

PHUMLANE, PROPHET OF VENDA

(a missionary fiction loosely based on the life of pastor Godfrey Ngomane)

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This five-part story is well suited as a missionary supplement to a five-week or five-day children's program and is aimed at the primary and junior levels. Each segment is also a suitable length as a bed-time story or as part of family devotions. I have changed the names and places because of the fictitious elements of the story. While the story line is fiction, most of the events are rooted in true to life experiences during my years in Africa. These include:

1. the burning of the witch's hut by the tsongoma (witch-doctor)
2. attack of the rock python
3. Godfrey's Bible reading in the Muslim shop
4. providential meeting of the missionary and Godfrey Ngomane in the Muslim shop
5. Godfrey's training in the Bible institute
6. stabbing of a Bible institute student
7. blood and corpse in the hospital waiting room
8. ordination, commissioning, and sending by the Calvary Baptist Church of Johannesburg
9. Godfrey's ministry in the homeland of Venda
10. my presentation of a live chicken to the head man
11. the headman's open invitation to myself
12. my children playing soccer in the village
13. the headman's testimony
14. Godfrey's convert studying at the same Bible institute in Johannesburg
15. the names of places (although not the actual places) and cultural practices

OVERVIEW OF SEGMENTS:

- SEGMENT ONE - FEAR IS NO FRIEND
- SEGMENT TWO – ANSWERS WITHOUT MEANING
- SEGMENT THREE – PHUMLANE MEETS A FOREIGNER
- SEGMENT FOUR – PHUMLANE MEETS THE GOD WHO HAS ANSWERS
- SEGMENT FIVE – VENDA MEETS THE GOD WHO HAS ANSWERS

SEGMENT ONE - FEAR IS NO FRIEND

The purpose of this first segment is to provide the setting. It introduces Phumlane, the main character of the story, and acquaints the reader with insights to African lifestyle and religious thought. It presents traditional African religion as fear-based and personalizes that fear in the young heart of Phumlane.

“Why is everyone screaming?” Phumlane (fum-lon-a) asked his mother as he peered through the small door of his family’s hut. All the pre-dawn commotion in the African village of Wayeni (Why-ene-ee) had awakened and frightened Phumlane. “Look Mom,” that hut is engulfed in flames. “Isn’t that Muzi’s (Moo-zee) hut?” “Oh, please tell me my best friend is not in there!” As the first rays of morning illuminated his mother’s face, Phumlane observed the face of fear. His mother’s eyes were glossed over and her emotions seemed frozen into every contour of her face. He realized she hadn’t heard any of his questions.

Having slept in the only clothing Phumlane owned, he impulsively darted out into the crowd, which had now gathered around the crumbling hut. Every few steps introduced him to some new conversation in Tsonga (song-ga), the native language of Venda, a vast area of northeastern South Africa. Everyone was asking the same questions. How did the fire start? Is anyone in the hut? Was it an accident or did someone start the fire? One person thought he had heard screams coming from inside the hut.

Then Phumlane spotted the Wayeni elders gathering just outside the head man’s hut. The head man and elders lowered their heads as an old, tall, ornately-dressed man approached. “That must be chief Masekoti! (Mas-e-cot-ee)” Phumlane concluded. The women all bowed as the distinguished group of Wayeni leaders made their way into the headman’s hut. While Phumlane knew the risk he was taking, his love for Muzi compelled him to sneak unnoticed around the back of the hut, where he hoped to find some opening which would allow him to eavesdrop on the chief’s deliberations.

Phumlane couldn’t find any openings in the back wall so he carefully and quietly climbed onto the thatched roof, where he forced open a little observation hole. What a fearsome sight greeted his eyes! There was an angry chief Masekoti, seated on a tree stump, demanding answers from the village elders, who were all sitting on grass mats in a semi-circle around the great chief. “Is it true that this is the work of the tsongoma (san-go-ma)?” Masekoti inquired. Phumlane wondered why the witchdoctor would burn a hut. He also knew the people feared the tsongoma as much or more than the chief. They believe he can cast blessings or curses upon them. He can even tell the elders who to punish for droughts, floods, or other calamities. Just thinking about the tsongoma sent a wave of fear down Phumlane’s spine.

