl who cooked Kathleen’s first Sudanese meal: “they are relatives of David, the 6’8” escort/bodyguard who watched out for me as I traveled to and from class every day. I would have hated to make those journeys without him.”

“Teacher?”

A student calls out in strongly accented English from the back of the classroom. My eyes sweep past rows of poorly constructed wooden benches filled with refugees whose eyes and teeth shine brilliantly against their dark Sudanese skin.

The student rises to his feet. At six-foot-five-inches, his thin frame towers above his classmates, yet maintains a respectful Sudanese manner. The tribal initiation scars that stretch in parallel rows across his forehead pucker with his questioning brow.

My class has educated me about those scars. The cutting that causes them is so deep that my student’s skull bone is engraved with the same design that is seen on the skin of his forehead. Whether he is dead or alive, his scars and engraved skull will always identify him as a Dinka man.

“Yes, Anok?”

He replies, “The verse you read about seeking the face of God... how will we know when we have found God’s face? What will it look like? And will it be only his face, or will it be his whole head?”

The class is silent, anticipating my answer.

I struggle not to let my internal smile show on my face, but I also feel the pain of a people who are desperate for Biblical knowledge and understanding. With an open Bible in my hand, I slowly reread and explain the message of 2 Chronicles 7:14. My explanation is received with claps, cheers, chattering in multiple tribal
tongues, and indescribable mouth noises my American tongue fails to mimic.

This is my second year as a guest teacher for the Diploma Bible Course of Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya. I love the task; it challenges me and never leaves me with a boring or mundane day. I am repeatedly asked questions like these: “Is wife inheritance acceptable to God?”; “Is 32 wives too many for one man?”; “Why don’t women like polygamy?”; and “What is wrong with cheating on a test? The pastor says it is good, Christians should help their brother when he is struggling.”

I eagerly accept the continuous flow of unpredictable inquiries, realizing that I too am learning. I am learning how to apply God’s word to a culture drastically different from my own.

Most of the people in my class are refugees from Southern Sudan, which has been under attack by the Islamic Northern Sudanese for over 20 years. Some of my students have seen their villages destroyed and their entire families brutally killed; others are not sure where “home” is and have lives comparable to the worst of nightmares. Some are called the “Lost Boys,” some were rebel soldiers, a few are from Muslim backgrounds, and one is a former warlord.

Many of the students have titles such as Pastor, Evangelist, or Elder, but without access to Bibles their knowledge of God’s word is greatly limited. This lack of training spiritually cripples the Sudanese church. The gospel message is received and passed on through oral transmission, which has its complications.

My Sudanese brothers are heroes of the faith. I watch them work through the steps of forgiveness, forgiving things more horrid than I can comprehend.

Says Kathleen: “These men are church leaders, evangelists, pastors, and teachers, etc. Many of them are still in secondary school because they did not have the opportunity to go to school in Sudan due to the war and lack of development. They studied all morning for regular studies, then came to the Bible school for the afternoon. It was common for them to come without having eaten anything except a glass of tea that morning, and my class started at 3 p.m. and went to 5 p.m.”

Two stories from Kakuma Refugee Camp

Night of the Spider
Late the other night, we had another disturbance. I was up reading my ‘Perspectives on the World Christian Movement’ book. It is a thick and heavy reader. I sat in a metal folding chair at the table that we now refer to as the “scorpion infested table” (from a previous incident!). My sister Normie was on the bottom bunk, sound asleep.

As I was reading I noticed some movement on the floor, out of the corner of my left eye. I turned my head to the left to see what had moved. There, on the floor, just three short feet from my chair, was a yellowish spider the size of my hand spread wide open. It had hair an inch long growing on its legs and two claws that resembled miniature lobster claws in the front. It was the highly dreaded and feared spider of Kakuma—the one they say can kill a person within 30 minutes if injected with its poison.

A lot happened in the next one and a half seconds (in present tense for effect):

• I scream, “OH GOD!!” - which is a deeply sincere prayer.
• Normie awakes.
• The spider runs under my metal folding chair.
• My feet fly up onto the seat of the chair, without my rear leaving the seat.
• The spider changes direction and runs out the back side of the chair.
• I hurtle my thick, heavy book towards the spider.
• Normie is sitting up in bed, looking confused.
• The book lands squarely on top of the evil spider with a thud.
The spider is squashed—dead.
A horrid stench fills the room.
I sit quivering in my chair, uttering repeatedly, “Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus! Thank you, Jesus!”

