

*Gems and the Gospel*  
*A Missionary Short Story from the African Bush*

By Kevin L. Brosnan

August, 2004

The events of this story took place in August, 2004. In teaching this story it will be helpful to display and reference a large map of southern Africa.

SEGMENT ONE – A FRIGHTENING NIGHT ON THE BANKS OF THE ZAMBEZI

What do emeralds, an elephant, a bicycle brake, tsetse flies, and a funeral have in common? They all played a role in our 4,000-mile trek from Johannesburg, South Africa, into the remote areas of northeastern Zambia near Malawi and Tanzania. This epic journey had been months in the making. Our nine-year-old Land Rover would be put to the test over long stretches, which are only accessible to four-wheel-drive vehicles in the dry season. With no phones or service stations, proper preparations were critical. The check list was complete: tools, medical supplies, drinking water, diesel containers, oil, camping gear, gifts for our Zambian national, and religious literature. The air seemed charged with excitement and anticipation as my fifteen-year-old son, Daniel, Luke Childs, an intern from Ambassador Baptist College, and I finally drove away from our Johannesburg home at 2:15 am, Monday, July 19. With some reassuring words, I said goodbye to my wife, family, church, and everything common and convenient.

We prayed for safety in travel, for the mechanical operation of the vehicle, and for God's power in ministry. We did not anticipate that God would have good reasons not to fully answer that prayer. None of us realized just how much He would rearrange our carefully planned, thirteen-day missionary journey! After prayer, I made a statement to Daniel and Luke, which turned out to contain a prophetic element. I explained to these young men that the trip has a number of known purposes and, no doubt, some yet unknown divine purposes. Our known purposes could be summarized in two words, *assistance* and *survey*.

Primarily we planned to encourage and assist the Samson Chilembo family. The Chilembos are members of our Johannesburg church, who have relocated in Livingstone, Zambia, seven hundred miles north of Johannesburg. They want to team up with a missionary to start the Falls Baptist Church of Livingstone. Samson is developing various business interests that will allow him to become financially self-sufficient, while being able to devote his focus on ministry. These business interests are three-fold: a medical clinic, gem mines, and a campground and conference center in the Lake Kariba area.

Our trip began at an odd hour for a good reason. We had to be at the Limpopo River when the border post opened into Botswana at 8 a.m. if we hoped to reach the Zambezi ferry crossing into Zambia before it closed at 6 p.m. This would allow us to cover the seven hundred miles to Livingstone by Monday evening. The monotony of skirting along the eastern edge of the Kalahari Desert was broken by the occasional sighting of an elephant or giraffe. But, despite our best efforts, we could not cross Botswana fast enough to compensate for delays at the South African border. We were an hour late for the ferry crossing and were forced to camp near the banks of the Zambezi on the northern border of Botswana. The Zambezi is one of the three great rivers of Africa. Like the Nile and Congo rivers, it is home

to more than fish. It is known for its abundance of crocodiles and hippopotami. One should always approach the river carefully and never assume that it is safe to enter the water. Both crocodiles and hippos can stay submerged for prolonged periods. As darkness descended the African bush seemed to come alive with the sounds of unfamiliar wildlife. Most distinct was the loud grunts of the hippos which came from all directions. A hippo's grunt is really a series of grunts which build in volume and length to a frightening crescendo. They made my bones rattle. They will certainly unnerve anyone unfamiliar with the experience. Only a lion's roar is more fearsome in the black of night. I had been warned not to set up our tent on a hippo path as hippos would rather trample the tent and its occupants than veer from their intended course. But, I just couldn't discern a path. The prints of wildlife were etched on every parcel of open ground. We finally picked what we thought was a suitable spot and pitched our tents. Fatigue soon overcame our apprehensions and we all drifted off to sleep, trusting the Lord to turn our nylon tent into a fortress of safety.

## SEGMENT TWO – A CONVERT AND A QUEST

We awoke early and the first light of a new day revealed numerous fresh prints around our tent, demonstrating that we all blissfully slept through a flurry of nocturnal activity.