Phumlane’s heart was gripped by fear. What if the tsongoma burned me to death or cast some deadly curse upon me or sent a puff adder or black mamba to bite me? What would happen to me? Will my ancestors be able to help me beyond the grave? Will the spirits be kind to me or will I suffer? I hope the good gods are stronger than the bad gods. Oh, how I fear death! Oh, how I fear life! Oh, how I fear the tsongoma and chief Masekoti!

Phumlane’s thoughts were interrupted by chief Masekoti, who stood to his feet and yelled, “why has the tsongoma burned this hut?” This action so startled Phumlane that he lost his footing and nearly fell off the thatched roof of the hut. Phumlane’s movement allowed a piercing ray of sunlight to penetrate his observation hole, striking Chief Masekoti in the eyes and drawing his attention to the roof. Phumlane’s heart seemed to stop beating as he saw chief Masekoti walk over toward the hole in the roof and gaze inquisitively right up into Phumlane’s eye ball. Phumlane froze, gripped by fear. He dare not even blink. The great chief was staring right at him.

SEGMENT TWO – ANSWERS WITHOUT MEANING

The story teller may need to briefly overview last week's story to remind the children of Phumlane's predicament. The purpose of this second segment is to present Phumlane's disillusionment with the religious views of his culture and his determination to find the true God Who has answers with meaning.

[repeat this paragraph from last week] Phumlane's heart seemed to stop beating as he saw chief Masekoti walk over toward the hole in the roof and gaze inquisitively right up into Phumlane's eye ball. Phumlane froze, gripped by fear. He dare not even blink. The great chief was staring right at him.

At that very moment the tsongoma burst into the room, diverting Masekoti's attention away from Phumlane. "Yes, I ordered that hut burned. That woman was a witch and she used her powers to hurt many people. She deserved to die." Chief Masekoti now stretched out his arm and pointed his long finger directly at the tsongoma, who bowed at this gesture. "And what of her children?" the chief replied. "They have all perished. This is a wicked and cruel deed. You have taken innocent lives."

The news of Muzi's horrible death consumed Phumlane with grief. He felt a great emptiness at the loss of his best friend and wondered if Muzi was prepared for the spirit world.

Nothing mattered now. As Phumlane climbed down and started home he resolved never again to fear the tsongoma. "That is a dark power, a cruel power. The tsongoma's answers have no meaning," he thought. "He uses his power to control people. I need power to overcome fear and darkness. I need a God Who loves me." On that day Phumlane determined that he would never stop looking for the God Who loves him and has answers with meaning.

The years did not dull Phumlane's memory of that day. He never forgot Muzi. He often asked himself, "what if I were Muzi?" Sometimes Phumlane asked his friends about the God of love, but they were more interested in soccer than his strange religious ideas. His teachers were no help either. They, like his parents, feared the tsongoma and guarded their words.

Phumlane, like most of his male companions, planned to leave Wayeni after he finished grammar school. There were no jobs in the village. They would all head for the cities of South Africa. And, no city offered more allurements than Johannesburg, with its teeming millions from every corner of Africa. Some wanted to find jobs mining gold on the Witwatersrand. Others would become an apprentice in a machine shop. Some might go to the coast where they could work in the fields, harvesting pineapples or bananas. Phumlane planned to go to Johannesburg and try his luck at retail sales in an open market.

Just months before Phumlane completed his schooling, an event occurred which once again focused his attention on his quest to find the God that loves him and has answers with meaning. His uncle Thelbela (thel-be-la) invited him to assist in a python hunt. Venda is known for its large rock pythons and a single, live snake can bring a good price. Most Africans despise and fear snakes, with good reason, and Phumlane was no exception. However, he relented, and joined Thelbela on his python hunt. Thelbela believed he knew where he could find a very large python.

Pythons, unlike venomous snakes which bite their prey, pounce upon their victims rapidly and wrap around them before they can run away or fight back. The python then begins to squeeze its helpless victim until it can no longer breathe and its bones begin to crack. After the animal dies the python swallows it whole. Very large pythons have been known to eat humans in this manner.

Sure enough, Thelbela and Phumlane had tracked down a python trail and it indicated that the snake was even larger than Thelbela had hoped. The aged Thelbela was excited at the prospect of catching the largest python of his life. Thelbela and his two assistants followed one path while Phumlane followed another, which separated the two groups by some distance.

