

Angela Amal

I was born in South Sudan. I don't know my birthday, but I was told it was in 1965. I was the sixth born child. Three of my siblings passed away. When I was born there was a fierce civil war in my country.

One day, my uncle came to my village and asked for the dowry for his sister (my mom) that hadn't yet been paid. In our culture, if a husband doesn't pay the full price for his wife, the woman's family owns her and the children. My father couldn't pay him anything, so my uncle took us away, including my mother, and brought us to Kitgum in Northern Uganda. It is about two hours south of where I come from. I can't remember the year but I was very little.

When we arrived, someone brought me to take care of a small baby as a nanny. I lived with those relatives away from my mom. My older sister was taken to Gulu to look after another child. Life was really hard. I was a young child left to work hard and take care of a small baby. I was so little I couldn't really carry the baby. Aside from being a nanny, I was responsible to start the fire for cooking and do other domestic activities. I took care of that child for two years. I was around 6 years old. There was a day when I was playing with the baby, and the baby's father came and yelled at me, saying: *Why are you not rekindling the fire? If you don't work, you won't eat.* I was a small child and wanted to play. To this day, if someone threatens me not to eat, it really upsets me from that painful past and I will refuse to eat altogether. I wanted to go home and be with my mom. I ran away and went back to my uncle's home. I stayed there for a few days.

My mother wasn't around because she was sent to work on somebody's farm. My uncle's hut was far away from ours. It was just me and some other children. After three days, I went to the Catholic church to try to get some schooling. My uncle found out where I was, so he dragged me away. He wanted me to take care of another small child in the town. The Catholic mission told my uncle that I needed to go to school, but he lied to them and said he was bringing me to a school in the town.

Life became hard again. I was forced into slave work. I didn't stay long before I escaped back to the village. When I got there, another lady took me to watch a new child. I was really confused. *Why do they keep forcing me into this? Why am I like a slave to people and no one saw that I had any value?* I became ill and very weak. They brought me to the government hospital but I didn't improve.

I thought there was no hope. I thought I was going to die before ever living my own life. I envisioned some spirits pulling at me. One group pulled one way, one the other. Both shouted, "She should be ours!" I didn't realize at the time that this was a spiritual battle for my soul. I became healed from the sickness instantly. I now know that it was God who healed me and preserved my life.

Shortly after that, the child I was taking care of got very sick and died. He was only two years old. I returned to the Catholic mission to go to school again. Once again, my relatives found me and took me to take care of another child. I was never given the chance to go to school. I watched the baby girl until she

could speak and reason. The child's mother was rude and abusive. She overloaded me with so much work. I tried to run away but failed. Then the mom gave birth to another baby.

After delivering, the doctor stopped her from nursing because she was old and not producing milk. The child was brought to me as an infant and I bottle-fed her. The mother decided to bring my younger sister who was still very small, to train her in case I wasn't there. I was thirteen years old and my younger sister was ten. I would take care of both children. I was also responsible for washing clothing, cooking and cleaning. I had to wake up at 4 am and start making food for the family for breakfast, take the children to school, work hard all day and late into the night. They had a motive that I was unaware of. When I turned fourteen years old, they prepared me to marry a driver from Kampala. He was 32 years old and had six children from different women. His name was Isaac.

I didn't understand what was going on. My older relatives told me what to say. Many people gathered from both families. When the man came, I didn't know who he was. I innocently welcomed the visitors in the home. They asked me if I knew Isaac. I said I knew him from when he came and visited, which is what I was instructed to say. They made a collective decision then and there that I will be his wife. When the food was brought we ate and then returned home. Three days later, Isaac came to where I was staying. He told me to get in the car. I said: *Why? Where are we going?* He didn't answer but commanded me to enter the vehicle. That is how I was taken to be his wife. We began preparations for the marriage ceremony. In our culture, the family makes an agreement and it is declared a marriage.

Later on there is a ceremony. My own mom wasn't told anything about the relationship. Money and cows for dowry were given to my uncles and the relatives who mistreated me. Nothing was given to my mom, or my father in Sudan. I was left alone in the village while Isaac returned to Kampala. (This is normal here.) The uncles who received the money went to dig with a tractor. I was working distilling alcohol. I wasn't allowed to eat anything from the garden. I was only given two dresses for clothing. Isaac called me to pack harvested grain and bring it to him in Kampala, approximately a nine hour bus ride away.

In Kampala, people would go to the borehole to fetch water from outside. Isaac didn't want me to go outside the fence. He was very jealous and overbearing, and mistreated me. Isaac's brother wrote him accusing me of cheating and prostitution. I didn't understand why he wrote those things. When Isaac came home from work, he started to yell at me. No sleep caught my eyes that night. He told me to call a certain woman to discuss this issue.

The woman and I spoke, but Isaac still didn't believe me. He told me he was divorcing me. I needed to go because I wasn't taught how to behave as a wife. His sister suggested he give me money to return to the village. He refused and said I had to walk with my feet back to Kitgum (an 8-10 hour drive). He picked up a gun and waved it around, forcing me out. He was with Special Forces and I was afraid of him. I left. I went to another part of Kampala and stayed with a cousin of mine. When the cousin saw I couldn't do anything there, she sent me to a place called Makindye to do some work. I did three months of hard labor for a bus fare.

I returned to Isaac's mother because I still belonged to their family. She decided to use me to carry supplies for her family back and forth between Kitgum and Kampala. I stayed for four years in her home. She would tell me that Isaac would change his heart and take me back. A relative encouraged me to sell

alcohol in the disco halls. He convinced me, and I left that woman's home. One night while working at the disco, a man named Philip saw me.