By 6 a.m. we had broken camp and were first in the queue to clear Botswana immigration and customs. However, our diligence was not rewarded, for we found that the ferry had broken down the previous afternoon. Confusion reigned as the hours passed. Just as we were considering another route through the Chobe and Namibia, we received a hand-delivered message, written on one of our own church memo pads. Samson, who spent the night on the Zambian side of the Zambezi, wrote briefly, "Stay put." Luke's powerful binoculars allowed us to observe the slow and seemingly chaotic progress of repairs to the ferry pontoon on the other side of the great river. Smoke, the distant roar of the engine, and finally the movement of the ferry rewarded our patience. We were across the Zambezi and in Livingstone before dusk on Tuesday. We lost a day but still believed we could return to Johannesburg before the second Sunday.

Our delay at the Zambezi was frustrating, but purposeful. It allowed Samson to cross paths with an influential man from the Lake Kariba area. Each man had been looking for the other for some months, and God used the ferry breakdown to bring them together. This man is in a position to help Samson obtain valuable property around Lake Kariba, which has value for mining, tourism, and for use as a Christian campground and conference center.

Our one day in Livingstone allowed us to encourage the Chilembos toward evangelism and discipleship ministry, assess the progress of their medical clinic, and visit the magnificent Victoria Falls, which divides Zambia from Zimbabwe. Words cannot describe the thunderous beauty of Victoria Falls!

Samson also decided to take us to visit a man named Raymond, because he is the one man Samson most desires to see saved. Raymond has a clear view of Victoria Falls from his home, so Samson used this as an excuse for taking us to visit him. We determined that I would witness to Raymond only if he responded favorably to some leading questions and expressed a genuine desire to hear the Gospel. Seldom have I witnessed to a grown man whose heart was so prepared for the Gospel. Raymond eagerly invited me into his home and asked me to share the Gospel with him. I cut no corners in my presentation, and Raymond, although religious, readily acknowledged his lost condition and need for Christ alone as Savior. I was able to challenge him regarding proper Christian fellowship and spiritual growth. His greatest concern was for someone to come back and witness to his wife. The responsibility for further witness and discipleship will fall upon the Chilembos. We all thanked God for this great answer to prayer and determined that Raymond's salvation must have been one of the unknown purposes for our trip.

Samson's uncles and aunts told him some months ago of a remote area where his great-grandfather had been chief, an area surrounded by mountains rich in semi-precious gems. Samson, hopeful to have some rights to the minerals in these mountains, set out four months ago to discover the lands of his ancestors. He embarked on his 1,500-mile journey with little money and no vehicle or provisions. Exposed to the elements and at the mercy of strangers, Samson was forced to trust his Savior for daily safety and nourishment. Not knowing the name or exact location of the village, he wandered through areas of Tanzania, Malawi, and Zambia, pursuing each rumor or hunch to its dead end. Samson's soul fell into despair one

evening as he suffered with a bout of malaria, hadn't eaten in two days, and had nowhere to sleep but under the stars. He began to wonder whether he would ever find his ancestral home or even if he would be able to make his way back to his family in Livingstone.

### SEGMENT THREE – FEARFUL ENCOUNTERS

Both Samson and the villagers were amazed when, in the providence of God, he stumbled into the village of Enchuka in northeastern Zambia. The headmen and elders gathered around in disbelief as a man claiming the name of Chilembo entered their midst. The headman, also named Chilembo, quizzed Samson about the names of his parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. Once convinced, the people stood around him in awe as the headman proclaimed that Samson should rightfully be the chief of their villages. They confirmed the legend that his great-grandfather was chief of the region and that Samson does indeed have land rights in the area. The headman took Samson privately to several remote locations where semi-precious stones have been excavated. He showed him the burial grounds of his ancestors and proclaimed that the mountains surrounding the village of Toawe are now Samson's property, a decision that will be legally formalized in Lusaka. Samson asked the villagers to begin mining the area and promised that he would return someday with white men. While they could not deny his identity, no one believed he would actually return with white men, for no white man had ever stepped foot in their villages.

