

FOREWORD BY TIM CHALLIÉS

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A COMPANY

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OF

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HEROES

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PORTRAITS FROM THE GOSPEL'S GLOBAL ADVANCE

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TIM KEESEE

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“I have so enjoyed reading Tim Keese’s books. He is truly a ‘frontlines’ brother in Christ who tells it like it is on the battlefield / mission field.”

**Joni Eareckson Tada**, Founder and CEO, Joni and Friends; author, *Joni and A Place of Healing*

“Tim Keese is both a master storyteller and faithful theologian. Each page is a poetic narrative of faith, hardship, and Jesus building his world through weak and ordinary people. *A Company of Heroes* pulses with the resolute energy of God’s saving love. Keese writes, ‘In the name of Jesus, demons are cast out—and in the name of Jesus, fear is cast out.’ That God himself saves you from the fear of man just might be the most misunderstood reality of the modern church. The love of Christ and the perseverance of the saints together will subdue forces of evil and change the course of history. This book represents a poetic collaboration of Keese and a modern-day great cloud of witnesses, and each chapter displays the highest achievement of missionary valor. All Christians should read this book.”

**Rosaria Butterfield**, Former Professor of English, Syracuse University; author, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*

“Tim Keese’s journals bring to light stories of mercy, endurance, and audacity. The heroes in this book are the hands and feet of Jesus—hands scarred and stained by service and feet that go to hard places with the gospel message that shatters darkness and sets captives free.”

**Jim DeMint**, former United States senator; Chairman, Conservative Partnership Institute

“One of the greatest joys of being a pastor is hearing people tell me their stories of God’s grace in their lives. *A Company of Heroes* is a book of stories of the amazing grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in the lives of faithful servants of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Their stories help us to know we’re not alone, and they help us to remember that our lives and our stories are not worthless or meaningless if we are living for God’s glory and not our own.”

**Burk Parsons**, Senior Pastor, Saint Andrew’s Chapel, Sanford, Florida; Editor, *Tabletalk*

“Peopling that great heavenly choir is among the missionary’s greatest motivations. Tim Keese compels us to sit at the feet of this great cloud of witnesses by presenting a kaleidoscope of missionary lives. From mosques to Mormons—from first world to third—he urges us to lock shields with the great soldiers and choristers of the past and present. In *A Company of Heroes*, Keese writes brilliantly as a reporter and lover of gospel advance.”

**Paul Schlelein**, missionary church planter, South Africa; author,  
*John G. Paton: Missionary to the Cannibals of the South Seas*

## A Company of Heroes



# A Company of Heroes

Portraits from the Gospel's Global Advance

Tim Keese

A Company of Heroes: Portraits from the Gospel's Global Advance

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To Debbie,  
in the company of heroes



# Contents

Foreword by <i>Tim Challies</i> .....	11
Acknowledgments .....	13
Introduction .....	15
1 Facing Fear: Sayid, Aaron, and Jillian (North Africa) .....	23
2 The Glory of the Cross: Samuel Zwemer (Bahrain and Jerusalem) .....	43
3 The Character for Bravery: Mei Li (China) .....	57
4 Mercy. Multiplied.: Michael Alemu (Ethiopia) .....	75
5 A Hero in the Battle of Life: Carl Keesee (Danville, Virginia) .....	91
6 Rise and Fight Again: Ivan and Oksana (Central Asia) .....	99
7 Shepherds: Danny Brooks (Salt Lake City, Utah) .....	111
8 Torn Curtain: Roger Weil (London and Leningrad) .....	129
9 White Rose: Dollie Jones Keesee (Danville, Virginia) .....	137
10 Cell 44: Georgi Vins (Soviet Union) .....	143
11 Martyrdom of Faithful: Gayle and Cheryl (Afghanistan) .....	157
12 Incurable Optimism: Dave and Gloria (Arabian Peninsula) .....	173
13 “He Showed Them His Hands”: Jakob (Syria and Armenia) .....	191

14	Things as They Are: Amy Carmichael and William Carey (India) .....	205
15	The Broken Sword: Jon Wesley and Sarah (Indonesia) .....	221
16	Aslan Is on the Move: Micah and Katie (Oxford, England) .....	237
17	End of the Road: JD Crowley (Cambodia, Laos) .....	251
	Epilogue .....	273
	Notes .....	277

# Foreword

I write these words at the end of a year-long journey around the world. Twelve times in the past year I boarded a plane and began a long journey to a distant nation. Twelve times I disembarked and got oriented and began a search—a search for objects related to the long and storied history of the Christian church. I scoured colleges and cathedrals, libraries and museums, always on the lookout for objects that would tell a story beyond themselves. I found some incredible artifacts. In the National Archives of Northern Ireland I found the Bible that Amy Carmichael had pored over for so many years as a bedridden invalid in southern India. In a little museum in England I found the snuffbox Andrew Fuller had pulled from his pocket and passed around the room as a makeshift collection basket upon the founding of the Baptist Missionary Society. In a new exhibit in China I found Hudson Taylor's gravestone which for so many years had been lost—discarded and covered over by the Communist government. I found all these and so many more. It was an inspiring year.

Yet over the course of the year it slowly dawned on me that I was discovering an even better, ever more precious treasure. Everywhere I went, I met Christians. I landed in a major city in China and was immediately welcomed for a meal by the pastor of an underground church. I landed in Australia and was invited to stay with some newlyweds who had prepared a spare bedroom specially for me. I flew over to Auckland, New Zealand, and was

invited to stay as long as I wanted in the home of some believers there. In England and India and South Korea brothers and sisters in the Lord gladly gave up their time to drive me many miles and to provide personalized tours. I joined into formal or informal worship services in Brazil, Ecuador, Israel, the Philippines, South Africa, Zambia, and elsewhere.

