



Mambo Sawa Sawa ... things already better

On May 21, 2007, at 2:10 p.m., I was sitting on a bus in Nairobi, Kenya next to a Baylor freshman named Paige Williams. I know the exact date and time and person because it is written here in my Bible beside Psalm 18.

Do you remember that Psalm? It is the song of David's theophany. He "sees" God. David begins with descriptions like "fortress," "deliverer," "refuge," "stronghold." Keep reading, however, and you'll find that there's a quick shift in the tone of David's voice. What we hear is a cry for help.

I was reading this Psalm out loud to Paige as we were on our way to the Kibera slum. It is a place in need of rescue, a place where there is a constant cry for help. Paige had been there before. She knew what we were about to see. She knew that Kibera sat on a piece of land the size of Baylor's campus, and that it housed (I use that term loosely) more than one million people. We stood side-by-side in that place together, and I witnessed poverty and suffering like I have never seen before.

I wrote down what she said to me that afternoon right here by the story in Psalm 18, the story of a God who rends the heavens and comes down to rescue. She simply said, "You'll never be the same. I want you to know that."

Turns out Paige was right ... I'm not the same.

On that day I was confronted with the tension of my God who can rend the heavens and a slum full of his creation attempting to just survive. Now my world included poverty and AIDS. They have names; they have faces.

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Coming back to the United States was hard. I landed on U.S. soil, and felt put off by the cleanliness of Chicago O'Hare airport. It is so sterile, and it's just an airport.

I was mesmerized and horrified at the filtered water and ice that I found in my refrigerator. Everywhere I looked, I felt suffocated by my stuff.

In the midst of all of it, I was experiencing the haunting, and the joy, and the heartbreak as I remembered the face of Francis Kimani — a boy my age that I met in Kibera. He could be me, I could be him. And as I remembered the feel of Magdalene's hands in my hands — a woman afflicted with AIDS living in Kibera.

Somewhere in middle of those thoughts I began to hyperventilate spiritually.

"What on earth do I do now?"

"How do I live in light of what I've seen?"

Simply put, I came home with a word.

And that word is responsibility. To borrow from Brooke Fraser and the book of James, chapter two: "Now that I have seen, I am responsible ... faith without deeds is dead."

No doubt it is true that I have a part to play. I've got a hunch that it'll never make headlines. As near as I can tell at this point, living responsibly as a Christ follower is not glamorous. It happens in daily living. It happens as I use the resources of my education, my wealth, my free time not just for myself, but for the least of these. It may look different for me than it does for you, but the principles are the same.

It takes prayer. It takes mindfulness. It takes stopping to think. But that's one luxury you and I have — time.

I've told you that I have a word, a word that expresses the reality of my responsibility. But I also have a song, a song that confesses an even greater reality.

If we were sitting here together, I'd sing it for you. But, I guess writing it out will have to suffice for now.

It goes like this: "Things already better... things already better...when the Lord is on His throne, things already better...things already better...things already better."

Those words are hard to confess in light of what I've seen. Kibera slum exists, and God is on his throne? Things are already better simply because God is on his throne?

Somehow I'm hanging in the tension between taking up responsibility and acknowledging that God is on his throne. I have work to do, but I'm not in it alone. And it's not mine (or yours) to finish.

I take some hope in knowing that I didn't learn that song in English, and I didn't learn it standing on American soil. I learned it on May 21, 2007. On that day, I realized anew that there is a God who rends the heavens and comes down to rescue. He is, indeed, upon His throne. See, I learned that song in Swahili standing in Kibera slum. It was taught to me by a small group of children who live there. If they can confess it, I can too.

In Swahili: "*Mambo sawa sawa ... Mambo sawa sawa ... yesu kiwa zini ... mambo sawa sawa ... mambo sawa sawa ... mambo sawa sawa*" ... things already better.