Now, four months later, and much better equipped, Samson promises to guide us to one of the most remote and inaccessible areas of the African continent. The prospect of taking the Gospel to villages where no white man has ever stood overcame all my apprehensions. The second phase of our trip from Livingstone to Toawe retraced Samson's earlier journey. We left civilization behind as we passed Lusaka, the capital, and set out ever deeper into the African bush. At this point, we became increasingly thankful for people's prayers, Samson's familiarity with the people and languages, and our GPS navigation. We crossed the great Luangwa River, which meanders through some of the most untamed areas of Africa, particularly the South and North Luanga National Parks. Every stretch of this river contained an abundance of hippos and crocodiles. We passed large herds of elephant and buffalo. Twice we encountered stubborn elephants, which seemed to believe the road was for their use, not ours. They were wrong in theory but absolutely correct in practice.

Supper time was always a highlight of our day. It was a time to relax and be free from the confines of the Land Rover, which had become our home. Luke, our chef, had the remarkable ability to transform canned foods into a taste of home. And, to his credit, I must say he spared no effort in planning and preparation. The rest of us usually pitched the tents as he labored over the paraffin stove. With the work completed, we all huddled around the stove. Its light illuminated our faces as ghostly shadows in the darkness. "Who is in the bush?" I wondered as we all heard the rustling of dead leaves and small shrubs. A quick, almost unconscious roll call revealed all present. What then spies us from the darkness? I couldn't help thinking about the prowling leopard we had seen earlier that evening. A glance into each person's face revealed a common realization. It's big and it's close! Then, we saw it. I can't now recall whether I first saw tusks, trunk, or massive body, but the elephant, now a mere fifteen yards away, was making his way through our camp. We could clearly make out its massive features in the light of a full moon. How thankful I was that neither Luke nor Daniel were in their tent, for the gargantuan creature was brushing against it. Will he destroy the tent? Or, worse yet, will he get tangled in the anchoring ropes and go on a rampage? Who knows what his reaction might be? We knew we would be helpless to escape his fury. Even the Land Rover could offer only a facade of safety against such determined strength. The elephant, not the least intimidated by our presence, proceeded toward us. Thankfully, his preferred path to the river led him to the left of our other tent, which served as a buffer between the behemoth and us. Although the whole ordeal probably transpired in a mere two

minutes, the terror and excitement of the moment is forever frozen in our memories. Our adrenaline was still running high when a less intimidating giraffe followed the same course some minutes later, providing entertainment for our meal.

I was awakened the next morning by the scream of an elephant, the grunts of hippos, and the faint, but distinct, sound of the heavy breathing of a lion, which I surmised was some two hundred yards away. Some of the roads in this region could be described as desolate paths, flanked on either side by tall grass and bush. On one occasion we backtracked, believing that we were surely not on a road. However, we proceeded after the villagers assured us that the mountain path would eventually improve after crossing three streams. These roads were so desolate that we actually cooked our meal in the center of the road one evening. Our flashlights revealed distant eyes in the bush, but our hunger overcame any apprehensions regarding our vulnerability. The jungle was so dense that we struggled to find a place to pitch our tents. The experiences of these days formed vivid memories, which I will one day share with my grandchildren.

We arrived in the town of Chipata on Sunday. Here we were able to take in new supplies and visit Samson's mother and terminally ill brother. Knowing my apprehension at the vast cultural divide, Samson reassuringly instructed, "Do exactly what I do, nothing more and nothing less." I was thankful for the opportunity to observe but concerned about causing offence at such a sensitive time. I followed Samson into the small, dark hut, where we sat down on a grass mat. There his brother lay, almost lifeless, surrounded by his wife, children, and mother. I felt uncomfortable as the minutes passed. It seemed to me that no one was saying or doing anything. I was tempted to break the silence but remembered Samson's admonition. Finally, Samson began to speak in hushed tones. While I couldn't understand a word, I surmised that he was first inquiring about his brother's condition. Then, it seemed he was explaining his own circumstances and introducing me. Finally, a word I understood - my own name.