I came to learn that even though those treasures of church history are inspiring and worth seeing, the greatest treasures can't be found behind glass in museums. The most valuable artifacts of the history of the Christian faith aren't neatly labeled in library stacks. The most enduring relics aren't boxed up in dusty basement archives. Those objects are wonderful and inspiring and worth pursuing around the world. But the true treasure is found in those posh edifices and ramshackle huts we call churches. The greatest treasure is God's redeemed people.

For years now, my friend Tim Keesee has been scouring the world for that kind of treasure. His search has led him to pastors in the world's most dangerous nations, to missionaries who have left behind family and comfort to take the gospel to distant lands, and to people in his own hometown who have labored silently but faithfully. Much of his search is documented in his incredible *Dispatches from the Front* series of videos that I've watched and recommended countless times. More recently I've been thrilled to see him also document it in books like this one. With one eye on the present and one on the past, he powerfully tells the stories of dedicated men and women from today and days gone by. I encourage you to join him on this journey and to come to see and know the greatest treasures in the world.

Tim Challies

# Acknowledgments

Recently an intrepid missionary friend wrote to me words that capture my own heart: “There are few things I enjoy more than meeting and interacting with other brothers and sisters in Christ. As I get older, the pool in which these saints reside gets deeper and wider. The joy increases too.”

To the saints in this book, our fellowship in the gospel is indeed deep and wide because it flows from the saving grace of Jesus that is deeper, wider, and sweeter still. This fellowship is a taste of heaven. I am truly blessed to be the reporter and am grateful to the men and women in this book—my friends, my heroes—who trusted me to tell their stories despite the risks they face as they live on mission in hard places.

I am thankful for so many who made this book a reality. For the remarkable team at Frontline Missions International—the men and women on the field as well as those on the home front. You shouldered even more of the work while I was working on this project—as always, I am grateful for you.

For my Epaphras-like friend, Steve Leatherwood, who is a beloved coworker (Col. 1:7). For John Hutcheson, Ben Ebner, Allan Sherer, Andy Johnson, Pete Hansen, and Brannon McAllister with whom I have shared many of the miles and muddy roads that run through the pages of this book.

Many encouragers came alongside me, literally and figuratively, as I traveled and wrote, by offering a timely word, good

## Acknowledgments

coffee, or a walk in the woods. I think especially of Gloria Furman (for all the “book scheming” we did together in shaping this book); Kevin and Leslie Cathey (you are gifts of grace and strength to me); Julie Zickefoose (my inimitable friend and fellow writer); Rosaria Butterfield (my faithful prayer partner in this venture—you always had my back); my pastor Trent Hunter (thank you for your genuine interest and cheer and for your Barnabas-like encouragement over the past year of writing and traveling); Chun Lai at Westminster Seminary (an unsung hero of the *Dispatches from the Front* films and a wise counselor as I wrote this book); and Jonathan Henning (like your namesake in the Bible, you are a strong and faithful friend who in your dark hour reminded me to look up and know “you, O LORD, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head” [Ps. 3:3]).

As usual, the Crossway team was superb. I am particularly grateful to Justin Taylor for his friendship and guidance and to Tara Davis, my über-editor once again, as well as to Nick Chiodras who did the excellent maps that open each chapter. Thank you for getting this book over the finish line!

Finally, to my family: I’m grateful to my daughter, Sarah, and son, Tim—both gifted wordsmiths—for the helpful suggestions they provided throughout the book. You both continue to make your father’s heart glad. Debbie, you have a share in every page that follows. By love and prayer you time and time again have sent me on my “journey in a manner worthy of God” (3 John 6). You are numbered among the company of heroes.

# Introduction

“Grandpa, were you a hero in the war?” The old man had parachuted behind enemy lines during the D-Day invasion forty years earlier. He was part of a crack team that, against superior numbers and weaponry, took out an entire German artillery battery—and thus spared the lives of hundreds of Americans landing on the beachhead at Utah. He was awarded the Bronze Star for valor that day, and after Normandy, he went on to fight with distinction. But looking beyond the memories and medals and into the eyes of his grandson, he answered simply and sincerely, “No, but I served in a company of heroes.”<sup>1</sup>

Across the world, I’ve walked point with a company of heroes, too. We’ve shared jungle paths, desert roads, and city streets on five continents. These brothers and sisters are foot soldiers in the long campaign as Christ builds his church across the centuries and among all peoples. Their stories are drawn from my journals—often written in motion as they went about their days. Viewers of the *Dispatches from the Front* film series may recognize some of them, although here I can share their lives more fully without the restraints of filming and security. Other heroes whose stories I tell serve in hard and hard-to-reach places. Their actual names can’t be written here, but they are written in heaven. As Paul described, they are “unknown, and yet well known” (2 Cor. 6:9) because they labor in obscurity, but God is with them.

