

THE BEAUTIFUL CITY

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The plane collided with the runway, and after a few bumps became one with the earth. It slowed and coasted the rest of the way. The runway was surrounded by safari, dotted with acacia trees. Wandering amidst the grassy plane were animals of all sorts: giraffes mingled with tigers, and lions with zebras. As we stepped out of the plane, the animals gathered in a circle and began to sing the "Circle of Life."

At least that is how I imagined it when I heard that I would be going to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to work with kids who live on the street. My knowledge of Africa came from the *Lion King* and documentaries on isolated tribal groups. I wondered how I would share the gospel working with what I imagined to be impossible language and cultural barriers. But, every preconceived notion I had flew out the window when the wheels collided with the runway, and the city of Addis Ababa, not a herd of animals, greeted us.

As we grabbed our bags and headed towards our van, I was taken aback with what awaited me on the other side of the airport doors. The second we stepped out, there was a crowd of people competing to earn a little money and carry our bags. There were hands reaching to grab our stuff because once they touched it, we had to pay for their services. With an iron-grip on our suitcases, we pushed through the crowds and made it to our driver, Tasfaye.

Addis Ababa overwhelmed my senses. Everywhere I looked there were masses of people walking on the sidewalks and streets and there were cars traveling bumper-to-bumper weaving in between animals, people, and oncoming traffic. Stop signs were only a suggestion, making the many roundabouts and intersections a jigsaw puzzle. No space was left untouched, every building covered in advertisements for the latest hairstyles and for the “refreshingly different” Cola, *Jinga*. My stomach was churning. The road we were on was more potholes than pavement. I took in a new smell every 100 yards as we passed the dump that many people called home, drove through a herd of cattle that was running wild in the road, and then passed a meat shack that explained why the cows were running. But the overwhelming stench was the diesel that hung in the air. I viewed everything through a lens of black smog. Stuck behind a diesel-belching dump truck, I could see the black smoke filling the van. Competing for our attention were the sounds of horns, goats, and people shouting “foreign-gees, hello, how you, what you doing, give me all you money.” This was definitely not the Africa I had pictured.

But as the overwhelming became normal I began to notice the people. Though I was surrounded by them, I had never noticed who they were. Everywhere people were begging. To make money, kids were selling gum and tooth brushes. But they were invisible to me because I had always been taught to avoid eye contact and uncomfortable situations. Then I began to make friends.

Abel loved to dance the robot and sing “Boom Boom Pow”. He loved to learn, especially during Bible time. One day he brought in some bread he had bought on the streets and he gave a piece to every boy before he took the little piece that was left. Our translator, Taye, said he was going to grow up and be a preacher. He was full of life. But Abel was dying. He was orphaned by AIDS, and the very disease that killed his parents will also one day take his life. The medicine he needs is free, but the authorities will not give it to a child without his parent. And to make matters worse, the AIDS that is destroying his body has also destroyed his chance at having a family. He is a risk. Anyone who takes him in risks getting the disease as well. So he lives on the streets and sells gum and cheap bracelets to support himself. Every day I passed twenty Abels.

Then there was Aylab. Aylab drove me crazy. He never paid attention, always distracting someone else. He cheated when we played games, always starting fights. But, for some reason I felt compassion for Aylab. He just wanted attention. And as I started to pay him attention, I began to see him as more than a nuisance. Although no one had ever shown him love, he loved to play soccer (he was really good at it), he loved to make people laugh, and he loved to dance. Aylab had been sent to Addis to live with his aunt; however, his aunt didn’t want him so she sent him to live on the streets. He was addicted to street life and probably alcohol, too. My heart broke for this boy who didn’t know how to love people. I became determined to love him even when he was unlovable. Some days we thought he was changing, then

the next day he would punch someone, make faces during the lesson, and stare at me defiantly. But, the day that we had to say goodbye, I hugged him and told him I loved him, and when I looked at him he was crying.

Every day was a day of tears. Sometimes they were tears of joy, others of sorrow. We tried to meet with each of the boys to hear their stories and to pray with them.



We got to talk with Ezideen, who when we first met him was unwavering in his faith to Islam. One day the kids received shirts from a local church, but Ezideen wouldn't accept his because on it was the name of Jesus. He would neither sing the songs with us nor recite the verse. But, he was listening. During our meeting with him, he told us he wanted to change his name from a Muslim name to a Christian one. He told us he believed Christ had died for his sins and saved him. The day before we left, he gave us a note saying he was praying for us just as we had been praying for him. Our last meeting was with Seiyu. Seiyu was on the streets because his parents were too old to take care of him. With no one to care for him, he was destined to a life on the street. He told us he had no hope. Everyone, including our translator, was in tears as we prayed for Seiyu to find the One who gives hope.

As I learned persons' names, I began to see that their stories were like mine. Everyone has a broken story. Yet even with this brokenness, people want to be seen and they want to be known. It was easy for me to become overwhelmed by all of the Abels, Aylabs, and Seiyus walking the streets of Addis. But, as I began to see like Jesus, I saw beauty. The beauty of Abel's story is that he has been adopted into God's family. He is no longer fatherless, and one day, he will be made new: no more AIDS. That is the beauty of the gospel. It is the beauty of my story. Through His grace, God makes the wrecked beautiful. And my hope is that the bruised and broken people of Addis will become the beautiful city.