Then, it happened. Thelbela spotted the serpent half-way into his subterranean home. This was Thelbela's opportunity to catch the python by surprise. He and his two assistants pounced on the back half of the snake and pulled with all their might. What they thought was the back half of the snake turned out to be only the back fourth. Thelbela was exuberant at the sight of such a huge specimen of rock python. Slowly, the defensive creature was forced out of its hole, at which point it became aggressive. To Thelbela's dismay the python proved to be more powerful than the three men. Suddenly and inexplicably, the snake coiled around Thelbela, trapping his arms against his body and making it impossible for him to reach his knife. Thelbela pleaded for his two helpers to save him, but they ran in terror. Thelbela could feel his life being squeezed from him. Each tightening of the coils became more painful. Thelbela found he was unable to breathe or call for help. The world began to fade.

SEGMENT THREE – PHUMLANE MEETS A FOREIGNER

The story teller may need to briefly overview last week's story to remind the children of Phumlane's predicament. The purpose of this third segment is to teach God's providential care in sending the gospel to those who will receive it. It also illustrates how God uses the experiences of life to draw men to Himself.

Thelbela, abandoned by his two helpers and in the death grip of the merciless python, resigned himself to an awful fate. Unable to breath, the world around him dimmed into complete darkness as he fell into unconsciousness. Phumlane, alarmed by the irrational screams of the two fleeing men, raced toward his uncle without regard for his own life. He gasped at the sight which confronted him. The python's mouth had already engulfed most of his uncle's head. Fortunately, this was the most vulnerable position for the python. It only took a few seconds for Phumlane to kill the snake with his knife. His uncle, now free from the death grip of the python's coils, was not breathing. Phumlane stood helpless over his uncle's lifeless body. Then, Thelbela coughed and his chest expanded, as he drew his first breath of life-giving air. Moments later, he opened his eyes and recoiled in fear as he gazed upon the dead snake lying next to him.

Phumlane feared for his uncle. What if he had died? Would the power of the ancestors or tsongoma reach beyond the grave? Is there a God Who has the answers? Surely, such a God would not be a God of fear, but a God of love. Phumlane knew that he would never be set free from the bondage of fear until he found peace through the God of love. Having received Thelbela's promise never to hunt pythons again, Phumlane embarked on the long journey to the great city of Johannesburg.

While the distance was only a few hundred miles, it seemed as if Phumlane had traveled through centuries of time. Huts were replaced with skyscrapers, paths with wide freeways, ox-carts with motor cars, trains, and buses, open markets with super markets and malls, village hospitality with city crime, leisure with hustle and bustle. He enjoyed all his new experiences.

Sometimes, Phumlane browsed the local bookstore. "Surely, I am not the only person who ever sought for the God Who has the answers. Perhaps, someone has written about this God." The proprietor directed him to a large black book. He was surprised to find the book was written in Tsonga, his language. "Only very important books are translated into Tsonga," Phumlane thought. I must buy and read the Bible.

Phumlane finally found a job selling fabric in a large, Muslim, open-air market in Johannesburg. When business was slack he would sit at a desk and read his Tsonga Bible. But, he was careful to hide his Bible when the shop owner was present because he was a devout Muslim. Phumlane knew he would lose his job if the owner discovered him reading the Bible.

One day a white couple came into his shop. This wasn't unusual as there are many white people in South Africa. However, their strange accent gave them away as foreigners. "Perhaps they will spend a lot of money," he hoped. "You are not a Muslim, are you?" declared the white man. Phumlane wondered what magical powers gave this man such insight. "No, I am from Venda," Phumlane replied. "How do you know I am not a Muslim?" "Muslims don't normally read the Bible," the man replied. "Do you also read the Bible?" Phumlane inquired. "Yes, I not only read the Bible, but I know the God of the Bible. Do you?" replied the white man who then

extended his hand and introduced himself and his wife. “My name is Vince and this is my wife Bethany. We are American missionaries.” “Glad to meet you. My name is Phumlane,” was the reply. “No, I do not know the God of the Bible. Is He the God of answers? Is He the God Who loves?”