I also want to introduce you to heroes of the past. Over the years, yellowing books, obscure footnotes, and neglected tombstones have set me out on serendipitous detours to flesh out the lives of gospel pioneers whose courage, faith, and vision shook iron gates and broke deep darkness. Others would follow and build a road over the trail left by the first missionaries—paths sometimes marked by their untimely graves. Some of these intrepid saints are famous and quotable—others were known to only a small circle of rope-holders and left no memoirs or monuments. Whether well-known or unknown, past or present, their stories are important reminders that the gospel does not only reach across the globe, but it also spans generations and centuries. This is why I love to spend time with missionaries on the field and then go and brush off the tracks left in the region by pioneers of a century past. It's a kind of gospel archaeology that reminds me of God's faithfulness as "one generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts" (Ps. 145:4).

### **Joy and Perspective**

Many years ago I was in Albania at a time when the little Balkan country was emerging from nearly fifty years under a brutal, Communist dictatorship. Among the Iron Curtain countries, Albania was considered the "North Korea" of Eastern Europe because of the isolation, deprivation, and persecution that the people suffered for decades. When Communism collapsed in 1990, there was no known church in the entire country, but God showed his great mercy to the people of Albania as the gospel was preached to even the most remote corners of the country so that within twenty years, there were Albanian congregations in every city and in most towns throughout the nation!<sup>2</sup>

During those first years of freedom and gospel advance, a missionary friend invited me to teach a short series on church history to his little congregation of first-generation Christians.

Night after night I walked with them through the centuries and shared the stories of faithful men and women—their brothers and sisters—who had followed Christ in their day, and it became clear to them that the gospel they had heard and believed was the same one that Paul and Polycarp and Perpetua believed and died for. Theirs was the same faith that Luther defended and that Hudson Taylor had sailed to the other side of the world to preach in Chinese. These truths were found in God’s Word, the Bible—the same Scripture that Tyndale put into English and Carey translated into Bengali was the book that their pastor preached from in Albanian.

When this reality took hold, light shone in their eyes and joy filled their faces! They had been told by family and friends that they were deceived and were part of a small cult of fellow fools who had drunk the same Kool-Aid. But now they saw that the church wasn’t just the forty or fifty people gathered in an apartment sitting on fold-up chairs. Instead, they were inseparably part of something worldwide and wonderful. They were connected to the saving work that Jesus himself started across the centuries and across the world as he gathered—and is gathering—his own from every nation and generation! Meeting this “company of heroes” from church history put iron in their souls and gave them greater perspective to endure the persecution and ridicule they faced.

These first-generation Christians found strength for endurance in the company of “saints below and saints above, the Church in earth and heaven.”<sup>3</sup> I, too, have been impacted by the stories and examples of those who have gone before—and their strides in running after Christ have quickened my own pace.

John Piper put it this way:

What I have found . . . is that in my pastoral disappointments and discouragements there is a great power for perseverance

in keeping before me the life of a man who surmounted great obstacles in obedience to God's call by the power of God's grace. I need very much this inspiration from another age, because I know that I am, in great measure, a child of my times. . . . When you are surrounded by a society of emotionally fragile quitters, and when you see a good bit of this ethos in yourself, you need to spend time with people—whether dead or alive—whose lives prove there is another way to live.<sup>4</sup>

## Many Proofs

Out of the whole range of exceptional Christians that I know or know of, how could I possibly narrow the list here to twenty or so individuals? First, these are men and women I've had the opportunity to walk with and talk with and serve alongside. I worshiped with their churches, whether they met under a mango tree or in a beautiful stone edifice or secretly in the shadow of a mosque. I ate their food, enjoyed their music, explored their neighborhoods, and heard them pray. This gave me the chance to add color and texture to the narrative portraits I capture in my journal so that the reader, as much as is possible, can experience their stories—not just know the facts of them.

Second, my gospel heroes from the past would make up a long list indeed! But the ones I write about here are those whose lives and impact I've had the opportunity to trace during my travels. I share David McCullough's love for experiencing a place in order to give history-writing more of its physical and emotional dimension, seeing the past as *their* present—real people in real time in a real place. McCullough said:

I couldn't possibly have written about people trying to dig the Panama Canal without going down there and feeling the humidity, the rain, and the heat. For Truman I had to see the places where he was in World War I, and to make the run he made through the Capitol on the night that Roosevelt

died. . . . Well, that run, it seemed to me, was one of the key moments in the whole story. Why was he running? Was he running toward something or away from something? Did he somehow guess that he was running to the presidency? It's a great moment. I wanted to see how long it would have taken him to make that run, to figure out which route he took, because he could have gone several ways, to see what would have been flashing by in his peripheral vision.<sup>5</sup>

Tracing paths my gospel heroes walked helps me bring the reader along for the run, to widen their peripheral vision of the past.

The exceptional quality about these heroes—whether past or present—that has strengthened and steadied me is how all of them have oriented their lives around the truth that Jesus really is alive. They are living, walking, witnessing reminders of the resurrection because they daily demonstrate that Jesus is personally and powerfully with them—working in them and through them and for them. By their willingness to go and risk and act in the reality of the resurrection, they live out the truth that “the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power” (1 Cor. 4:20). The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of their endurance, risk-taking, and death-defying joy. Their optimism doesn't come from wishful thinking but from the power of an endless life—both Christ's and ours in him.

This confident hope has also given needed reminders to me—in a thousand different ways and places—that the church is *not* in decline. It's easy to think otherwise. Our fears, our tears, our comforts, our brokenness all obscure our vision. Then there is the daily downpour of bad news—a news crawl that feeds our doubts so that sometimes we find ourselves whispering in our hearts what a tactless Gideon blurted openly, “If the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us? And where are all his wonderful deeds that our fathers recounted to us?” (Judg. 6:13). The God whom Gideon was questioning was indeed alive,

personal, and present—and about to do even more “wonderful deeds” through this unlikely servant. And it is the same today.

