

Pastor Opoka Jimmy Kilara

I was born on November 1, 1983 in Kitgum Uganda. Our village is called Lemo. My father, Vincent, was a peasant farmer. My mother, Magdalene, took care of our home. There were six of us children in all. I was the fifth born. There was a difficult time in our family in 1986 because of government problems. When President Museveni came into power, we had to run for safety. We ran down near the river, very far from our home. We stayed three years in hiding, and then the Karamajong cattle raiders came. They would come and beat us and steal our livestock. People were scared and could run, you could easily be separated from your family for a couple of days staying in hiding. When the Karamajong found that anyone slaughtered a cow, they would pay with their life. They grabbed all the cattle and they went with them. My mom decided to bring us to visit my uncle in Gulu, hoping that it would be safer. Unfortunately, the cattle raiders also reached that side. On a certain day, they came to attack us. I was walking with my older cousin. She saw them and ran. I was still new to the place so I didn't know where to go. I saw a man walking with his gun (carried behind his head). I knew that I had to run, even though I didn't know where I was going. I started heading toward a mountain, as fast as I could. I was running for my life and crying, I was terrified. I ran deep to the foot of the mountain, and found no one there. I thought I would die that day. I entered into a big forest under the mountain. All of a sudden I heard a voice from the other side of a stream calling me. I stopped and heard the sound again but didn't see. It was my aunty calling me from the other side of the stream. I was amazed that I was going to live. I had been running without hope and didn't think I would ever be found in the thick forest, but God protected me and brought me right next to my relative. I went with her and she brought me to the place where everyone was hiding. It was a hard time for us. Once

the government settled down, they decided to stop fighting and killing us Acholi people. They sought peace and tried to create a relationship with the people, and so we were able to return to Kitgum and resettle in the village.

I began school at 7 years old. In 1992, my dad asked all of us children which of us was willing to study hard in school, and I responded that I was. My dad worked very hard to support me, because I showed a strong interest in learning. I was loved and favored so much by my father. When he would go to dig, I loved to go with him and stay close to him. The following year, he became mysteriously sick. He was admitted to the hospital, and his body parts started to rot. After a month, he died. I was around 10 years old. When he died, I was heartbroken and lost my hope. I couldn't go back to school. The following year, my oldest brother encouraged me to go back to school and said he would pay for my school fees. I went back and found encouragement. My brother supported me through two years, but then something horrible again happened. My brother also died. He left behind two children, a two-year-old girl, and a baby girl less than a year old. Once again I was disappointed and heartbroken. I decided to continue to go to school, but I didn't care or have any hope for my life. I didn't complete the whole year and had to repeat the same level again the next year because of the pain in my heart.

My other older brother loved spending time at the discos and partying and wanted nothing to do with our family. I was left in the home with my sisters and my mother whose condition wasn't good. She would get swelling in her legs where she couldn't walk for 3-5 months, so me and his sisters had to be responsible to get food and to dig to help the family. Life continued but it wasn't

easy, and there was no hope. We were just trying to survive. Nobody could come and help or encourage us.

In February 1997 early in the morning in Lemo, before I left the house, I saw two men. They came to where we were sleeping and they ordered us to come out quickly. I had never seen rebels before, but that was them. They told us to sit down and take off our things, tied our hands, and ordered us to grab our bed sheets. We were led by the rope and joined a big line where many soldiers were. They moved us to the next village, four kilometers away. From there they decided to rest and cook some food. It was around 9 am. After rest, they started to tell us how to live among them: *You have to feel free and accept the way of life, or we will kill you. If we think you have any negative intentions, we will kill you.* I acted as if nothing was wrong and pretended to happily go along with whatever they said. I was scared and trying to survive. They thought I was very good and they gave me some freedom. When they were sorting out their things, they decided to give me a uniform. When they gave it to me, I received privileges to walk around. They thought I liked this life as a rebel. Some of the villagers ran and escaped but they never expected me to try. Around 6 pm, when they were planning to leave the camp, the government soldiers were pursuing us and found our camp. They started shooting. Bullets were raining terribly, and people were running for cover to find a safe place. While the bullets were raining, the man who abducted me was busy trying to defend himself. I ran away, as hard and fast as I could, because I was running for my life. God gave me favor because of the uniform I was wearing, so I managed to escape that day. I went slept in the bush that night and reached home the next day. The ones who abducted me didn't know that I escaped, because after the attack

they had to divide into two groups. They thought I joined the other team going in a different direction.

