

Only the Gospel Has the Power to Change the World

It was always a difficult time for me when the electricity was out on our mission. But when the power came back, the darkness went away. The fan worked. I love electricity. Electricity is not a reliable commodity in third world countries. A presidential election was held while we were in Ghana. The incumbent's campaign slogan was, "Keep the lights on," meaning if he was reelected he'd continue building the infrastructure in the country.

I spent a lot of time contemplating the concept of infrastructure. I observed that some people are builders and some are takers. Traditions and culture in Africa allow for people to consider only themselves and what they can get. Conversely, the men and women who built our nation were thinking of us and what they could give. As builders instead of takers, they made conscious, deliberate decisions to build communities, schools and a democracy that we benefit from today. Malachi foresaw this unique time: our ancestors' hearts would be turned towards us and we would grow up in a wonderful, rich environment filled with values and freedom. In exchange, we would turn our hearts to them and do temple work they couldn't do for themselves. I know the value of what we can give to them. I don't know if I will ever fully appreciate the great blessings I have because so many of our forbears chose to be honest, to work hard, and to sacrifice for us.

Imagine living in a country where the virtues of our ancestors are not considered essential. How do you change a culture like this? How can you change a continent? What is needed is a prophet. In 1978 the Church sent missionaries to West Africa. One of the first men baptized was Joseph William Billy Johnson, a true pioneer. He had 400 people ready for baptism when the missionaries arrived. Brother Johnson lived much of his life without the true Gospel. He knows what it's like to be in spiritual darkness. But most of us have lived our lives with the Gospel around us. Maybe it doesn't shine very brightly in our own life, but the spiritual light from so many people around us is often strong enough that we can see our way. It's possible that we don't realize how valuable the light of the Gospel is because we've never seen life without it.

Ben and I were Area Missionaries. We traveled throughout West Africa and taught Priesthood leaders how to handle Church finances. Early in our mission we flew to Sierra Leone. We taught the leaders in Freetown. Then we drove to Bo where there is another District. The road to Bo is 165 miles long. The trip took six and a half hours because the road was destroyed during their civil war. The poverty we saw along the way was staggering. This was very different than the jungles of Ghana. There, each village has a small industry, such as making pots or drums. It's fun to drive by and see the people wave at us. But for the villagers along this road, they sat and literally watched the traffic go by. When they saw a vehicle, they held out their hand. In every village we passed along that road, every hand opened up and out to beg. They wanted something to make their life just a little easier, but they had no interest at all in making their lives better. These people just wanted to be more comfortable in their poverty. When we finally arrived in Bo, we went into the training with Priesthood leaders who had been waiting for us. They were eager to learn, hungry to know how to do things right. Over the next two days I had a great time with the members of the Church there. They are very faithful and strong. We drove an hour further to Kenema, where there is a branch. A missionary couple was teaching a temple

preparation class at the same time Ben taught the Priesthood Leaders. I was impressed with their faithfulness and their desire to improve their lives.

After having my faith strengthened in Bo and Kenema, we began our trip back to Freetown along that same road. We saw the same things, but I no longer felt sympathy. I couldn't believe that people could live like this. If my ancestors could make the desert blossom, imagine what they could have done with these abundant resources! I thought about what I saw along that road for weeks after we returned to Ghana.

One morning while reading my scriptures, I was able to see deeper into my experience in the trip back from Bo. The intent of the Savior's sacrifice is not to make us more comfortable in our sins. The purpose of the atonement is to lift us up, to lift us out of our spiritual poverty into a better life. The Savior said in 3 Nephi 26 "*And my Father sent me that I might be lifted up upon the cross; and after that I had been lifted up upon the cross, that I might draw all men unto me. . .*" The Savior doesn't want us to ask for a spiritual handout. Some of us want to remain in our current life and just have our sins forgiven, but that will get us nowhere. The Savior wants to help us leave our old life behind. In order to acquire the blessings the Lord has for us, we must be willing to change. We must be willing to work. And we must be willing to give up the things that are holding us back.

A challenge the Church faces in West Africa is tradition. Some of the traditions are extremely expensive, such as funerals, or the price a groom must pay for a bride. Even among Church members, these traditions can be costly. I realize that it's easy for us to look at another culture and see what has to change, but can we look at our own lives and give up the things we treasure that are actually burdens?

I have come to see that only by completely trusting the Lord, only by *fully* embracing the Gospel, only then can we make the changes that are required to be part of the Lord's culture. Temples and covenants are essential. Our prophets have understood that it's not enough to bring the saving ordinances *to* a people. What the Lord wants to do is *change* us, to lift us up, to bring us to exaltation

The changes that must take place in Africa are massive. Remember the men who were with Caleb and Joshua? They came back from their foray into Canaan and said, "The country is too big for us! It is filled with giants! We can never take it over!" I used to scoff at their lack of faith. Well, I had never seen such giants until I went to Africa. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ has the power to bring about the changes that need to happen. We could see the miracle beginning while we were there. Africans are very religious and are searching for the truth. Do you remember the 600 United Brethren in Herefordshire in 1840 who joined the Church when Wilford Woodruff arrived? Like them, many Africans were led by the Spirit to prepare themselves before they met the missionaries. Baptisms in African missions are among the highest in the world. Members of the Church have strong testimonies. The Lord told Jeremiah that the days would come when he would no longer be praised for bringing "*... up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt.*" Instead the world would marvel that the Lord gathered Israel, "*from every mountain, and from every hill, and out of the holes of the rocks.*" The Lord is changing the hearts of the people all over the world in preparation for the Second Coming. This isn't the missionaries' work; missionaries are only servants. This is the Lord's work.

One Sunday we traveled to a Branch in a Liberian refugee camp on the outskirts of Accra. The branch met in two rooms of a school house. There was no electricity. Gospel Doctrine was held outside under the trees. Chickens pecked at the dirt near our feet. I was asked to say the closing prayer. I wondered what these people could possibly be thankful for, and then the Lord, very simply, revealed it to me. They have the scriptures. They have a wonderful Branch President. They have a living prophet. They have all the blessings of the temple just an hour away. And most important of all, they have testimonies of these things. The things that I hold to be the most precious gifts from God, they have. I came to realize that having material things is not bad *as much as it is dangerous*, as sometimes abundance can prevent us from determining what is truly valuable.

Only the Gospel has the power to help us see out of spiritual darkness. Only the Gospel can change our lives and bring us closer to the Savior. Only the Gospel has the power to save us all, and not just save the world, but *change the world*. In 1 Nephi 14:7 the Lord said, “*For the time cometh. . . that I will work a great and a marvelous work among the children of men. . . .*” This is that time.