## The Real Hero

I’m always amazed at God’s choices in the book of Hebrews to illustrate enduring faith. The company of heroes in chapter 11 is an uneven and unlikely lot that ranges from Abraham the patriarch to Rahab the prostitute. That’s because the chapter is not a gallery for displaying human greatness but rather one that magnifies God’s grace. It’s as if everyone in Hebrews 11 is pointing down the line to the next chapter to the *real* hero of the story, “looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:2). The heroes you will meet in this book are also pointing in that same direction. They are pointing to their risen King, who has all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, his kingdom has no borders. He is mighty to save across every geographic, religious, political, and ethnic barrier—in war and in peace, from preliterate animists to past post-Christian sophisticates. The heroes in this book reflect this gracious diversity. They come from many backgrounds and many nations. They are ordinary men and women who have an extraordinary Savior. They love the gospel and live in the integrity, boldness, and humility that flow from its daily grace.

This kind of gospel-centered humility is glory-giving, not glory-getting. The heroes in this book disdain puffery. Their work is quiet, steady, often dull, and occasionally dangerous. At times it is nation-shaking, but always it is Christ-magnifying. Still, though, knowing their reluctance to have attention drawn to themselves, I remember a conversation that Stephen Ambrose shared in his classic World War II history, *Band of Brothers*. As he was interviewing a veteran of many hard and closely fought battles, the old soldier said to Ambrose, “Now listen, whatever you do in this book, don’t go making me into a hero.” Ambrose replied, “I don’t make heroes. I only write about them.”<sup>6</sup>





## Facing Fear

Sayid, Aaron, and Jillian (North Africa)

“So I say this very sobering word: God’s plan is that his saving purpose for the nations will triumph through the suffering of his people, especially his frontline forces who break through the darkness of Satan’s blinding hold on an unreached people.”<sup>1</sup>

*John Piper*

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.” (Phil. 1:27–28)

“The more you mow us down, the more we grow. The blood of Christians is seed.”<sup>2</sup> Tertullian, a North African Christian, penned that famous taunt around the year 200. All-powerful Rome was waging a bloody campaign against Christians—a defenseless,

vulnerable minority, law-abiding in all things save the worship of the emperor. It was the most uneven contest imaginable—like lambs among wolves. Yet, Tertullian pointed out that it wasn't working. Despite Rome's best efforts to stamp out this infant movement, Christians continued to multiply. With a nice touch of derision, he added, "We have filled all the places that belong to you—cities, islands, forts, towns, exchanges; the military camps themselves, tribes, town councils, the palace, the senate, the marketplace; we have left you nothing but your temples."<sup>3</sup>

Steady, pervasive growth and intense persecution characterized the church in North Africa during Christianity's early centuries—and it's a good description of the church in North Africa today. Rome couldn't stop the gospel's advance then, and radical Islam can't now. That's not to say things are easy. It's a nearly 100 percent Muslim region that stretches from Libya to Morocco, and one of its chief exports in recent years has been fighters for the armies of ISIS, most coming from Tunisia and Morocco.<sup>4</sup> In short, the spiritual darkness and physical danger faced by Christians here is real, but Jesus is calling and positioning messengers throughout the region to "go, stand and speak . . . all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20 KJV).

I want to introduce you to several such messengers in North Africa: Sayid, Aaron, and Jillian. Their courage—or better to say, the way they face fear and overcome it—has been a strong example to me. Their obedience is Christlike, for it has cost them much. Death threats, painful betrayals, jail bars, and the daily demands of disciple-making have all been part of that obedience. But in their obedience to keep going, standing, and speaking, my friends have seen new life springing up from hard ground.

Aaron told me one of the passages that has given him hope to endure despite setbacks and his own weakness is the parable of the farmer scattering seed. It's a window into how Christ is building his church in North Africa. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground.

He sleeps and rises night and day, and the seed sprouts and grows; he knows not how. The earth produces by itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come” (Mark 4:26–29). The “seed” is the Word of God, the life-giving message of the gospel. Even though the farmer can’t make the seed grow, he still has a vital part to play in planting abundantly.

The parable ends swiftly. In the weeks leading up to the harvest, time slows, like the mocking monotony of a ticking clock. The farmer pushes on in hope, but weighed down by work and waiting, and days so ordinary you could miss the opportunity in them. But then life stirs from the ground, and when it’s full and fruitful, then the harvest is gathered.<sup>5</sup>

### **Atlas Mountains, Somewhere South of Fez, Morocco**

**January 10, 2014**

A coal fire glows orange and hot in the smoky corner of this little village house somewhere in the Atlas Mountains. Supper is done; tea has been poured. I’m sitting on a sheepskin, bundled against the chill air, along with two Berber families, who are listening and questioning intently as my friends share good news with them in Arabic. And since I can’t contribute to the conversation, I’ll just drink in the tea and the warmth and scribble a few lines.

Set out from Casablanca early for the drive to this mountain village, the ancestral home of a Moroccan brother named Sayid. He and our friends, Aaron and Jillian, are letting me travel with them in this corner of North Africa along the western edges of the Sahara. Aaron and Jillian have served Christ in this region for nearly a decade. I love this couple’s simple trust in their God’s sovereign care and control in all things, even when—especially when—things are out of their control. In their straightforward obedience to go and make disciples in hostile territory, they don’t

overanalyze or overestimate what *can't* be done. Rather, they focus on what *can* be done—and do it.

