



DIGGING DITCHES







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Helen Roseveare

CHRISTIAN FOCUS





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ISBN 1-84550-058-X

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Published in 2005

by

Christian Focus Publications, Ltd.,
Geanies House, Fearn, Tain,
Ross-shire, IV20 1TW, Scotland
and

WEC International,
Bulstrode, Oxford Road, Gerrards Cross,
Bucks, SL9 8SZ

www.christianfocus.com

Printed and bound by
CPD, Wales

Cover Design by Alister MacInnes

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Prologue

‘Make this valley full of ditches!’

The words almost sprang out of the page – I knew God had spoken. But did I really want to hear? I had asked him to give me just such a clear word, a ‘Thus saith the Lord’ type of word, to guide me into the next stage of my journey. But now that He had spoken, I was almost afraid to hear His voice.

I was lying in a hospital bed, following two major operations within a week. I had just completed a nine-month tour of deputation meetings in the USA for my Mission (WEC International) following 20 years of missionary service in Congo. Halfway through that tour, which included over 400 public meetings (school assemblies, church youth groups and Sunday services, university Christian Unions and women’s meetings), in over 20 different states, as well as six weeks in Canada, I found that I had a lump (a tumour). It was early in February, a Thursday morning of a busy week. I managed to control my thoughts and go ahead with the meetings already arranged for that day and the following. Saturday was a free day to prepare for several engagements on the Sunday and during the coming week. I asked my host and hostess if they would be kind enough to leave me on my own for a while. I knew I had to find peace in my own heart to continue the tour, knowing that medically, others would consider that I should go for help. I was very conscious that if I backed out, and asked to go home for treatment, it would cause enormous difficulties for those who





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arranged the tour. The publicity, arrangements for meetings, transport and hospitality for the whole four months would be thrown into confusion.

That Saturday morning, 7th February 1976, I read my morning portion from the Scriptures, then I read Daily Light and prayed. I simply laid it all before the Lord. What did He want me to do? As I re-read the Scripture passage, I sensed God speaking His peace into my heart. Reading through the Bible in a year, I had reached Exodus 1 to 3 that morning. Many years before, God had spoken to me clearly through Exodus 2:9, when Pharaoh's daughter charged the mother of the baby Moses, found in a basket in the reeds at the river's edge, to care for the baby – her own baby! – with the promise: *'Take this baby and nurse him for me, and I will pay you (I will give you your wages).'*

In 1954, when I had been in Congo (at that time, the Belgian Congo) just sixteen months, the Mission Committee asked me to move our fledgling medical programme from Ibambi to Nebobongo, a then disused leprosy colony seven miles up the road. I was terrified at the mere thought of what such a move would mean – all the responsibility of developing the village, as well as starting again all that was involved in developing a health service. I felt angry with that committee, feeling they had been thoughtless towards me, and I almost rebelled. Seeking the Lord's direction at that time, my morning reading had been in Exodus chapter 2. And the Lord said, 'This fledgling health service is your baby. Take it, and care for it in My Name, and I will see that you lack for nothing of which you have need.' I moved out on that promise, and the Lord never failed me through the many turbulent years that followed.

Now, was He saying to me, 'I have a new baby to entrust to you. Will you trust Me?' Then I turned back to read again the verses in Daily Light for the 7th February, and I read: *'One of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back and with a loud voice, glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus said:*





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‘Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.’
(Lk.17:15- 18 KJV)

I looked up the passage in my Bible and read the following verse, which said: *‘Jesus said to him, “Rise and go; your faith has made you well’* (Lk. 17:19 KJV). It was all part of the story of ten leprous men who came to Jesus for healing. All ten had been *healed*, but just one turned back to thank the Lord for His healing, and that one was made *whole* by faith, and through giving thanks. In my heart, I knew that God was speaking to me, into my immediate situation, and I accepted, understanding that I was to continue with all the tour of meetings, to say nothing to anyone of what I feared to be going on in my body, and, actually, to think no more about it for the time being. In other words, God would look after my need for physical healing, but, more immediately, He would give me spiritual wholeness as I trusted and thanked him. He would indeed ‘pay my wages’ each step of the way ahead.