It took me a few moments to pull myself together and explain to Normie what had happened. Finally I worked up the nerve to carefully pick my book up and peek under it at the dead spider.

Seeing that it was indeed, most certainly dead, I turned the book over so Normie could get a good look at it. Her half-asleep eyes bulged out of her eye sockets and her mouth dropped open. “Its body is as big as mouse!” she gasped.

We closely examined its hairy legs and its claws, thanking God all the while that it was dead. I cleaned the spider guts off the floor, cleaned and sanitized my ‘Perspectives’ book, and sprayed perfume around the room to counteract the putrid smell of spider guts and poison.

It was a long time before I settled down and could go to sleep. I crawled up onto the top bunk and let down the mosquito net, fully aware that it is not the malaria-carrying mosquitoes that I want to protect me from, but rather, the man-killing spiders and poisonous scorpions. I’d take malaria any day over those spiders and scorpions.

For example, after seeing a group of Sudanese carrying small, wooden crosses through the camp, I asked one of my students what was happening. He answered, “We heard that the Bible says we should take up our cross and follow Jesus, so we made these crosses to take up. We are following Jesus. We understand that if we are not willing to take up our crosses, we are not worthy of Jesus. We want to be worthy of Jesus, so we carry the crosses.” It is obvious to me that my brothers are struggling: struggling to understand what it means to follow Jesus, struggling to understand basic instructions in God’s Word that I have taken for granted.

In spite of the many misunderstandings and the lack of Biblical training my Sudanese brothers suffer under, I find that many of them are deeply committed to following Jesus—even to the point of death. They have not denied Christ and become Muslims when their lives have been threatened.

So Help Me God! (I am going to hurt someone!)

It was what I was afraid of seeing, hoped I never had to witness, but I encountered it: a man and woman in a physical fight. I saw a man beat a woman right in the thick of the refugee camp. I was with a Turkana friend who begged me not to get involved, but I could not just stand

After missions class, several of my students made commitments to take the gospel message to Northern Sudan—to the Muslims who attacked their villages and killed their loved ones. As they learn precept upon precept of God’s Word, they are realizing that the ones who have persecuted them need Jesus.

Nurse Normie caring for a six-year-old child, who was suffering from malaria and had a temperature of 106 degrees.

A Turkana girl surrounded by other Turkana children, amused by the pale people taking the picture.
I have been deeply moved by their level of commitment. After missions class, several of my students made commitments to take the gospel message to Northern Sudan—to the Muslims who attacked their villages and killed their loved ones. As they learn precept upon precept of God’s Word, they are realizing that the ones who have persecuted them need Jesus.

In spite of the growth I see in my students, I understand the desperation behind the continuous plea they make on behalf of the Sudanese church: “Please tell your people in America that their Sudanese brothers are struggling. We need Bibles and Bible teachers. Ask them to help us. We are their brothers.”

From my point of view, my Sudanese brothers are heroes of the faith. I watch them work through the steps of forgiveness, forgiving things more horrid than I can comprehend. But in the end, they are victorious. What else would make a former SPLA (Sudan People’s Liberation Army) soldier declare, “Prayer is my gun!” Yet, I know that they continue to struggle with comprehending some basic biblical concepts. I cannot deny that they are struggling, and I am grateful for the opportunity to help my brothers.

My students, my lost and forgotten men of Sudan, are a treasure to me. I feelprivileged to have shared this small portion of their life.

Kathleen’s sister Normie Shank at work, caring for a beggar boy who was mentally challenged. While caring for him, she discovered scars from whips all over his back and legs. She also thinks he has AIDS. In this picture she is attending to some of his open sores.

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Rosedale Bible College alumna Kathleen Shank is from Greenwood, Delaware and believes that “life is full of love, adventure, challenges and opportunities that...are meant to be passionately embraced.” An indefatigable traveler, Kathleen combines her delight in other cultures with her desire to do something worthwhile by serving when she visits other countries. She has taught at Kakuma, worked at a center for street children in Russia, done hurricane relief in Honduras, and run the children’s program at Regions Beyond Ministry in Ngoliba, Kenya, among other things. Her sister, Normie Shank, often joins her.

Photos courtesy of Kathleen Shank.