It's clear that Aaron and Jillian have a complete partnership, sharing in all the highs and lows of ministry here. Beneath Jillian's petite 5'2" stature is a woman of grit and grace. In ten years of marriage, she and Aaron have lived in twelve houses on three continents. But she's not just following her husband on this journey—she is following Christ. The Lord has used Jillian to lead many daughters of Mohammed to the Savior.

Sayid was the first fruit of Aaron's disciple-making ministry in North Africa—a beautiful beginning, for Sayid is himself a disciple-maker now. Sayid speaks Arabic as well as his Berber dialect but no English. And my Arabic is confined to what halting baby talk I can conjure out of my little *Lonely Planet* phrasebook. But Sayid was delighted that I had learned *qahua*, the Arabic word for “coffee.” When we stopped for a bite to eat, Sayid was eager to introduce me to Moroccan coffee called *nous-nous*, Arabic for “half-half.” It is a perfect parfait—rich espresso topped with frothed cream and served in a shot glass.

Our road took us into the foothills of the Atlas range, and we broke up the long, cramped drive at Volubilis—the ruins of what was once an important Roman city on the edge of the empire. While exploring, I came across mosaics that were nearly two thousand years old. The images of lions and leopards are reminders that one of Volubilis's chief exports was wild animals for the gladiator games in the arenas of Carthage and Rome. It seems that because of its remoteness, Volubilis became something of a city of refuge for persecuted Christians in the late Roman period—and remained a center of Christianity until the early 700s, when Islamic armies put this city under the sword.

It was good to share the time together and to climb the ruins and imagine the Roman legions that once marched here. But daylight soon slipped away, and I had to make a reluctant retreat because we still had a lot of road ahead of us.



In Sayid's village with Aaron and Sayid

Reached Sayid's village after nightfall. His family welcomed us to their home, a typical Moroccan village house with thick mud-walled rooms flanking a courtyard open to the stars. Aaron and Jillian have visited Sayid's family often, but the fact that this time the women allowed Jillian to help in the kitchen was something of a breakthrough in their letting her enter their lives; so Jillian happily pitched in with Amina and Aziza as they prepared couscous. This meal is practically a sacrament here among the Berbers. We feasted together on the couscous, along with bread as big as a drumhead, called *hobs beldi*, and washed it down with continuous cups of mint tea.

Afterwards, we gathered around a little coal stove, the only heat source outside of the kitchen's earth oven. For the past hour, Sayid has been witnessing to his sister, sister-in-law, brother, and nephews. Aaron also shares of Christ in Arabic, and Sayid takes the message further in their Berber dialect, for Sayid and his family are Berber of the a-Mazighri, a family of North African tribes that stretch from here to Libya. Sayid is the only Christian in his family, the only Christian in his hometown. Together they spoke with compassion and urgency of Christ alone—until the last of the fire, the last of the day.

## **Casablanca, Morocco**

**January 11, 2014**

I woke this morning in Sayid's village with the help of a pesky rooster. The air was cold, and in the distance morning light fingered through a gray sky and touched the distant mountains. In the early light, I found Sayid out sitting near the well drinking in the Word. This is his source. This is what fuels his endurance, his preaching, his counsel, his heart. Sayid has been in the faith for six years. Before that, he was a brick mason with a fifth-grade education. But during these six years, Sayid has walked with the Lord and filled his days and his heart with God's Word. I thought of the passage in Jeremiah, "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name" (Jer. 15:16).

Before setting out for Casablanca, we had a visit from the local police chief. His name was Hussein, but I prefer to call him Barney Fife. It seems that since Sayid was arrested three years ago for the "crime" of sharing the gospel, the police try to keep track of him whenever they can. It was just a routine hassle. Barney was just doing his job—and to have a real, live ex-con in town along with several of his foreign accomplices likely spiced up an otherwise boring beat. Barney called in our names and passport numbers to the police headquarters in Fez; so while he finished up the report, we took a walk.

For Sayid this place holds many emotions. This is the mountainside where he was born, and from the mosque in the center of the village to every house and footpath in between, this is home. Here he first tasted new life in Christ. Here he first felt the sharp slap of rejection, but also here he first embraced the fellowship of suffering with the One who also came to his own, and his own received him not.

What's clear is when Christ lit the candle of Sayid's life, he couldn't conceal it. "A city set on a hill cannot be hid." The day Sayid was baptized, he sent a group message to over one hundred

people—everyone in his phone contact list! It said simply, “*Walit Masihi*” (I have become a Christian). In this country, this was like asking to be killed, but Sayid did not have a death wish—he has a living hope. In fact, his old life was the real death sentence. Now in Christ he has never been more alive—Sayid has a life that no man can ever take away!<sup>6</sup>

My brothers have taught me so much about fear and faith and risk. Aaron told me that when Sayid was put in jail three years ago, Aaron was in the grip of fear over it. He said that for him the only way to break fear’s chokehold was to pray and then go out immediately and tell someone about Jesus—and so that’s what Aaron did. In the name of Jesus, demons are cast out—and in the name of Jesus, fear is cast out too.

After the police report was completed, we said our goodbyes to Sayid’s family and set out for Casablanca. Made good time on the unusually fine roads here and reached Casablanca by early afternoon. Gathered for worship with the house church that Sayid pastors. Before the fellowship around the Word, though, we had fellowship around the table. It was an amazing meal called *pastille*. It’s a perfect pie of honey, almonds, caramelized onions, and pulled chicken, infused with a baker’s dozen spices from saffron to cinnamon, all in a flaky, crunchy crust. We made short work of this Moroccan manna!