Late Sunday we set out north for Lundazi and Chama. Progress was slow on the deplorable roads as we alternated drivers throughout the night. The hours passed quickly as we shared devotional thoughts and sang every hymn we could think of. Samson's sister, who lives in Chama, was quite surprised when we arrived at her home on Monday morning. News spread quickly that white people were in Chama. Daniel, Luke, and I were fast asleep that morning when the local immigration officer arrived, feeling very official and important to have the opportunity to examine some American passports. Samson, however, would not allow him to wake us, and we only learned the next day that he had looked over our documents and officially recorded our visit in the "records office" at "city hall." Samson used the morning to meet with several people who mined the local hills for semi-precious stones.

Tsetse flies everywhere! Swarms of them! How vicious and resilient are these carnivorous little beasts! "Why have we stopped?" I inquired. "Quickly, let's go before these tsetse flies devour us," I commanded Daniel, who happened to be behind the wheel at the time of this unforeseen turn of events. Then came the words I most dreaded to hear, "Sorry, Dad, but there seems to be something wrong with the vehicle." It was late afternoon on Monday, and we were twenty miles from the most remote destination of our entire trip, the village of Enchuka. Even a gas station was so far away that we were carrying two extra containers of diesel. My nightmare came true. We were stranded in the middle of a tsetse-infested game reserve somewhere along the border of Zambia and Malawi. "Lord, help us," I quickly prayed, as we all instinctively rolled up the windows and began murdering every remaining tsetse in the cab.

## SEGMENT FOUR – STRANDED IN THE HEART OF AFRICA

How it could possibly help I didn't know, but it just seemed proper to look under the hood, which was now blackened with a mass of tsetse flies. A quick examination deepened the ominous feeling that was beginning to grip my soul. The clutch was not working, and there was absolutely nothing we could do about it. It seemed we only had two options. We could wait inside the cab for hours or days for a vehicle to come by, or we could force the transmission into first gear and drive on. The tsetse flies seemed to prefer the former option, so we chose the latter and finally coasted into Enchuka at dusk.

Like the soldiers in Acts 12, there was "no small stir" among the villagers at our arrival. While I don't know a word of Tumbuka, I'm sure I have heard every exclamatory remark in the language. However, I was confused by the mood. It seemed the villagers, especially the headman, were avoiding Luke, Daniel, and me. Is it because we are the first white people to ever step foot in their village? Or was there some other problem? Did I need to be concerned? Was our safety at risk? I watched with the aid of a full moon as the headman approached me. He took a seat directly in front of me and faced me. He bowed his head and wrapped both arms over it. I was puzzled by this gesture, which lasted for some time. Then, he left.

How thankful I was for Samson's presence. Throughout the trip he had served as guide and translator. Once again he set our minds at ease. He explained that the headman was severely embarrassed by our arrival. The villagers were all saying that Samson's return with white people proves that he is a man of his word and that they are all liars. For, since Samson's first visit, they had not mined any semi-precious gems from the surrounding mountains. Some feared the black magic of the witchdoctor as retribution for any sudden prosperity they might gain from their efforts. Others just didn't believe Samson would return with white men.

It seemed the headman was relieved to have an opportunity to redeem himself when he heard of our mechanical problem. He was up at the crack of dawn, dressed in his official headman attire, including a colorful hat, determined to ride his bicycle as far as necessary to find a mechanic. He promised he would return with a mechanic that same day. After repairing his tire with needle and thread and with two oranges from our dwindling food supply, he set out under a hot African sun for some distant relic of civilization. I must admit that, although I appreciated his monumental effort, I doubted whether any good would come of it. There was at least some comfort in knowing that something was being done. Many hours passed, and amid the sounds of crackling wood and muted conversations in Tumbuka, I thought I heard the distinct sound of a motor vehicle. Yes, it's true. The headlights were now piercing the early evening darkness. True to his word, the headman returned after dark in a pick-up truck with a Malawian mechanic. I was a bit dismayed when the mechanic asked me if I had any tools, but before long I observed an air of confidence and expertise that set my mind at ease. The mechanic worked all through the night, dismantling the clutch housing. He almost seemed to enjoy working with my tools. He kept commenting on how wonderful it was that my wrenches didn't bend. When I expressed my appreciation, he made it clear that he only came because of the headman's authority. I was tempted to watch his every move, but finally decided a good night's sleep was more important.