I rejoined my host and hostess later that morning with peace in my heart and was enabled to accept the first two of God’s challenges, even if I did not manage to think no more about it! Two months later in the tour, when taking a week of meetings among university students in Chicago, I became feverish and unable to keep any food down. My mind worked overtime and I presumed that I had secondaries from the rapidly growing lump. This did not prove to be the case and I probably had a sharp attack of ‘flu. I was enabled to keep almost all my engagements, despite two weeks of feeling rotten and very weak. Eventually the tour ended and I returned to the UK, where I rang my brother-in-law, the medical superintendent of a general hospital in the west of England. A medical check-up resulted in immediate admittance to hospital and then surgery. Initially thought to be benign, a simple local excision was carried out. But further laboratory sectioning confirmed that there were malignant cells present. So three days after the first, I underwent a second operation.





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I was now recovering. What had the Lord for me? Would I really recover, or merely have a few more years in which to serve Him on earth? What could I do for the Lord in that time? What was His plan for my life? I was not unduly worried. I had had four months to accustom myself to the situation. In fact, I had already begun to think in terms of a three-year appointment to a job that I felt I could manage, so as to be fully occupied in the Lord's service as long as I had strength to do it. After that... well, I was willing to wait till that time came and trust Him to see me through any difficult years that followed. I actually wrote to the missionary team in Congo, when I first knew I had a lump and that I might not have much more time to serve the people, to suggest that perhaps they would give me the privilege of going back to them to serve in a new capacity, training African pastors, using French as the medium for teaching rather than Swahili, so that they would be more highly regarded by the authorities. I received no answer to my letter.

After coming round from the anaesthetic, I asked a nurse to open my Bible for me at the marker, and to prop it up on the bed table. I prayed, and asked the Lord to speak to me very clearly. Then I saw that the marker was at 2 Kings 3. How could God ever speak to me, in a meaningful way, through that Old Testament passage? I knew the story. I had taught it at the students' college in Congo not so very long before.

'Lord,' I prayed, 'I really need a "Thus saith the Lord" so that I can stand on Your Word for the next stage of my life.'

However, despite my doubts, I started to read. The chapter relates how, following the refusal of the Moabites to pay the annual tribute they owed to King Joram of Israel, he joined forces with the kings of Judah and Edom and marched south, presumably along the western border of the Dead Sea, to come round to the southern end of the territory of Moab, in order to attack the Moabites, hoping to take them by surprise. When the combined armies reached the River Arnon, expecting to refill all their exhausted water supplies, they found only a dried-up river-bed! The soldiers were ready for





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mutiny. The three kings, having discussed the situation, called for the prophet Elisha and told him to ask his God what they should do in this emergency.

The Spirit of God came upon Elisha, and God spoke to him: *'Make this valley full of ditches.'* Furthermore, God told him that although they would neither hear wind nor see rain, He would fill the ditches in the valley with water.

That verse, *'Make this valley full of ditches'* started with the words, *'Thus saith the Lord.'* or in the modern version: *'This is what the Lord says.'*

As my eyes moved down the page, and as I approached verse 16, I stopped and prayed that the Lord would make me willing to hear what He wanted to say to me. I was scared. I knew the story, and now I could see a 'Thus saith the Lord' coming. What would it mean for me?

As soon as I read it, even without going on to read the rest of the story: how the soldiers did as God said, and made the whole sandy river-bed full of ditches; how, during the night, God filled the ditches with water; how, in the early morning light, the Moabite army on the mountain-top to the north saw the rising sun reflected in the water and, presuming the ditches to be filled with blood from fighting between the Israeli and Judaeen soldiers; how they had swarmed down the mountainside to plunder the camp, and how the Israelite and Judaeen armies fell on them and brought about a resounding victory. I knew that God had spoken to me.

'Make this valley full of ditches.'

'This valley' must mean the present circumstances of my life, and so much had happened that year. My dear mother had died. I had just completed an exhausting nine months of touring and speaking in the USA and Canada. That week I had had surgery for cancer. It seemed unlikely that WEC would allow me back to the mission field, at least initially. Life felt very uncertain. It was indeed a valley situation.





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‘Make .. it .. full of *ditches*.’ I was not being asked to dig a Suez Canal, just a multitude of small ditches, each one individually important. Was God asking me to live a day at a time, and do each small task as it arose without asking for one long-term goal? Those soldiers, in the Bible narrative, could have revolted and refused to dig mere ditches. ‘It’s not what we trained for! We have no proper tools! It’s beneath our dignity!’ But in fact, they appeared to have obeyed. Of course, without the ditches the water that God wanted to send would have been wasted; it would have soaked without trace into the sandy riverbed. The ditches were essential to contain the promised blessing.

If God asked me to do tasks for which I felt I wasn’t trained, tasks that appeared to be much less strategic than all that had been achieved in the past twenty years of medical service in the Congo, was I willing to trust Him and go ahead, one step at a time, doing whatever He chose to ask of me, day by day, even without any apparent long-term goal?