After our meal, one of the brothers shared his testimony. Kamal’s first exposure to the gospel was through Christian satellite TV. The one thing that stood out to him was hearing Christians praying for all people—whereas a Muslim’s standard prayer was for Allah to kill all non-Muslims. He saw a way of love and grace that led straight to Christ. He said the word *salvation* appears nowhere in the Koran, whereas the Bible is all about salvation. So Kamal believed on Jesus, the Messiah, and prayed to him in the only place he knew to pray—the mosque! He had never met another Christian, until one day at the café where he was a waiter he greeted a man with the salutation “peace and grace.”

The standard Arabic greeting is usually only *salam* (peace), but Kamal said “peace and grace.” This man, whose name was Mohammed and who also was a believer, said, “Are you a Christian?” Kamal said he was and that he prayed to Christ in the mosque. Mohammed said, “No. You don’t need to go to the mosque to pray. You can pray anywhere, anytime because Christ is in you. And you don’t need to clean yourself by the ceremonial washing because Christ has forever washed you by his blood.” Later these two new-found brothers baptized each other in the ocean near Casablanca.<sup>7</sup>

Kamal’s brother-in-law, Hasan, also shared his story. When the September 11 attacks occurred in the United States and thousands of innocent people were murdered in the name of Islam, he rejected Islam in his heart. Later, when Kamal shared Christ with him, Hasan immediately believed the gospel!

It was beautiful to see not just solitary believers but families—husbands, wives, children—worshiping Christ together. I felt like I saw twenty centuries slip away and was seeing a page from the book of Acts lived out.

After the testimonies and Sayid’s message, they sang with much joy—and I was finally able to join in. I couldn’t sing in Arabic, but I can clap in Arabic! As the psalmist said, “Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!” (Ps. 47:1). And so we did. Singing songs of redeeming, steadfast love. Light has dawned! The Son has risen!

## **Rabat, Morocco**

**January 12, 2014**

Up early for the drive to the bus station to send off two Peruvian missionaries. Aaron calls Cesar and Joel the “Gospel Pilgrims.” About a year ago Aaron sent out an appeal to his friends in Peru for two men to come help him and Sayid respond to the thousands of requests for Bibles that they receive each year. Aaron said, “Send me two men who have a reputation for evangelism.”

Cesar, a youth pastor, and Joel, an assistant pastor, responded. With the blessing of their churches, they were sent to people who have never once heard the gospel, seen a Bible, or met a Christian. Aaron and Sayid have poured much prayer and preparation to get Cesar and Joel to this day. These two Peruvians are reminders to me that missions is no longer from “the West to the rest.” As Christ is bringing men and women to himself from every nation, so he is also sending them out to every nation!



Sending off the “Gospel Pilgrims”

Joel and Cesar are headed south, deep into the Atlas range to personally respond to requests for New Testaments and to share the gospel along the way to whoever will listen. Sitting in on their briefings the other day as they spread out a map on the floor and went over the routes and logistics, I thought of something Ernie Pyle wrote in a wartime dispatch: “A map is as common a piece of equipment among front-line officers as a steel helmet.”<sup>8</sup> Maps and missions have gone together, I imagine, since Paul and Barnabas spread out a leather one. It’s the geography of kingdom advance, where vision, prayer, and shoe leather come together.

Cesar and Joel have six months of Arabic language study, a backpack of New Testaments, and a joyful confidence in Christ their captain. Like soldiers advancing, Cesar and Joel have no

idea where they will spend the night. All they know is that Jesus is in them and with them and for them—and that’s enough. So in Spanish, English, and Arabic, we prayed over them, recalling David’s praise in Psalm 140:7: “O LORD, my Lord, the strength of my salvation, you have covered my head in the day of battle.” God, go before my brothers. Strengthen their hearts for the unknown days, the uncertain nights.

Aaron seemed deep in thought after our goodbyes. He told me that in times like this there’s a constant battle in his heart “between the words of fear and the words of God.”

Went back to Aaron and Jillian’s home afterwards. This is a morning to rest and repack, getting ready for the long road to Marrakesh and beyond. Jillian made up a fine French press, and we had coffee and a chance to talk about her own journey of faith and fear and surpassing grace.

Jillian is a busy wife and mother of three; but her home, her heart, and her hands are always open—reaching, winning, and discipling the women around her. Her sincere love for her Muslim neighbors earns her space to ask searching questions, as she did recently when she asked a Moroccan mother, “How would you feel if your son completely gave himself to and completely dedicated himself to the teachings of Koran and Mohammed?” She answered that she would be afraid that he might become a jihadist, which is a real possibility because terror cells in Europe and ISIS ranks in Syria are filled with Moroccans.<sup>9</sup> Jillian replied that she, on the other hand, would be happy for her son to be completely dedicated to the teachings of Christ, wherever that might take him. The Muslim mom answered with sobering silence as the ground beneath her faith began to shake. This conversation reminded me of something Charles Spurgeon said long ago: “He who religiously obeys Mahomet [Mohammed] may yet be doing grievous moral wrong; but it is never so with the disciple of Jesus: obedience to Jesus is holiness.”<sup>10</sup>

Jillian admitted that sometimes, especially in their first years in North Africa, fear paralyzed her. Some of the fear was her own, but some she caught from others in the missionary community. There was fear *of* man and fear *from* man. Jillian told me an interesting story that became a turning point for her in facing her fears during their first years in Morocco. She wanted the friendship, counsel, and input of older, veteran missionary wives; so she reached out to one of them, and they began taking early morning walks together. One morning as they were chatting about kids and life, the veteran missionary said, "Lately I've been having some good, heart-to-heart talks with J." Jillian thought to herself, "Jay? Her husband's name is Robert. Who is Jay?" Finally, she couldn't keep her question in any longer and said, "Who is Jay?" The veteran missionary stopped in her tracks in the middle of the quiet street where they were walking. In a whisper with an edge she said, "Jesus." Jillian was stunned and said, "If we can't even say the name of Jesus, what are we doing here?" And that was the end of their morning walks. The missionary was offended, and other missionary families labeled Jillian and Aaron as "confrontational." They were people to avoid because "they are going to get us kicked out."

