

# PREACHING FROM THE GRAVE

A Story of Faith From the  
Rwanda Genocide

PHODIDAS NDAMYUMUGABE, PHD

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# 1

## Fond Memories of My Childhood

*Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction;  
pay attention and gain understanding.  
I give you sound learning,  
so do not forsake my teaching.  
For I too was a son to my father,  
still tender, and cherished by my mother.  
Then he taught me, and he said to me,  
"Take hold of my words with all your heart;  
keep my commands, and you will live.  
Get wisdom, get understanding;  
do not forget my words or turn away from them.  
Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you;  
love her, and she will watch over you."*

—Proverbs 4:1–6

I was born on October 3, 1970, in Kibuye,\* a province about 130 kilometers (80 miles) west of Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. I was the final addition to a family of eight children. Growing up, one of my sweetest memories was of being pampered, an experience many last-born children hold in common. I was the center of my parents' love, and my siblings affectionately used many nicknames to describe their love for me or the values they wanted me to develop. I grew up feeling loved but also challenged to live up to my family's expectations.

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\* Today, the name Kibuye as a province has changed and it is called Karongi.

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In our part of the country, life was tough. We learned to work at a very early age. By the time I was nine, I was in charge of caring for our family's animals. I did not enjoy being placed in charge of the cows, especially when the weather turned cold. Splitting the towering trees for firewood was another of my duties.

For me, one of the most challenging times was waking up every morning, rain or shine, to lead our animals to pasture where they would feed for the day. My parents trained us to work hard in all circumstances, no matter how we felt. Laziness was not permitted. Even at lunchtime my niece and I were expected to do some chore as a family assignment before returning to class.

The discipline I went through at this young age had nothing to do with our financial status. No one had much money in this rural area, but we had the minimum needed for our well-being. Though we had house-helpers who could have done most of the work without my contribution, my parents expected me to assist with the daily duties. Work was the principle of life, and everyone had to be involved if they hoped to live independently in the future.

Despite the difficulties of living in a rural area of western Rwanda, our mountain life held many advantages that far outweighed the more luxurious life in the cities. Some of those benefits I can understand only now that I am old enough to miss them, yet others I could understand and appreciate even while I was still a young boy.

My family lived in a place where you could hardly look three hundred feet without seeing another hill. Hills are characteristic of Rwanda, which is commonly known as "the country of a thousand hills." But Kibuye is unique, because there are also mountains, some of which are the tallest in the country. These mountains make the weather always pleasant, never too warm or too cold.

The most scenic feature in this part of the world is probably Kivu Lake. It is a beautiful body of water dotted with small conical-shaped islands from which one may jump into the clear waters below. These islands caught my attention as a child. As a young boy, I enjoyed seeing their shadows reflected on the waters, creating varied colors and beauty as the sun rose and set.

Growing up, we didn't need swimming pools, because the clear lake waters, cradled by solid white volcanic rock, were ideal. Volcanic insulation

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kept the waters at a consistent temperature of about twenty-four degrees Celsius (seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit). This made the lake a good source of recreation and refreshment, whatever the weather. Whenever it was cool outside, the lake felt warm, and when it became warmer outside, the water stayed cool.

This beautiful lake was central to many of my childhood memories. I remember keeping animals around the lake and diving with friends to chase the fish in the depths of its waters. I recall running bare-chested as a child into the cool waters to refresh myself during the noon heat.

But even greater than my appreciation for the geographical features of my home village, I knew my family life was the most important blessing for me. Since I was the last-born in my large family of eight children, many of my nieces and nephews were around my age or even slightly older. This gave me the opportunity to have many friends who were also family members.

Every single vacation, I visited my siblings' homes just to enjoy the company of my nieces and nephews. Life was sweet at this tender age. Every vacation time was a celebration. I made it a habit to spend time with my siblings after finishing the duties assigned by my mother—sometimes at their homes, sometimes at my own. Every time we visited, we would always stay up outside the house at night, basking either in the full moonlight or under a starlit sky.

We often exchanged African stories which our parents had told us to teach us cultural and biblical values. We liked to compete in our storytelling, taking turns one after the other. Life was blissful, and love was the undeniable theme in our home.

