

Love Put to the Test, the Gospel in Action

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Translated from the original French by Sandrine Burgess

Rwanda, located in the heart of Africa, survived the last genocide of the twentieth century. Divisions, bitterness and other conflicts marred two ethnic groups, the Hutus and Tutsis, and scarred Rwandan society both before and after this tragic event. My story is the testimony of a Christian couple who experienced the genocide differently and despite it all, were drawn together to live in peace thanks to the Gospel. I wanted to know more about their story and to write an article about it, so I asked to meet with them. They welcomed me in their home the afternoon of Sunday, January 11, 2009.

"We had to face many trials; we came up against several obstacles. We lived through hell; we were dead and buried. But praise be to God, we were raised again in Jesus Christ and now, Jeanne, my wife, our four children and me, are happy."

His voice strained by emotion, George did not know where to begin. Little by little, he gained his composure. To help us understand the context better, he introduced us to his four children: two sons that he had had with Jeanne and two daughters that Jeanne had had by another while he was imprisoned.

Jeanne and Georges told us how they had met in 1992. She completed her secondary studies in the school where he was teaching. Their love didn't seem to stand a chance, not only because she was a student and he was her teacher, or because she was a young girl and he was older, but also because she was Tutsi and he was Hutu. Besides that, George's father was widely known for his hatred of the Tutsi. They wanted to get married in 1993, but their families opposed it.

The two lovers looked for a 'plan B' to save their relationship. They decided to flee, hoping to find refuge together far from anyone they knew. Georges did all he could to acquire the papers necessary for them to run away, but in February 1994, identity cards indicating that a person was a Tutsi were already starting to cause problems. Because of this, Jeanne was unable to get through the check points posted around the country. So their plan failed, but their love and George's courage were still intact. They discussed other options, but time was running out and the rising threat of war was becoming more frightening by the day.

George's father pressured him to come back to the city. Though repulsed at the thought of leaving his fiancée, he returned home when his mother feigned illness. He wished to go back to Jeanne, but the war had started. Because his father had helped set the massacres in motion, George dared not move. He had to stay put. That he had left behind a pregnant fiancé only added to his pain. He was now unable to help her in this extremely difficult time.

"I thought that he had abandoned me on purpose, because he was Hutu and he could travel throughout the country as he wished. I started believing my doubts when I heard

someone say that George had sent his father to come and kill me. My own family had just been murdered in front of my own eyes. I was in the last days of my pregnancy. I wanted so much to have my child; that's what stopped me from giving up and giving in to the murderers," Jeanne said.

To survive, she slept in the bush and received help from another woman who was also hiding. During this whole period, she cursed George day and night. After some time, she was rescued by the soldiers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front who had just put an end to the massacres. Jeanne was taken to a school where she joined others who had escaped the genocide.

Meanwhile, the murderers and members of their families escaped into the Democratic Republic of Congo. George had chosen to stay with his family because his father led him to believe that Jeanne was dead. However, he was not convinced that this was true. With no other means to travel, he set out on foot on his long journey to find her. After two weeks walking, George came to the city of Butare, where he learned that Jeanne and their child were still alive.

"When I saw her, I was moved, but I was also surprised by her reaction. Instead of running into my arms as I had imagined she would, she ran away screaming. It was only a long time afterward that I understood the reason for her reaction."

Jeanne was experiencing shock. And since everyone knew who George's father was, George was imprisoned. While in prison he could not stop thinking about his situation, nor of the idea that his own sweetheart who had turned him in. As for Jeanne, she took satisfaction in her revenge.

George received news about her from his neighbors who came to visit prisoners. According to them, Jeanne had turned to prostitution in order to survive. Georges refused to believe it until the moment he learned that she had given birth to another girl and that she didn't know who the father was. Because of what she had done, Georges decided to forget her. Pitied by her neighbors, Jeanne's misery only deepened when she gave birth to yet a third child. One neighbor, Claire, took care of her, providing for her needs, both material and spiritual. She persisted in inviting Jeanne to pray with her, but Jeanne always refused.

Georges was unhappy and desperate. Thanks to a friend he had met in prison, he came to the realization that Jesus was his only refuge. His friend took him to pray, and there he heard Pastor Mugisha from Kigali preaching on God's love. Even though George prayed, his feelings for Jeanne remained unchanged. He had chosen to forget her. But this same pastor returned to the prison, this time preaching on forgiveness. That day they read Matthew 5-7, and George heard the Lord's Prayer explained in detail. He understood that in order to be forgiven, one must first forgive others. He wrote a letter to Jeanne explaining all that had happened and asking her to forgive him.

Jeanne, however, did not yet understand that the Gospel has power to change hearts. She thought George was trying to trick her so he could have his revenge once he was released from prison. Rather than throwing the letter away, she kept it, carefully putting it away. But why? Then she forgot it. She understood later, once she had accepted Claire's invitation to go to church. That day when she heard the pastor's and evangelist's messages, she was saved.

From then on, Jeanne never missed an occasion to pray and she started to read through the Bible. In her reading she came to the Gospel of John and the new commandment given by Jesus: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."

Jeanne knew that she had never loved those who killed her family and their accomplices, George included. Hadn't Claire also lost her husband and her children? She, however, had been able to forgive and to love all people without distinction. Claire did all she could to help Jeanne see. She showed her the example of Jesus on the cross and his plea for forgiveness on behalf of those that crucified him, praying, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

After sending his letter, George continued to wait for Jeanne to write and tell him she forgave him too. In the meantime, in 2003, he was declared innocent and released from prison. Before going to look for his family, he asked himself whether he should go in person to ask for a response to his letter. He was afraid, but a surprise was waiting for him.

It was Jeanne who had told the authorities that George was innocent, and they told her what day he was to be released. As George walked out of prison, she was there waiting for him, waiting to ask him to forgive her, and waiting to tell him that she had forgiven him. Reunited in front of the prison, they praised God together.

George knew he had to leave Jeanne for a time to go and see his family. He spoke to them about the Gospel. Through his influence, his mother and sisters changed their racist attitudes, but unfortunately, his father was already dead.

As for Jeanne, she had started to learn to sew and was beginning to earn her own living. The prostitutes she had known in her time of distress also heard about Jeanne's courage and that she had accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior.

On July 10, 2004, George and Jeanne married. In 2006, they had their fourth child. It was the Gospel's flame that relit the flame of their love for each other, a flame that had been snuffed out by inter-ethnic hatred.