That same year, I continued my education and finished primary school. No one could guide me and help me in any area, but I was trying. I finished two terms but it became so difficult. I decided to dig a garden of cassava to pay for my school fees. I went to Okidi, a village on the other side of Kitgum, because an uncle of mine stayed there. I was given half an acre for my garden. I worked really hard. When I was about to return to school, on May 26 1997, the insurgency was really so bad and tough. I was leaving Okidi and heading back to town. On my way back I was carrying two other people with me on a bicycle. When we were turning a corner, we saw a long line of rebels on the road. I threw the bicycle so the others with me could run for safety. One was a boy my age and one was a little child. I was fourteen years old at the time. I started running and tried to come back and found another line. I realized I was surrounded. One of the LRA commanders said: "Shoot him right here and now!" I raised his hands and assured them that I wouldn't run. One of the soldiers came and grabbed me and I joined the line. We started walking. I was taken again.

The very team that abducted me the first time were the same ones that abducted me again. Normally if they see you escaped and capture you again, they will automatically kill you. But the man who abducted me the first time wasn't around right away. We walked and walked very far. In the morning the man saw me. He asked where I had been. I said I had been around all that time with the other team. He believed me and didn't realize that I had escaped and got recaptured. I again decided to pretend to gain favor with them, in order to save my life. We

walked from the 26th of May to the 3rd of June. My feet started to swell from walking for so long. When your feet swell and the rebels find out, they kill you. They were planning to walk up to Sudan to meet with other members. They captured many children and wanted to bring all of us there for training. I was worried because my feet were swollen. I knew that my only options were to die along the way or try to escape. We were near a river. We crossed and spent a night on the other side. Someone came and warned us before we slept, saying that if anyone tried to escape, they would be killed right away. In my heart I was thinking the journey was still far and because of my feet I wouldn't survive. The only option was to try to escape that evening. At night they put a tarp down because of fear of rain. The guards were placed all around. I tried to look around to see a place where there was no guard and I found a small gap. I wasn't saved at the time. My father was a staunch Catholic and when he was alive he always brought us to church, and he feared God. I was praying in my heart a prayer for safety. I said, *God of my father, please help me*. I knew my dad used to have a relationship with God. I just kept praying and praying that prayer. I was on the extreme end of people sleeping. Around 2 am, I tried to roll to detect if anyone could see me. No one noticed. There was a soldier standing at a certain tree outside of the tarp, but he didn't notice. Then the rain came. The man took off from his position and entered under the tarp to get out of the rain. I waited during the rain, I was halfway out of the tarp and so the rain was falling on me. I heard the man sleeping and so I decided to roll again. No one noticed, so I stood up and made up my mind. I started quietly walking and stood under the tree in the moonlight to look around and find a way out. Everybody was asleep, so I started going step by step. It was in a plain and anyone could see from a long distance, but in the distance ahead there was tall grass. My objective was to reach the tall grass to be hidden. Step by step I walked ahead, my heart pounding. I made it safely to the tall grass, stopped for a while, and took

