

Guest Teacher:

Going Deeper

BY PASTOR RAY BENTLEY



For most of my adult life, I saw the majority of the mass of humanity as a river of suffering—a persistent flow of poverty, famine, disease, and heartache—while I stood on the shore, lamely throwing in an occasional life preserver. Then I would turn away, unable to bear the suffering.

As a pastor, I knew I had a responsibility to the poor and needy of the world. So, our church consistently participates in and supports relief efforts. But personally, I couldn't stand to watch the pictures of famine and of suffering; of children with distended bellies and mothers with dried-up breasts futilely trying to feed their babies. I would see these images and quickly change the channel or turn the page. I told the Lord I couldn't handle the heartbreak—that surely I would die. I am like many of us: baffled, bewildered, not sure of what to do with problems so overwhelming and heartbreaking.

Meanwhile, God put people in my life who were doing what I could only fear. They were in the middle of that massive river—engaged, involved, and making a difference, one person at a time. They were challenging me, inviting me to jump in. For years, I resisted until I couldn't any longer. My time had come.

So, I went to Africa. I embarked on my first trip armed with knowledge and encouragement and a boyish sense of excitement. I was going on safari! But I was not prepared for how the Lord would change my life. The next trip pulled me in.

It's not like I haven't seen and ministered to human suffering. Or that I haven't heard countless, wonderful stories of God moving in the midst of hard and heart-wrenching circumstances. It's just that now, for me, God was pulling me into the river of suffering, urging me to "go deeper."

Jesus often challenged His disciples to go deeper. When Simon Peter and his fellow fishermen had experienced a frustrating

night of fishing on the Sea of Galilee, with little in their nets to show for it, Jesus came along and gave them some unusual instructions. These fishermen usually worked at night, when it wasn't so hot, and they fished close to shore in the shallows where the fish gathered. But Jesus told them to "**launch out into the deep**," in the daytime no less, and then cast their nets.

Peter argued a bit, no doubt tempted to flaunt his many years as an experienced fisherman. But by now, he had come to respect Jesus, so after a mild protest, he responded, "**At Your word I will let down my net.**"

So they went deep, and their nets were filled to the point of breaking. Peter ended up throwing himself down in front of Jesus, and Jesus prophesied Peter's future, declaring, "**From now on, you will catch men.**" Peter and his friends **forsook all and followed Him** (Luke 5:1-11).

So we went to one of the hardest places in Africa. We went deep, pulled into the river of suffering, where I thought I would surely die. And you know what? My heart *was broken*, and I *was grieved* at the pain and suffering I saw, but I did not die. In fact, our nets were filled to overflowing with the beauty of the people we met, whose lives touched ours as much as we ministered to them.

The children who gathered around—at the orphanages and the safety compound where hundreds of night commuter children walk miles to find a safe place to sleep for the night—blessed us. These children would grab our hands, five or ten at a time, just to feel some reassuring adult contact. It was an honor to be there, to be "Jesus with skin" to the children who have so little. In fact, my daughter and son-in-law adopted

a little boy from one of the orphanages, so now at home I have a five-year-old grandson named Isaac who is a daily reminder to me of those dear children.

Don't be afraid to go deeper, to launch out where the Lord directs. Don't stand on the shore of life and watch the river flow by. Don't harden your hearts to the sounds and needs of humanity. Jesus didn't. He heard it all. He wept, He prayed, and He gave Himself.

What I want to encourage you with is this: don't be afraid to go deeper, to launch out where the Lord directs. Don't stand on the shore of life and watch the river flow by. Don't harden your hearts to the sounds and needs of humanity. Jesus didn't. He heard it all. He wept, He prayed, and He gave Himself.

Look around you—whether it be overseas or right in your own neighborhood, the river flows constantly, the needs are great. Is it messy? Uncomfortable? Tiring? Even dirty and painful at times? Oh yes. But you won't die from the heartache or the giving. You'll find joy. In fact, only then will you be truly alive. ☞

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