Suddenly it all seemed very insecure. For twelve years, as director of a small hospital in the great Congolese forest land, I had had a clear-cut daily programme, well-defined responsibilities, a measurable task for which I was accountable. Again, in later years, as director of a college for African paramedical workers, my job had had clear limits, a specific goal, a tidy programme. Even when I first came home to help care for my invalid mother, there had been a regular daily programme, and others had always been available to help as needed. But now, the box in which I felt God was asking me to live seemed very open-ended. To whom would I be accountable? How would I know, each day, just what was asked of me? Would I be financially supported? Hundreds of questions raced through my mind, yet the Lord’s words were clear and unequivocal: *‘Make this valley full of ditches’* **and**, with the command, came the promise: *‘This valley will be filled with water!’* He enabled me to say, ‘OK, yes, Lord!’

For many years after I became a Christian, I yearned for the mountain-tops, for experiences of God’s glory and power, of His





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enabling and blessing. The story of Caleb (in Joshua 14:6-14), who, at the age of 80, asked Joshua to give him the hill country as his inheritance, despite all the savage inhabitants and obvious difficulties, stirred me. Caleb was said to have followed the Lord wholeheartedly. That was what I wanted to do. Caleb was sure God would give him all the victory he needed to achieve his goal, and I knew I wanted to trust the Lord in the same way. Basically, I wanted to live on the Mount of Transfiguration!

During the first twelve years at Nebobongo, we watched God do some amazing things. The small village had grown up and expanded around the church. Pastor Agoya, and his wife Taadi, worked tirelessly amongst the nursing students, the hospital patients and their relatives. Yandibio transformed the primary school, teaching some 170 children in four grades. Mama Damaris cared for orphaned babies with endless love and patience. Mangadima and I trained twelve male students every year to be paramedical workers who carried the main load of an ever-expanding hospital. When qualified, they staffed some ten small rural hospitals and forty or fifty dispensaries and clinics. Thousands of patients were treated every year, hundreds undergoing urgently needed surgical interventions. Mud and thatch buildings were slowly replaced by brick ones with permanent roofing. All our young people became enthusiastic members of our Campaigner Clan. Students played football with energy (even if not with a great deal of knowledge of rules!) and all ages joined together in a church choir.

We were a happy family. God graciously sent revival into our midst during the early years together, and that cemented our relationships one with another. There was little or no consciousness of colour differences. We shared all we had and grew together spiritually through many difficulties and frustrations, as well as through the good times.

It is true that there were some gravely ill patients whom we could not help, empty shops that could not provide needed building or school supplies, a broken down truck that taxed our





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ingenuity to keep it on the road. There was always the urgent need to respect the national people and their customs, whilst seeking to train them in good medical practice, and the urgent need to understand and keep industrial law as we handled workmen and nurses, on minimal finances. Then there was the urgent need to keep healthy, despite carrying an enormous workload and heavy responsibilities. Yes, there *were* difficulties and frustrations, and so many urgent needs. But we grew spiritually through them all, and the times of joy and blessing outweighed the problem times.

In 1960, handing over control of the country from Belgian officials to Congolese nationals caused enormous hardships and much misunderstanding. Foreigners were often barely tolerated. All leadership needed to be passed to nationals, even when there was no-one trained to carry such responsibility. There was mutiny in the national Congolese army, a breakdown of all communications, emptying shops and an almost total lack of supplies of food or medicines. Yet we worked our way through another four years of mounting difficulties, and God once again wonderfully undertook for us.

Suddenly, in 1964, we were engulfed in civil war. Guerrilla soldiers took over and cruelty reigned. Thousands were killed senselessly. Infrastructure was needlessly destroyed. Schools had to close. Hospitals could hardly cope with the influx of the seriously wounded, with minimal stocks of anaesthetics or antibiotics. Yet through the whole 18 months of mindless tyranny, the church grew. Many congregations more than doubled! Christians took every opportunity to share the gospel with terrified villagers and marauding soldiers alike. 'How is it you are not afraid?' they were often asked, by the amazed population. And they were quick to share the Good News of Jesus Christ on each occasion.

After five months of captivity I, along with most other missionaries in our area, were rescued and flown to our home countries to recover. During the ensuing 14 months, I wrote *Give me this mountain*, the first part of my autobiography, that





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tells my story up to that moment in 1965. And the discipline of writing helped to clear my heart and mind of the trauma of the months of captivity.