This added isolation has been hurtful, but it's also helped them to focus on why they are here—to make the saving work known of the One whose name is above every name. She decided that whispering inside self-made, Jericho-high walls was no way to live, no way to point others to Jesus. This has by no means removed fear and pain from her path. Elisabeth Elliot once wrote: "To be a follower of the Crucified means, sooner or later, a personal encounter with the cross."<sup>11</sup> Over the years, like a living sacrifice, Jillian has had many encounters with the cross. One was the time that they were betrayed by an infiltrator, and a picture of Aaron, Sayid, and others baptizing a Moroccan believer was given to the police and put on the front page of the national newspaper. Even in this hard situation, Jillian found a silver

lining. She said, “At least the whole country—even the king!—got to see that there are actual real, live Moroccan Christians!” Still, it was a time of great uncertainty. But Jillian’s most painful encounter with the cross was when their entire family was featured on an Islamic terrorist site, complete with photographs of her children and threats upon their lives. She felt so violated and so vulnerable and so angry, and suddenly in this dark, dark valley, Christ, who took all our sin upon himself and gave us all his righteousness instead, exchanged her hate and fear with his love and peace. Only transforming grace can explain how she could forgive—and even pray for—those terrorists.

Jillian is clearly leaning hard on Christ, and he is helping her stand. Her fearless and faithful one is with her. Always.



Aaron and Jillian

## **Marrakesh, Morocco**

**January 13, 2014**

This afternoon we all set out for Marrakesh to respond to Bible requesters and to fellowship with some bands of believers scattered further south. A Moroccan brother named Marwan joined us. Marwan's journey from Islam to Christ is one of amazing grace. His steadiness and courage remind me so much of his mentor, Sayid. The two of them have led the way in the first ever in-country Christian radio broadcast. Their "studio" is simple and mobile and reaches listeners across North Africa as far as Libya. The broadcast provides opportunities for more online Bible requests, and the call-in programs elicit a full range of responses from sincere questions to daily death threats.

Our road out of Casablanca skirted the Atlantic briefly, but as we continued southward, the land changed—the terrain, the trees, even the sky changed. To the west, the late sun looked old and red, veiled in a cloud of fine dust. By the time we stopped for fuel and coffee, it was clear we were on the edge of the Sahara—on just a corner of a desert the size of the United States!

Reached Marrakesh in the evening. The night was cold, but we warmed ourselves with laughter and good coffee. Met for a Bible study with several brothers and sisters tonight. I was particularly blessed by the testimony of one sister. Fatima is from the far south in the Sahara. Her mother is a devout Muslim, but her father was neither a good Muslim nor a good husband; and by the time Fatima was fourteen, she was a convinced atheist. She went to law school and surprisingly had a professor there who wanted his students to research the differences in the legal systems of countries who based law on the Bible and those who based law on the Koran. But it was hard to do the assignment justice since there were no Bibles in the library and only one foreign student had a copy of the dangerous book. Frustrated that she could keep the borrowed Bible for only a few days, Fatima went online to see if she could somehow obtain her own copy. She

found an internet site that offered a Bible, and, as a result, she met with Marwan and Aaron at a café where they gave her a copy. Over the course of several months, they and Jillian patiently and humbly answered her questions about the Bible. However, when Fatima asked questions about Islam at her law school, she was told, “Do not ask such questions. To even ask shows you are on the path to becoming a *kafir* (an infidel)—someone who is deserving of beheading.”

The contrast between the Christian and the Muslim responses to questions could not have been greater—like the difference between light and darkness. Eventually, Fatima attended a church meeting, where she was struck by the sense of family among them, by the ordering of their lives around the Bible, and by their singing! Jillian spent countless hours with her, studying the Scriptures together and pointing her to Jesus. Two years ago, Fatima believed! She has told her family and has suffered much by their rejection and their accusations that she is mentally unstable. But my sister’s confidence in Christ as the only Savior is strong, and the new life he has given her no one can ever take away. I thought of the passage in the Psalms: “When my father and my mother forsake me, then the LORD will take me up” (Ps. 27:10 KJV).

Also at the Bible study was a dear old gentleman named Ghafur. Over fifty years ago, Ghafur was a soldier sent to the Middle East during a time of war. One day he met a man in the street who was desperately searching for food for his family. Ghafur knew where he could get some supplies, so he got the food and accompanied the man back to his home, where the man’s wife said with joy and relief, “We prayed to God in the name of Jesus, and he has heard our prayers!”