off from there. I went and stayed by the bank of the river for the rest of the night. When dawn broke, I heard the rebels whispering and preparing to take off to Sudan. I heard them leave and then gained the courage to try to cross the water. I had to wait to pass to see if it was deep or not, to find a place where I could pass, because I couldn't swim. I found a spot where the water was shallow, and I was able to safely cross. I walked until I found someone. I reported to a local government officer who brought me to their barracks. I told the army commander that I was a student and asked if I could go back home to resume schooling. They wouldn't let me. Anyone who was abducted by the rebels had to go through a reintegration process before going home. I stayed in the barracks for three days. Then when there were a bunch of us there (others who had escaped from different locations) they brought us to another barracks close to Kitgum town. We were there another three days and taken somewhere else. We were in the new place for four days, then we were taken to Gulu barracks. We thought we would be brought back home in two or three days, but they kept taking us around all over the place. They lied to us that they were bringing us home, but there was nothing we could do. From Gulu, some of us were brought to the World Vision organization. When I was there I heard the Word of God for the first time. Every evening there was fellowship and teaching of the Word of God. One evening, June 20 1997, I really understood for the first time that God loved me and I sensed Him speaking to me. I came forward and committed my life to Christ. The preacher asked me why I came forward and wanted to make sure that I understood and believed the Word of God. I grew as they disciplined me and I even started helping out with the evening fellowships. After one month they sent me back home. At that time, there was not anyone from my village who was saved at all, no one understood about salvation. When I came back home, I started to walk as a child of God, telling people I was saved. They were shocked and confused by me. They didn't understand. I started to

explain to them what it means to be born again. After a month of being home, I got the opportunity to go to a vocational training school in Kiryandongo, another part of Uganda. I was in that course for 8 months. I stayed there and let everyone know I was saved. There was a Christian fellowship group within the school that I joined. I took it very seriously. I asked the person leading the fellowship what it takes to serve God, and teach His word. I asked him if one day I could make it to do that. The man encouraged me and asked me to try teaching one evening. My heart desired it so much, but I also was afraid and didn't know how to do it well. The other young man encouraged me to pick a chapter in the Bible and the verses, then speak about it, as the Spirit led me. He told me: *It's not your message, but God's message; and the Spirit of God will lead you how to preach.* I shared from 1 Thessalonians 5:1-5. I still remember because it was a very important day for me. I taught about living like a child of God, not living like others who do bad things in the darkness. In the beginning my fear was what to share. By the end, I didn't want to stop but kept preaching and preaching. I came to find out afterwards that the other young man was discouraged previously, but he found encouragement in God raising me up. God used us to mutually encourage each other. The other young man was about to leave because his time was finished, so he entrusted the fellowship to me. I wanted to do better and serve God with all of my heart. When time came for me to go back home, I had to leave the fellowship. That's how I started to teach the Bible and serve God. I loved it so much and was very happy. People began to see that I was serious and called by God to do ministry. After school was finished, I came back home and went to the village. In 1998 is when I started to settle in the village and move around. People started hiding their bottles of beer from me because they felt ashamed of their sin. I encouraged them not to hide but to understand why they should leave their old life behind and follow God.

My new passion led me to share my faith with my best friend, Richard. I came to his house and brought my Bible. Richard was so offended, and told me that he never wanted to see me again. I was very hurt and I lost my best friend. I went through times of loneliness and it was challenging. God replaced my friend though. I got to know another boy named Thomas. I shared with him and eventually he came to church with me. After a few weeks of going to church, he also gave his life to Christ. It was such a joy to have another believer to stand with me. We began moving around the village sharing God's love with the people together. Thomas would ask me a lot of questions. I taught him how to witness and share his faith, and then in the evenings we would both go out and evangelize. The people would mock us, call us names and insult us, but slowly things began to change. There was a certain drunk man who always mocked them, but one day he invited them to pray for him. God delivered the man, and him and his wife got saved. They burned the shrines and drum that they used for their witchcraft ceremonies. That made us four believers.