At last, news trickled out that the national army, strengthened by fifty mercenary soldiers (mostly from South Africa), were liberating our area. Peace was slowly being restored and letters began to come to us from our local African leaders. Would we ever consider going back to help them recover from the devastation? It was so thrilling to realise that they *wanted* us back, that the way was opening up to make our return possible. We heard that 'everything' had been destroyed: buildings, equipment, supplies, hospital, schools and homes. We hoped they were exaggerating. Could we face the mammoth task of reconstruction, knowing that it could all happen again? My excitement became tinged with doubts. Could I mentally and spiritually stand up to the strain of all that would be involved in returning? Had I known all that the next seven years would include, I might well have chosen not to go. But God mercifully hid the details from our eyes! And He filled us with His peace and the assurance of His protection as we returned.

During those 14 months at home the Lord started to re-focus my heart from the ever-deep desire to live on the mountain-tops, to the realisation that God's work is mostly done in the valleys, doubtless spurred on by the vision given on the mountain but, in practice, turning that vision into reality in the valley. When we returned to Congo in 1966, we found the rumours were basically true. Rebel forces *had* destroyed 90 percent of all we had built at Nebobongo in the previous twelve years. It was clear that we would have to re-build and start all over again. But then came the surprising direction to leave Nebobongo and go 450 miles to the east, to re-start the work in the valley at Nyankunde.

At Nyankunde, on the foothills of the Ruwenzori mountains, above the treeline and out of the endless forest, there were huge views and a much better climate. Five missionary societies agreed to join forces and start a new, larger, better-equipped hospital,





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with a Government-recognised college to train national medical and paramedical workers. Dr Carl Becker, a seasoned Africa Inland Mission (AIM) missionary, and I had dreamed of such a joint venture for several years. Suddenly, it was as though the civil war with all its destruction had precipitated a fulfilment of the vision. Dr Becker would run the hospital and the multiple medical services that would be involved, and I would run the training college. The team grew around us. Three or four other doctors joined us, several American and Swiss nurses, and eventually one other English nurse/midwife tutor. The Government encouraged us to go ahead and develop the work, though no-one was willing to put their signature to an official document! Richard Dix and his team made bricks and put up buildings. Dr Becker and his team saw and treated nearly 1,000 outpatients every day. And I, with a small team, taught student boys from all over the north-east of Congo and Rwanda to become the medical-evangelists that were so urgently needed. But this did not happen overnight!

The land we were given was an overgrown valley, rough brambles and wild elephant grasses growing out of a thick layer of black mud! Dr Becker had his vision already fairly clearly in his mind and heart. Waving his hand up the valley he told me I could have some four to five acres of it to develop the college. I paced it all out, stuck flags in the four corners then clambered up the hillside and looked down on 'my' valley and asked God to give me a vision of the college rather than just a vision of a valley full of mud. By modern radio and ancient bush-telegraph, we sent out messages to invite students, both men and women, who had finished at least one year of secondary school education, and who had a desire to serve the population in medical work, to turn up. The first group arrived in early August 1966 – expectant, yet also suspicious. Some were proud and a little disdainful, others were shy and a little fearful.

Where was the college they had come to join? 'Over there,' I answered, as nonchalantly as I could manage, waving an arm up





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the mountain slopes. And the dormitories? 'Also there,' I declared. As they realised that there was no college and no dormitories... 'You build, I'll teach!' I challenged them. It took them 24 hours to take in my preposterous suggestion that they should take their shirts off, clear and weed, dig and shovel, cut down trees, build, roof and thatch their own school, village, classrooms, dining hall and dormitories. But eventually they agreed, and together we did it. In October 1966, we started classes. Two years later, and every year afterwards, a group entered for Government exams, passed, and were awarded the coveted certificates.

Of course, during the next seven years, there were exasperating situations, when students pitted their strength against mine. They wanted better meals. 'OK, provide your own!' I told them. They wanted better subsidies for their fees. 'OK, I'll withdraw what I put in every week, and you can find your own!' Once or twice, the rebellion was more serious, and it took all our skill and prayers to bring them round to accept God's discipline, as well as His love and grace. There were frustrations, as when the needed roofing nails did not come in time to complete the roof before the rainy season started, and when paint eventually arrived from the 'city', some 500 miles west, with three of the twelve tins filled with water. But slowly, our valley turned into a well-respected, Government-accepted college. Our vision became a reality.