However, as I grew up, though content with family love, I could sense a need for improvement in our environment. My family was relatively comfortable in terms of material possessions. My parents could supply our family's needs, and we had no shortage of food or clothing. But living standards in Kibuye were so low that it was difficult for ordinary people to buy even a bike. We were satisfied with our humble way of life, but as I grew older and visited the neighboring cities, I saw a different way of living. I soon felt the need to take my family to a higher level.

In this spirit and out of love for my family, I determined to study diligently and work hard so that one day I could make a change in the lives of my family members. Like most kids, I remember often talking about my dreams and

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promising my mother that one day I would provide for our family's needs and give her a happier life.

My mother had a caring nature, but she also dealt strictly with me. She was so strict that during my childhood I often felt her rules were too heavy. As I grew up, however, I understood that she was the best mother I could ever have wished for in life.

When guests were visiting our family or my sisters had come back home, which happened often, she would talk about the love she had for me and what a good boy I was. I knew she always had something positive to say about me, and I felt great about this.

However, her facial expression inspired fear whenever I knew I had done something displeasing or contrary to the family order. Looking into her eyes in those moments, I learned the difference between good and evil, virtue and vice. The consequences of not doing what was right gave me a picture of how God hates sin. In the same way, her public joy and her compliments for me when I did right taught me how God considers us when we are behaving according to His will.

Like other mothers, she did her job of educating in the home. My mother longed to see my future, and I often heard her say so. She looked forward to seeing me finish my studies, becoming the man she had envisioned as she disciplined, encouraged, and coached me in all areas of life. Unfortunately, as sometimes happens in this life, she did not live long enough to see the fruits of her work. She passed away before I finished high school due to an untreated stomach illness, probably undiagnosed cancer.

The lessons I learned from my family helped me feel a deep love for God at a young age and to recognize the importance of obedience. I remember giving my life to Jesus in the third year of my elementary education when I was nine years old. Our church was close to my home, which gave me opportunities to attend every worship service. I was always sitting in the first pew, and every time there was an altar call, I eagerly responded to the pastor's invitation to make a commitment to God.

Church made a meaningful difference in my life. I enjoyed every worship service, and each sermon left a tremendous impact on my mind during those early years. I still remember specific pastors as well as their sermons and illustrations.

Some of the most touching moments in my spiritual life as a child were

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the times for prayer. Our church had drums, which in those days were used to remind church members that the hour for prayer had come. There were church members who knew how to make drums, and each church usually had five or six of them ready for use. The beat of drums echoing in the mountains preceded every worship service, beckoning us to congregate for worship.

Weeks of Prayer were some of the most important times we had. Since I lived near the church, I was often up earlier than anyone else, sometimes starting to beat the drum several hours before sunrise. I did this to wake up everyone in the village so they would come to the church, which was the center of spiritual and social life for Seventh-day Adventists. Sometimes we would play the drums for hours. The playing had nothing to do with dancing, but the combination of rhythms was so beautiful and attracted both youth and adults for worship.

Everything was about to change, but one thing would remain to mark my past heritage and determine my future spiritual life. Among my seven siblings, was a sister who seemed to love God more than all the others. She had read the Bible from cover to cover in her youth and had underlined all her favorite verses. When she was married, she distributed gifts to all our family members. Everyone received gifts, and since I perceived she loved me the most, I thought I would surely deserve a gift. When she appeared to have given out every gift, I wondered what she would give me! I felt somewhat angry with her, because it seemed she had forgotten me.

I thought there were no more material things she could give me, but in reality, she had kept back a surprise. One morning, she approached me and said the gift she had set aside for me was a Bible. This was not a new Bible; it was her old Bible, filled with underlined verses and promises. Since I did not have a Bible of my own, I accepted it with some resentment. This was not what I had expected! It certainly was a surprise. It wasn't until later that I realized it was one of the best gifts I could have ever received.

From that time on, whenever I was not at school, I was reading my Bible. I didn't know what this would do for me until years later. At this point in my life, I read it as if it were an assignment.

As I read that Bible through, the part that attracted me the most was the book of Proverbs. I remember reading in this book what wisdom is all about. Every time I read passages and stories from the Bible, I felt as if they were speaking directly to me. The story of Elijah's faithfulness affected me greatly.



## **Preaching From the Grave**

I often prayed that God would help me be as wise as He wanted me to be and that I would be able to stand firm like Elijah on Mount Carmel.