There was another man who would move around with a music system. There was a day that he came to their church when I was preaching. The man had a dream that someone was telling him to go to the church, find this man and he will pray for you. He came and we prayed for him and he got saved. Then we were five believers in the village. It continued like that, until the number reached eleven, twelve, and more. I said to my pastor, that the number of believers are many and the place is very far from the church. Others wanted to come check out the church but it was too far for them. I asked him to start a church in my village, so we started to organize to open a

church there. That was in 2000. We prayed and in 2003 the church started, Lamwal Baptist Church. The number of believers kept increasing. Unfortunately in that year the insurgency was really tough and we were forced from our home to the IDP (Internally Displaces Persons) Camp. When we were living in the camp, God used it. We started a church in there, and continued fellowshiping. In 2005 the number of believers in the church was very great. We started preaching open-air crusades and opened another church from that church in the camp, in another area far away. That church is there to this day. There was a time when my pastor asked me to go to Bible school training. I said I could not do it because my level of education was too low. I didn't think I could make it. The pastor encouraged me that I could make it if I was truly committed, so I went and tried. I spent two years locally and then went to Baptist seminary, and was admitted to school in Jinja, a beautiful place in southeastern Uganda. That was in 2003. In 2005, when the rebel war was going on strong, there was no money for school fees. In 2007, I met a beautiful young woman named Grace. She was a strong believer and active in the church. When the war was calming down, everyone returned home from the camp and God continued to move. Grace and I were married that year as well. Before that when things were tough, I fasted and prayed for God to help the situation. God gave me a vision that I was sharing the Word of God with many people who were listening and full of joy. I saw an entire village together. The Word that I was sharing, it was like God's voice coming through my mouth, not my voice. After that, I rejoiced in what the Lord was doing. That same year I also got money for school fees to continue my seminary training. I graduated in December of 2008. We also had our first child, Malinga Griffin. I started officially pastoring the church. I continued serving the Lord in this way, until I got some problems in 2014. In 2012, Grace gave birth to our second child, Joanne. Grace started to fall sick, and we didn't know what was wrong. We started to move to the

hospital for investigation and she developed a tumor in her nostrils which brought a blockage in her nose. The hospital in Kitgum referred us to Gulu to try to help, as they couldn't do anything here. The swelling was so big and developed all the way to the ears and she couldn't hear. When I took her to Gulu, they recommended an operation. They operated to remove the tumor and it took her a long time to revive. She was very weak. They took her to surgery at 9 am and it took all day until 9pm. Everybody thought she had passed away, but I was very strong in heart that it wouldn't happen, because everything that happens I put into prayer. I prayed together with everyone who was in the surgical ward about to be taken to surgery. All of them revived and were discharged from the hospital, God did a great work. When Grace revived, she was very weak. Money was nowhere. Everything was so hard. I had to do my best to help her, with food and the hospital bill. Meanwhile at home my mother went through some difficulties and developed some health problem. She couldn't speak. I was overloaded. No one was there to take care of my mom, so I had to request two of my older nieces to help her out in the mornings before school and in the evenings. They helped out there, while I was in Gulu with Grace. Once Grace was discharged, we returned home and found my mother still in a bad condition. I prayed hard for her. Up to now, she's not yet okay. She can now move a little bit out and collect some firewood and do some minor work., but is weak and can't speak. When I came back, I continued pastoring the church. Pastoring became very difficult because my mother and wife were both not fine. I would feel guilty if I went to church and left my wife suffering, so I would have to run around getting her medication first. It was like that for three years. After the operation, the swelling came back again and it was worse than the first time. She started to become thinner and thinner. Everyone thought she was HIV Positive, but they tested frequently and it always came back negative. When they were doing testing they found out she had cancer. They couldn't help

her in Gulu but she had to go to the main hospital in Kampala. There was no money, and I was worried about my mother and the children. I talked to one of Grace's uncles in Kampala, to let her go and stay with him so I didn't leave my mother and our children all alone. After seeing the doctor, she would return back home. We communicated by phone. She stayed down there a month and finished the medication they gave her. She got some improvement from the medicine, though it didn't last long. She came back home in January 2014. We stayed for a while and continued with life. Then more difficulties came.