At that time, boys would take girls without their permission. He didn't even talk; he just grabbed me by force to sleep together. Afterwards I asked him if he had a wife. It would be shameful for me not to marry him. He said he had no wife. He was willing to go to my relatives to request marriage. My aunt informed him that I was married to somebody else. Traditionally in Acholi culture, once a man pays in full, you belong to him. You can only be released to marry someone else if they refund the money of the first husband.

Philip was persistent and promised that he would pay the money to Isaac. He organized some cows as a down payment. Before going to live at his house, I already gave birth to a baby boy, Emmanuel. Once I was brought to his home, I discovered that he had other wives. I had no choice but to stay there. He never paid the full amount to my relatives, so there was conflict between them. It became very tough for me. My co-wives loved to pick fights with me. I was 18 years old. It was so painful. At that time I gave birth to my second son, Vincent.

Things were difficult with Philip. When he was away in the army, I left and went to live in another village. Philip found me and ordered our two children to be taken away from me and brought to live with his uncle somewhere else. I had no say. Afterwards, I met a man named Charles who took an interest in me, and asked for my hand in marriage. The relative who I was staying with gave permission for him to take me. I went with him to Kampala. We had a son named Kayanza. I would sometimes come to Kitgum to check on my two children and then return to Kampala. Charles did not want anything to do with them. Meanwhile, Philip was imprisoned for a time and after his release he went back to the army. He went back to work for two years in the army and died from there.

I was in Kampala at the time. When I would check on the children I would never come to see him. When I heard that Philip had died in the army, I asked Charles if he could watch Kayanza for a short time so I could attend the funeral. He said if I went I had to bring our son because he wasn't interested in taking care of him. When I came, I found my other two children suffering. The firstborn, Emmanuel, was being treated so badly. They would send him with supplies to and fro, to be a slave. He had no clothes, only shorts. When I saw that, I was heartbroken at the condition of my children and I had to stay. No one else was interested in taking care of them. It was the time of the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army) Rebels and life was really tough in Kitgum.

After two months, I got a job with a company that was bringing relief to those affected by the war. I worked with them for ten years cleaning the office. After six years, I would assist them in recruiting other staff. I would help with interpretation of Acholi to Swahili.

I learned some other languages in Kampala. I was promoted to be a cook. I would go to our home and cook around 5 pm, then I would hurry back to work with my children to be protected from the rebels. Normally the rebels would come in the evening and commit many atrocities. It was 1998. That year, someone held a big crusade in Kitgum. I was not saved but I went to the crusade.

The man asked everyone who wanted to be saved to come forward. I was resistant to the salvation message because I didn't want to give up brewing alcohol to support my family. I was afraid my children wouldn't be able to eat or go to school if I gave that up. I was paid little at my workplace. After three days

of the crusade, I went home. While I was cooking, a scorpion stung my son Kayanza. He was in so much pain and couldn't eat. A local nurse came and helped him. He was only 4 years old. I saw that God saved his life and loved me. In the evening I went back to the crusade and got saved. Scorpions stung Kayanza about seven more times, but I didn't backslide. I kept praying and trusting the Lord. I was growing in my faith, but I couldn't read the Bible for myself because I never went to school.

I decided to leave my job because they were Islamic and wouldn't allow me to go to church. I had to find work to support my children. I returned to Kampala and a relative got me work. My children stayed in Kitgum because they were in school. The person I worked for in Kampala was mentally ill. He was rude and insulting to me. I wanted out. I was taking ARVs (Anti-Retro Virals) for HIV Treatment. I would come and get the medicine from Gulu and go back to Kampala, about a six-hour drive each way.

The money I received helped me with my medical treatment, but there was no money left for my children. They were my priority. I became heartbroken and discouraged. I left and returned to Kitgum. I got a job selling alcohol in Sudan. The pay wasn't good. As a Christian, I didn't really want to take part in that kind of business. I tried to get other work, but times were not easy. I decided to go to the village and grow sim sim (sesame seeds, the cash crop of Northern Uganda). It helped pay my children's school fees.

When I was preparing for the second year to plant crops, Erica called me to come and join the Africa4God WIDL (Women's Intensive Discipleship and Literacy) training. I knew her from being at the weekly Bible study in my village. The training went on for seven months and helped me so much. I learned how to read and write, study the Bible, and do other activities to help support my family and myself. I was so scared the day I had to teach the rest of the class from the Bible. Here I was, with my sordid history, standing in front of people. I was so scared and thought I had nothing to offer, but sharing the Word of God became a joy. I got a kerosene lantern so at night I could keep reading my Bible late into the darkness. It has become my comfort and strength. When I graduated, I started visiting other villages. I was singing, teaching and encouraging them. I found that I love sharing the Word of God and ministering to others who are going through hard times. That's how I began my work with Africa for God which continues to this day.

Back in 2008, Charles died. I have lost two husbands and was abandoned by the other one. I have three children with different fathers. My life was out of control. Everything from my childhood onward I felt like the demons owned me until God came and set me free. I am a widow, but have learned to rely more and more on God. I was never alone because He was always with my children and me.

All of my history is a testimony, because only by the power of God did I get through. Every story shows God working in my life. My prayer is that my children and grandchildren don't experience the difficulties that I have had to pass through, and for anyone reading this to stand with me in prayer. I love God and I thank Him for what He has done in my life so far.