"These are my mountains," Samson declared, as he gestured his arms in a 360-degree arch. "My heritage lies in this ground, in the minerals it contains: emeralds, sapphires, aquamarines, and garnets." "The horizon is his! What untapped wealth awaits him here!" I thought. Oh, what a double blessing if the Lord would open this area to the Gospel while

allowing Samson to support himself with its precious minerals! We had just hiked several miles to the village of Toawe, which formed the central hub of authority in former times when Samson's great-grandfather ruled as chief. Samson explained that the sparkling surface rock is only the low-grade upper level, which conceals the more valuable stones. Daniel and Luke enjoyed rummaging for samples. Each took some low-grade emeralds as souvenirs. Perhaps this was their reward for the effort of the hike. But for me, the historical significance of the moment more than compensated for the toil of the trail. We had decided to take this several-hour hike through the jungle from Enchuka to Toawe while we were waiting for the headman to return from Malawi. I could tell that Samson was pleased that his own pastor was the first white person ever to step foot in Toawe. While there was no immediate change, both Samson and I believed in that moment that my presence there symbolized a turning point from the past darkness of ancestral worship and fear of witchdoctors to a future enlightened by the light of the Gospel. Neither of us realized just how soon the penetrating power of the Gospel would manifest itself at the very core of Satan's grip.

## SEGMENT FIVE – PREVAILING UPON THE GATES OF HELL

As the hours turned to days and our food and water supplies dwindled, I wondered how and when our vehicle would be repaired. When will we finally leave Enchuka? More importantly, I wondered what divine purposes necessitated our delay and increasing discomfort. I see nothing good in this situation. Our plans to conduct a youth activity in Chipata are lost. Our appointment in a village south of Lundazi is missed. Samson's promise to revisit his brother in Chipata is broken. My commitment to preach in our church in Johannesburg on Sunday cannot be kept. Soon our families in Johannesburg will become concerned. But how could we set aside their fears when they don't even know where we are? I was convicted some time later with the biblical phrase "Oh, ye of little faith." Only at the end of our trial did the Lord reveal His purpose for our delay and demonstrate how easily He could get us back on the road, albeit by the instrumentality of a bicycle brake.

The repair of the Land Rover was simple enough - that is, in Johannesburg. The clutch fork needed to be replaced. Since that was not an option, our mechanic set out for Malawi again, with the promise to weld the clutch fork and return in one day. How thankful we all were when the Malawian mechanic returned late the next evening! He was working when I went to bed, and he was working when I awoke on the morning of our third day in Enchuka. The look on his face and the manner of his movements assured me that he had labored throughout the night.

Could we possibly still make Johannesburg by Sunday? I began to scheme. Then came the announcement. I hoped it lost something in translation, but the look on Samson's face assured me that I got it straight. Everything was reassembled, and the clutch still didn't work. I confess to faithless musing: "Lord, why are you doing this to me? Don't you know how disgusting this boiled local water tastes? It's like drinking smoke. From now on we have to live on semma and peanuts. Lord, don't you know how badly they need me in Johannesburg?"

Before my train of thought could slip any further, the mechanic enthusiastically declared that he could fix the clutch. What magic does he have up his sleeve? This I had to see. "Do you have a hacksaw?" he asked. "A blade only," I replied. How fortunate that the headman had a hacksaw without a blade. I watched as the mechanic pulled an aluminum rod from the brake of one of the village bicycles. (These bikes use rods rather than cables.) He then compared the rod with a cast iron, pestle-type part from the clutch mechanism. He explained that the unconformity of the weld didn't fit properly with the hydraulic piston rod of the clutch mechanism. He confidently assured us that the aluminum rod would compensate for this problem sufficiently to take us the 1,500 miles to Johannesburg.

