

Rape, Beatings Wouldn't Stop This Woman From Changing a Nation

Helen Roseveare was one of my heroines when I was in medical school. Although I never met her personally, I knew various people in her family.

Born in England in 1925, she became a Christian as a medical student at Cambridge University. (My father-in-law, Donald Dale, was a medical student there at a similar time.) Helen went out as a missionary to the Congo (which became Zaire), where she was the only doctor for 2.5 million people. She built two hospitals during the 1950s. She returned to England for a couple of years but then returned to the Congo in 1960.

At that time, the Congo was in turmoil following their independence from Belgium and the seizing of power by Mobutu. The conflict was due in part to ethnic struggles and in part to anticolonialism, and it left 100,000 dead. Helen chose not to leave during that time, but in 1964, she was taken prisoner by the rebel forces where she remained for five months, enduring beatings and rape.

Here's a description from Alan Burgess's book *Daylight Must Come: The story of Dr. Helen Roseveare*:

"She tried to escape, but it was useless: 'They found me, dragged me to my feet, struck me over head and shoulders, flung me on the ground, kicked me, dragged me to my feet only to strike me again—the sickening searing pain of a broken tooth, a mouth full of sticky blood, my glasses gone. Beyond sense, numb with horror and unknown fear, driven , dragged, pushed back to my own house—yelled at, insulted, cursed.'

Later she said of that experience, 'Through the brutal heartbreaking experience of rape, God met with me—with outstretched arms of love. It was an unbelievable experience:

He was so utterly there, so totally understanding, his comfort was so complete—and suddenly I knew—I really knew that his love was unutterably sufficient. He did love me! He did understand!

“‘He understood not only my desperate misery but also my awakened desires and mixed up horror of emotional trauma. I knew that Philippians 4:19, “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus,” was true on all levels, not just on a hyper-spiritual shelf where I had tried to relegate it. ... He was actually offering me the inestimable privilege of sharing in some little way in the fellowship of His sufferings.’”

She was taken to a village, where the rebel soldiers had gathered 800 local men. Helen was to be tried in a people’s court, the men having been given the instructions to shout “She’s a liar!” They would then be asked, “What shall we do with her?” They were to respond, “Crucify her! Crucify her!”

Here’s what happened, from an interview with Tonya Stoneman:

“During the trial scene, Helen was struck over the face with the butt of a gun.

“The moment of judgement came.

“Roseveare couldn’t see her jury; her eyes had nearly closed from the beatings ... but she could hear. ‘I heard a sound I had never heard before and will probably never hear again. I heard 800 strong men break down and cry.’

“They were weeping.

“Now instead of seeing her as the hated white foreigner, they saw her as their doctor.

“They have a word in Kibudu which means ‘blood of our blood, bone of our bone,’ she says. They rushed forward and said, ‘She’s ours. She’s ours.’

“They took me into their arms and pushed the rebel soldiers out of the way.”

After her release, Helen went back to England but returned to help rebuild the nation in 1966, establishing another hospital and medical school. She served there until 1973. She now lives in Ireland, where she continues to minister through speaking and writing.

*Adapted from **Felicity Dale**’s blog, Kingdom Women. Felicity Dale is the author of numerous books, including Simply Church. She is an an advocate for women in the church and trains people to start simple, organic house churches around the world.*