Then I began to realise that I owed it to my brother and younger sisters – all married with teenage children – to take my share of the responsibility of caring for our dear mother. At the same time, my own physical strength was severely tested by several bouts of tropical fevers. Besides that, my nervous energy was running low, so often tested as it was by mindless bureaucracy or sometimes brutal harassment. The Trades' Union was always ready to pounce and cause unpleasantness if a workman complained of wrongful dismissal or some such thing. Soldiers stopped us every ten or 12 miles on the road to town to 'inspect' our vehicle or our paperwork. Students became less and less prepared to





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obey 'foreign' leadership and threatened to report us to the local authority over almost anything that displeased them.

I had been nearly seven years at Nyankunde, helping to build the College, writing all the course material for classes, caring for 72 young men each year, as we trained them to take their place in the emerging health service in North-eastern Congo. Was it, perhaps, time to take a break? But how could I go home and leave the College without a director, the Government having legislated in 1966 that only a medical doctor with ten years experience in the Congo could be accepted as director of a nurses' training college? Much prayer was made, then my Mission agreed to my taking an extended furlough if someone could be found to replace me at Nyankunde. Just then two things happened! The Government changed its insistence on the ten years experience in the Congo clause, and two recently married doctors, Philip and Nancy Wood, applied to WEC to work at Nyankunde. God's amazing and perfect timing was displayed once again!

I left Congo at the end of September 1973, and came home to the UK to help care for my mother for as long as she needed me. We holidayed together in Cornwall, and we were given rooms on the ground floor of our WEC Headquarters, near London. Many were willing and able to help me to care for Mother in the way she deserved. She and I were both happy and rested. The Mission asked me to take a certain number of deputation meetings for them, particularly to challenge university Christian Unions and church youth groups with the enormous needs of two-thirds of our world to hear the gospel. And the Lord graciously blessed in these. At the same time, I wrote *He Gave Us a Valley*, the second part of my autobiography.

Then the invitation came from USA Mission Headquarters to go and take a series of meetings for them, all over the States and Canada. After prayerful consideration, and discussion with my mother, Mission leadership and my brother and sisters, it was agreed that I should go. In September 1975, I left for that long tour on the other side of the Atlantic. Nine days after my





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arrival in USA, my brother rang to tell me our mother was dying. She died on the tenth. I was not there. My heart felt bruised. Why had I left her? I had returned from Congo in order to be with my mother when she needed me. If God knew He was taking her home, why did He allow me to leave her just then? Somehow I was enabled to keep going through the tour. Then, early in February 1976, I discovered the lump. I had to come to terms with the fact that this might well signal the end of my missionary involvement. What next? At that moment, still in the USA, I received the annual report from the church in our part of the Congo, in which the leaders spelt out their need of a missionary to train their pastors, using French as the teaching medium. Previously, all teaching had been in Swahili or Bangala. Having written to the church (without explaining my reasoning) to offer to fulfil that need for a three-year term, I received no answer and the silence hurt. I felt unwanted, almost rejected. Years later, I heard that they *had* replied, and were surprised that I never wrote again to them. Their letter had gone astray.

Throughout eight years in training (1945-53) and the first twelve years in Congo (1953-65), I prayed to God that He would Give me this mountain!. Then seven years back in Congo at Nyankunde (1966-73) and two years at our headquarters caring for Mother (1973-75), He taught me that His work is done down in the valleys. 'He gave us a valley!', and now He was saying, 'Make this valley full of ditches!'

So I was to learn to go deeper down, to 'dig ditches', that were often unseen and unrecognised by others, but which God promised to fill with blessing for others. My first instinct was, 'OK, God, I'll dig you a Suez Canal!' but that was not what He asked for! My Lord wanted just daily, small obediences; He wanted me to do whatever needed to be done next, without needing to be thanked or recognised, without a pedestal or a halo. Some might even question my continuing right to be called a missionary as I had no particular sphere of service and no proper job description. Was I willing to be insecure, perhaps





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lonely, often away on travels with unknown people? Fortunately He did not fill out the picture too much at the start, or I might well have backed off! Had the Lord told Moses at the time of the vision of the burning bush all about the ten plagues and Pharaoh's obstinacy, and all about the grumblings and complainings of the Israelite people, possibly Moses would never have accepted God's call to go back to Egypt and deliver His people from the cruel hand of the Egyptian oppressor. No, God just told him at the outset that He was sending him to lead His people to the promised land. That was all. And that vision of the end of the story kept Moses going when the way seemed hard and long.

'You dig the ditch daily: I will fill it daily.'

So the next stage of my life's journey was established on that promise. That it might not be easy, that there might well be heartaches and deep problems on route, I was well aware. He did not promise me a bed of roses without thorns. But He did promise me that others would be blessed if I would obey and trust Him.