Just then I noticed Samson and Austin off by themselves. It thrilled my heart to see a gospel tract in Samson's hand. Had the Lord opened an opportunity for Samson to witness to the headman's oldest son? Austin was the only person, apart from the headman, who spoke English. Austin's English, unlike his father's broken speech, was fluent. Moments later Samson came to me and explained that Austin wants me to explain the good news. Religious syncretism is always my key concern in Africa, where people are so quick to "add" Jesus into their own religious systems. A critical moment came when I asked Austin, "Up to this point in your life, what have you been trusting for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life?" Without a moment's hesitation, he answered, "The witchdoctor and my ancestors." After a thorough presentation of the key elements of the Gospel, I asked Austin some more

questions. He readily acknowledged his lost condition and need for Christ. I invited him to pray and was relieved that he prayed in English. I will never forget how resolutely he renounced his dependence upon the witchdoctor and ancestors and fully embraced the finished work of Christ. His first question was "How can I share this great message with my people?" He asked for a supply of tracts and asked if he could translate the tract into Tumbuka, the language of northeastern Zambia and Malawi. He spent the next two hours translating our "Good News" tract. Moments after this divine purpose had been accomplished the mechanic asked me to test drive the Land Rover. Within minutes we were on our way back to civilization, rejoicing in the plans and purposes of God and praying for the furtherance of the Gospel to the Tumbuka-speaking people.

"This must be what hell sounds like," I thought, as we pulled up to the hut. Weeping and wailing. Unearthly tones. Utter despair. Even before we could exit our vehicle, Samson and I heard the sounds of the mourning of the heathen. I immediately thought of the verse in 1 Thess. 4:13, "But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others which have no hope." The experience reminded me again of the urgency of our purposes and the justification for our sacrifices. Minutes passed as Samson and I sat once again on the grass mat in the same dark hut in Chipata. Only now, our ears ached at the shriek of wailing, which seemed to intensify in the confines of the circular mud walls. Our hearts grieved as we gazed upon the now-empty mat in the center of the room, where Samson's brother had lain just five days earlier. I simultaneously felt strong feelings of pity and anger. On the one hand, I felt pity for the suffering that the superstitious darkness of countless generations continued to plague upon this poor widow. On the other hand, I felt angry that Satan's grip remains so strong upon this place so long after Christianity first came to Africa. Eventually the widow calmed down, and Samson seized the opportunity to offer some words of comfort to his sister-in-law. However, I had to endure the same uncomfortable experience when the group returned from the graveside. I remembered that Christ never preached a funeral. I remembered that He is the resurrection and the life. I wished that these people's hopelessness could be replaced by faith in Christ and the hope of the resurrection.

Samson's responsibilities required us to stay an extra day in Chipata. How good the Lord was to time our return to Chipata so that Samson could tend to the needs of his family and fulfill his responsibilities as the oldest son. Daniel and Luke used the extra time to conduct a rescheduled youth activity that afternoon. From Chipata, we were able to relay our phone number to my wife in Johannesburg, who phoned me later that evening. My soul was refreshed to hear her voice for the first time in nearly two weeks. I was relieved to know that newly arrived missionary, John Moore, could take our services in Johannesburg on Sunday. We left Chipata at 7 p.m. Saturday night and drove nonstop to Livingstone, arriving Sunday around noon. Luke, Daniel, and I left Livingstone at 4:30 a.m. on Monday and drove nonstop to Johannesburg, arriving at 10:15 p.m. Monday evening.

The African bush was more than I expected it to be. Yes, it was vast, open expanses and dense tropical jungles. Yes, it harbored large herds of distinctly African animals. But it is first a land of people. We found no place so remote that it did not contain villages and people. These are people for whom Christ died. These are people who must be reached with His Gospel. So ended our 4,000-mile missionary journey. God has opened a great and effectual door of opportunity to the Tumbuka-speaking people of northeastern Zambia. Who will dare to walk through this open door?