Over the years, Ghafur never forgot the gratitude of these Christians—nor the fact that when they prayed in Jesus’s name, they got answers. Fifty years later, Ghafur was working as a security guard at a supermarket and saw a man waiting in the parking lot reading a book. That man was Aaron. “What are

you reading?” Ghafur asked. “It’s the New Testament,” Aaron replied. “I heard of this book many years ago. Can I have one?” Ghafur asked. Aaron gave it to him and asked him to read the Gospel of Matthew. The next time Ghafur saw Aaron, he told him that he had read the entire New Testament and wanted to know more. After meeting with Aaron and coming to an understanding of the gospel, like the Christians he met decades earlier, Ghafur prayed in Jesus’s name. Jesus set his sovereign love on my brother and made him new—and he told everyone! As a result, his family rejected him, and his wife left him. During our prayer time, Ghafur praised God for his new brothers and sisters. When Sayid asked for favorites during the singing, Ghafur’s request was his testimony: “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus” . . . no turning back. They have a verse of this song in Arabic that we don’t have back home: “If I’m put in chains, or go to prison, no turning back, no turning back.”

## **Southern Morocco**

**January 15, 2014**

Early yesterday morning took the highway south through a barren land of desert scrub dotted with mud-baked villages and tinted with colors of ochre, pale pink, and burnt tangerine, all under a sapphire sky. It’s no surprise that great painters from Delacroix to Matisse were inspired by the palette and light of this wonderland. The mighty Atlas Mountains framed the horizon, spreading a curtain of snow and stone to wall off the sea of sand beyond it. Somewhere out there beyond them, Cesar and Joel are working. Got a quick call from them to let us know they are well and the Word is getting out. The Word is getting out here, too. Along the way, Aaron took every opportunity to share the good news. Over the past several days I have seen him give New Testaments and other gospel literature to many along the highways and hedges. He said that back in the States he is thought of as a Muslim “expert.” He chuckles at that. He says he’s just telling

people about Jesus—wherever they are and whoever they are. Islam is, in his words, “just another façade for lost people who are trying to save themselves.”

Reached Agadir on the coast in late afternoon and gathered to worship with a little house church that meets in the shadow of a minaret. Just a few doors down from the mosque, we worshiped Jesus.

Some missionaries have criticized Aaron and Sayid for encouraging believers to gather and to share their faith, saying that they are putting Moroccan Christians in danger. Aaron told me, “Before these believers heard the gospel, they were on their way to hell—how could they be in worse danger than that?” If these Christians were taught to fear from the beginning, from their first breath of new life, they would likely remain silent. But my brothers and sisters share their faith with prayerful boldness because that’s how it was shared with them. When they tell their good news to friends, they are like the woman in the parable of the lost coin whose invitation to her neighbors was simply winsome: “Come. Rejoice with me!” (see Luke 15:8–10).

This morning we huddled for prayer before setting out to the seaside for meetings with people who have requested New Testaments online. Thousands of these requests come in every year. There is always the possibility that the person asking to meet will turn out to be a member of the secret police, but Aaron’s number one priority here is not avoiding deportation. Making disciples trumps even his visa. Sayid’s and Marwan’s risk is even greater—they know from experience they could be arrested. Yet they all live in the moment, where risk and joy are all one because Jesus is near. They are not “Walter Mitty” Christians, merely imagining all the heroic things they have done or will do. They know that bountiful sowing brings life, and so they go and give and serve and speak in the name of Jesus.

We divided so as to keep separate, staggered appointments at different cafés just off the boardwalk. While Sayid and Aaron had

their meetings, and Jillian and Fatima theirs, I joined Marwan. We met a university student named Ali, who had never seen a Bible before but wanted one. Marwan was a first, too—the first Moroccan Christian Ali had ever met. We talked for an hour. Ali spoke some English; so I was able to join in the conversation and answer questions he had such as “Do Christians worship three gods?” “Why did Jesus have to suffer?” and “How can a man have a relationship with God?”

While we all grabbed lunch after our meetings, Marwan told us he had received an anonymous call threatening to turn him into the police for distributing gospel literature. He shrugged it off. If threats like that stopped them, they would have quit long ago. Before we were done, Aaron got a call from Cesar and Joel. They had given out many New Testaments and had even been invited to several homes, where they shared the gospel. But they added that local radio stations were reporting that Peruvians were distributing dangerous literature in the towns in that region.<sup>12</sup>

Late afternoon we set out for the ancient walled city of Taroudant in hopes of reaching it before nightfall. There’s no church here and no known Christians. But several there have asked for Bibles, and so we go. A walled city is a fitting picture of the situation all across North Africa. The sheer scale of the walls of opposition and the doors of opportunity are overwhelming. But my dear friends here—and other such gospel foot soldiers—are the everyday, everywhere infantry that God is using to move the boundaries of his kingdom into more and more hearts. I share Ernie Pyle’s affection for those on the front lines in every danger and season. He wrote, “I love the infantry because they are the underdogs. They are the mud-rain-frost-and-wind boys. They have no comforts, and they even learn to live without the necessities. And in the end they are the guys that wars can’t be won without.”<sup>13</sup>

By the time we reached the city, dusk was settling in its streets and last light touched the top of its battlements. And now, before

entering the walls of this Jericho, we believe the words of Christ our captain as he walks among his troops here on the front lines, giving us his strong, personal promises that cheer our hearts:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; . . .

when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the LORD your God . . .

your Savior. . . .

you are precious in my eyes,

and honored . . . I love you. . . .

Fear not, for I am with you. . . .

bring my sons from afar

and my daughters from the end of the earth,

everyone who is called by my name,

whom I created for my glory.” . . .

“You are my witnesses.” (Isa. 43:1-7, 10)