At that very moment the shop owner unexpectedly returned. He exploded when he saw Phumlane’s Bible and ordered the American couple out of his shop. Vince and Bethany had no choice but to return home and pray for Phumlane. How Vince wished he had gotten Phumlane’s address. The next day Vince returned to the shop, but as he feared, Phumlane was not there. The owner had fired him. Vince had no way to contact Phumlane. Phumlane sat at home without a job and without any way to contact the one person who seemed to know the God he was searching for. “His God can not be the God of love or He would not have taken away my help.” Phumlane concluded. “I will forget about Vince and his God. I don’t need to read this Bible any more.”

SEGMENT FOUR – PHUMLANE MEETS THE GOD WHO HAS ANSWERS

The story teller may need to briefly overview last week's story to remind the children of the circumstances which led Phumlane to stop reading his Bible and stop seeking the God of the Bible. This is the best segment to use for actually presenting the gospel to unsaved children. While it didn't always seem that God cared for Phumlane, God was faithful to providentially bring the gospel to him. God always had a plan.

Although Phumlane resolved to stop reading his Bible, he couldn't stop thinking about the passage he had read just before Vince and Bethany came into his shop. "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?"

Phumlane thought, "How could a God become my father? This would surely be the God of love. But, it must not be true. I asked, I sought, and I knocked, but the door was slammed shut in my face. He did not show love to me. These words surely are not true. Maybe I misunderstood them. I will read them one last time before I throw this book away." Phumlane opened his Bible once again to Matthew chapter seven.

"What is this?" he exclaimed. "Where did this paper come from?" A piece of literature was marking his place in Matthew chapter seven. He picked it up, turned it over, and there it was – the missionary's name and phone number! Phumlane smiled. "Vince must have slipped this into my Bible as he left the shop yesterday." Phumlane spent the rest of the evening reading and re-reading the Bible tract. He looked up every verse. Each sentence seemed to flood his soul with the light of truth.

First, he learned about God, the God of creation, the God of holiness, the God of love. Then, he read about God's law and his sinfulness. Phumlane trembled at the great gulf between God and himself. For the first time he learned that it is his own sin which separates him from God. "Why would a holy God want to love me?" he questioned. He discovered a love which died for him. He discovered a love which made a way through Jesus Christ. This message offered answers for all of his questions. "This is the God Who has the answers!" he declared. "This is the God of love." Now, he knew that his life-long search was over. Oh, how he wished he could share this great message with Muzi or Thelbela or his parents or everyone in Wayeni. "I must phone the missionary," he decided. "Vince will show me how to become a child of Jesus Christ."

After Phumlane received Jesus as His Savior, he and Vince began studying the Bible together in the evenings. Phumlane was a spiritual sponge and his faith grew day by day. He was soon baptized and started serving the Lord at Vince's church in Johannesburg. With the money Phumlane earned from his new job, he enrolled in the Bible institute. He carried a deep burden for the Tsonga-speaking people of Venda and hoped God would allow him to return there someday as a messenger of the gospel. He was already witnessing to Tsonga-speaking people in Johannesburg.

Phumlane had nearly completed his studies when tragedy struck. “Why have I studied in the Bible institute if I am to die like this? Who will go to the Tsonga-speaking people of Venda? How will my people hear? Who will tell the headman, my relatives, my family of Jesus Christ? They will all die like Muzi. They will never hear.”

Phumlane had been attacked by a mugger on his way home from work. The mugger brandished a knife. Its blade glistened in the moon light. Phumlane tried to reason with the assailant. “I have no money to give you,” he explained. “I only have God’s word to share with you.” As is so often the case in the violent city of Johannesburg, the mugger planned to murder him whether or not he had money. The appeal to God’s love did not penetrate the criminal’s hardened heart. The calloused stare on the attacker’s face revealed his murderous intentions. The mugger quickly glanced from side to side, as if scanning for witnesses. Phumlane seized the moment to turn and run. But, before he completed a step he felt a deep penetration in his back. The agonizing pain stopped him in his tracks and the sudden loss of blood sent him stumbling involuntarily to the pavement. There he lay, writhing in pain and alone, with his life slipping away drop by drop from the bleeding wound in his back.

SEGMENT FIVE – VENDA MEETS THE GOD WHO HAS ANSWERS

The purpose of this last segment is to demonstrate the full cycle of missions and to glorify God for doing what no man could ever have anticipated or manufactured. It is worth being a missionary.