My older brother Michael had gone to a village where some guys assaulted him. He was beaten and left half dead. One of our relatives brought him to the hospital. That was March 9 2014. The following day, the message reached me and I came to the hospital and saw my brother's critical condition. Most of the beatings were on his belly. The doctor discovered the large intestine was bad and the system in the stomach was too damaged. They operated on the 12th of March, but that night he died. Because it was a pending police case, we couldn't take him for burial unless we got permission from the police. We went to the police to get direction of how to proceed, we reported and registered the case. Some other people from there who saw it identified who the assailants were, and we started following from there. We took him for burial. That very day, my uncle who was the clan chief also died. The uncle fell out of shock from my brother's death and he died along the road. The following day we had to also bury him. It was a very difficult time for our clan and family. We finished with both funerals in one week, though traditionally here people kept coming. At least the main things were finished. At around 9 am, police men were coming toward us. They ordered us to sit down take off our shirts. We didn't know what was going on. We had to listen and do what they said. They brought us all to Kitgum central prison.

There were eighteen of us, all family members who had come from the funeral. We were charged with aggravated robbery. They claimed there was an old man from a nearby village who was robbed, and they suspected that we were the ones who committed the offense since we were all gathered together like we were. Nine of our relatives were released, and nine were detained. I was among them detained in Kitgum prison. There was nothing we could do. We couldn't talk or say anything; we had to wait to go to court. News reached everywhere and people were praying. They didn't find any evidence linking us to any crime. It takes six months when there's nothing that can confirm you committed any crime and no witnesses. After the six months, they gave us mandatory bail. They found no grounds on that case and they decided to simplify the case by themselves to simple robbery. I was in prison for six months, 185 days. To this day, I still have to report every few months and the case was never officially closed yet. The prosecutor of the case wanted a bribe from me, which I would not pay, and so it continues to drag on.

When I was in prison I was serving as pastor inside, so God used it as an opportunity to reach more people. He did a great work in many people's lives. I encouraged them through the hard times to pray to God and submit to Him, He is their only help in these situations. Others saw what happened in my life and committed their lives to Christ. I met a guy who is a popular singer, so we came together. The musician would sing and lead worship, and I would preach. He was in for a capital crime. God did a miracle and released us both. The other prisoners saw that and recognized the hand of God.

Also during that time, my wife Grace was in a really bad condition. She continued to battle the cancer. Because I was in prison, there was nothing I could do. I prayed that God would take care

of my family. One day they brought the news that Grace was really badly off and now was paralyzed. She was also pregnant, and I thought it was just a result of that, but it was worse. They suggested that she needed an operation because the baby might not be okay or she can even lose her life if she continued with the full term pregnancy. She was 7 ½ months pregnant. They operated to try to deliver the baby and save both of their lives. Our last baby, James, was born through that operation on September 3 2014. Thank God our baby was okay. Grace's condition, however, was severe. She had to be brought back to the hospital for more treatment. When Grace was in the hospital and I was in prison, my two older children knelt down to pray. The younger called the older to pray together, though they were very young. They knelt down and prayed for their mother in the hospital and their father in prison, a simple prayer for us, filled with power. *God, help my mother and help my father, Amen.* The following week I was released from prison. That very same day, October 13 2014, my wife was also discharged from the hospital. We met home on the same day. God hears the prayers of small children. I was amazed at how God answers prayer.

After Grace was released home, she continued suffering, and there was nothing that could be done. I'm thankful that we both got to go home and spend some short time together. She died on February 22, 2015. I continued to serve the Lord, because I love Him and He has called me to do His work. In all of this, I've never grumbled that God was bringing things in my life. I still hope in Him. I know He will lead me to the perfect place.

In my life, I have experienced difficult challenges. God has saved me multiple times, and I know it's for a purpose. I know its God who takes care of the people from here up to heaven. I know

that when I pass through difficulties I can still trust in Him. My encouragement to everybody is that God is in control of everything. He's the one who is guiding our steps, and He is the one who will lead us until we reach the end of our journey on earth.

I serve the Lord still today, and one of the things I do is going to the prison every week with Africa4God, sharing with the men who are still inside and encouraging them to hope in the Lord. Many are coming to salvation, because God is doing a great work.