“Wake up, Vince, the phone is ringing,” urged Bethany. “But it’s 2:00 in the morning,” Vince responded, still in a state of semi-consciousness. After stumbling across the dark room, Vince lifted the receiver. “Hello, this is missionary Vince. Who? When? Are you sure it’s Phumlane? What are his chances? Yes, I understand. I’ll be right there.” Vince slammed down the receiver. “Honey, what is it?” Bethany asked in an alarmed tone of voice. “It’s Phumlane. He’s been stabbed and may not live through the night. I must rush to the hospital. They won’t treat him until I pay some money. They said it doesn’t look good. Phone everyone in the church immediately and ask them to intercede before the throne of God.”

Vince stepped over a pool of blood as he rushed across the waiting room to the hospital receptionist. He couldn’t help noticing an oddly still person sitting in one of the chairs. Just then a doctor entered the room and exclaimed, “What is this dead person doing in the waiting room. Remove him immediately.” Vince was so relieved to learn that the dead man was not Phumlane.

“Are you missionary Vince?” asked the doctor. Vince hardly got the word *yes* out of his mouth before the doctor started rushing him into the treatment room. “Wait,” protested the receptionist. He must pay money first. “He will take care of that later,” the doctor replied as they passed through the doorway to the treatment room. “I am doctor Thabo (Tah-bo) and I am a Christian. I am from Venda and Tsonga is my native language. An American missionary won me to Christ many years ago before the tsongoma drove him away from our village. Phumlane is the first Tsonga-speaking Christian I have met. He arrived in a delirious state. He just kept repeating in Tsonga, ‘I must preach Christ. I must preach Christ.’ I decided to treat him even if I had to pay for it myself. We found your name and number in his pocket, but I knew he would die before you could arrive.” “Dr. Thabo, you are the answer to our prayers,” Vince replied.

Phumlane recovered quickly and soon graduated from the Bible institute. The church in Johannesburg ordained him and commissioned him to return to his homeland as a missionary. The work was slow and discouraging at first. According to African culture, he had not yet earned the respect and ear of his people. But, Phumlane plodded on year by year. The early converts grew spiritually and became pillars in his first church.

A breakthrough came when Phumlane invited Vince to preach. Folks came from many villages to hear the white man’s message. Some walked many miles. Vince presented the customary gift, a live chicken in this case, to the headman for officially sanctioning his visit. Hundreds listened as the missionary preached about a God Who proved His love, about a God who has the answers. Phumlane found that many villagers had harbored the same unanswered questions in their own hearts as he did for so many years. Many responded to the gospel and were gloriously saved.

Following the missionary’s visit the people started opening their hearts more to Phumlane’s preaching. “Teach us what the white man taught you,” the villagers often asked. The sincerity

of his message, the purity of his life, and the tenacity of his ministry won the respect of the Venda people, who now viewed him as an elder and began including him in many village proceedings.

Vince had many opportunities to visit the villages over the years and see the fruit of Phumlane's ministry. The headman extended an open invitation to Vince and the villagers accepted him and his family as one of themselves. It was not uncommon to see the missionary's children's white heads bobbing up and down amidst a mass of blackness on the soccer field.

The headman also accepted Christ and paid tribute to Phumlane at one of his open air meetings. Vince was so glad he happened to be present on this occasion. The aged headman walked to the front, motioned for silence, and began to speak. "I will admit that I did not respect Phumlane when he returned here with the gospel. Who does he think he is?" I thought. "Why does he pretend to teach his elders? He is no one special. Nothing will come of him and his message. Who are his parents? He was like all the other children. Who is he to start a church? Who will listen to him? But I have watched Phumlane over the years. He has been faithful to His God and God has blessed his ministry among us. He has taught me the truth and I have trusted Jesus Christ as my Savior. Many others have turned to His God. And, it is good. The Christian men don't beat their wives or break our laws. Our village is safer and happier because of Phumlane and His God. Our people no longer live in fear because they have found peace with the one, true God. **Phumlane is the prophet of Venda.** Our ancestors asked many wise questions, but they and the tsongomas didn't have the answers. Phumlane's book answers all our questions. Phumlane has done more for Wayeni and Venda than all of them! **Phumlane is the prophet of Venda!**

During the years that followed Phumlane and his converts established many churches in the villages of Venda. Some of his converts even studied at the same Bible institute in Johannesburg. Many thousands of precious souls broke the chains of fear through faith in Jesus Christ.