

Kony Victim, Now a Pastor, Brings Hope to Broken Community

“What is your name?” one of the soldiers demanded, as he wiped the blood off his machete.

An hour earlier, Thomas Abach, 20, and his older brother were walking home from a day of evangelizing in a neighboring village. As the young men traveled through the dark with their companions, they were attacked by a group of Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) soldiers. The soldiers were part of a brutal rebel group that occupied the area.

The drunken soldiers stripped the men and women, and then beat them. Abach watched silently as the soldiers gouged out his brother’s eyes and broke his ribs before finally killing him. Abach knew he was next.

Suddenly they surrounded him as he lay on the ground.

“What is your name?” the soldier barked again.

Abach couldn’t answer. He was paralyzed.

From above, he watched his own naked body lying on the ground. The soldier held his machete high in the air, preparing to bring it down on Abach’s neck.

Abach heard the Lord speak to him:

“See now that I myself am He! There is no God besides Me. I put to death and I bring to life, I have wounded and I will heal, and no one can deliver out of my hand.”

Then He spoke again: “There is time for everything: a time to be born, a time to die, and the days are numbered. I have set

a day before you of which no one can ever go beyond.”

Abach asked the Lord: “What does all this mean? Am I bound to die today?”

Then he prayed, waiting for the Lord’s answer.

“May your will be done,” he finally said.

Immediately, he heard the voice of one of the LRA commanders.

“Please, Thomas. We know your name now, because we have seen from your identity card,” he said. “You are not going to die.”

The commander explained the soldiers had seen that Abach and his people were true Christians, and because they feared God, they would release them.

The soldiers sent him away with the rest of the group, warning them to go directly to the church they had come from. They were given an escort, and warned not to leave the church, no matter what they heard. That night, the soldiers attacked the surrounding villages, killing many.

Reign of Terror

For more than 20 years, Joseph Kony and his LRA terrorized the people of northern Uganda. Kony claimed that he had a mandate from God to overthrow the Ugandan government and rule the country as a theocracy.

According to the U.S. Department of State, the LRA is one of Africa’s “oldest, most violent, and persistent armed groups.” Kony and his army have destroyed thousands of lives—abducting children; raping women; killing civilians; spreading AIDS; burning homes, churches, farms and schools; and stealing and destroying property.

For years, Abach fled from the LRA. He left his home to sleep in the bush before eventually arriving in Jinja and then

Kampala, Uganda's capital and largest city.

In Kampala, Abach met IMB missionaries, including Anthony Shelton, who helped him to grow in his faith and eventually to plant churches within the city. Shelton also encouraged him to study at Uganda Baptist Seminary in Jinja. After he graduated from the seminary, Abach felt he needed to share his life and knowledge with others.

Shelton suggested he return to northern Uganda to minister to others whose lives had been destroyed by Kony's rebels.

Abach first returned to Oyam, his home district, in 2011. He was overwhelmed by the physical and spiritual needs of the community. The area was completely devastated by Kony's rebels. Everyone had been forced to flee and for years the place was deserted—a ghost town.

Finally, people began returning to the abandoned district and took up the task of rebuilding their lives from scratch. Brick by brick, they began to reconstruct their houses and replant their gardens. With Kony and his rebels gone, they are trying to start life over in the shadows of daily reminders of that atrocity.

A Call to Return

When he went back to Kampala, Abach heard the clear voice of the Lord a second time. He felt a calling from God to return to the place of his nightmares and share the Good News of the Savior who had spared his life and could also bring life and healing to the people of Oyam.

"I was so afraid to come back here," Abach said. "But I knew because of God's call in me, it didn't matter whether I was going to a good place or a bad place. It is God alone who cares for my life.

"All along these people have been without any person who can

counsel them and encourage them and give them the words of God," he explained.

"I think God had seen to it that I might be one person who is responsible to come and help these people."

Renewed Hope

On a sunny day 24 years after his encounter with the LRA, Abach, now 44, stands at the edge of a murky swamp. He lowers himself into the brown water as a group dances across the concrete bridge above, clapping and singing. One by one, the people enter into the water, confessing their trust in Christ as they are baptized.

Since he arrived two years ago, Abach has seen more than 60 new believers come to faith. Four churches now stand in places where there was only rubble and ash.

He has also started a primary school in one of the churches, and has a vision to begin more schools and clinics across the area.

Richard Okello, a member of Puno Atar Baptist Church, serves as the chairman of the new primary school. His eyes well up with tears as he remembers how his house was burned by the LRA, and his children were never able to finish school.

"We are so blessed and our prayer is that God may make this church grow and become very strong so that it continues helping people within this community and far," Okello said.

"This church here is doing major things. There were some of our children that could not continue their studies but now they can. This is a great thing this church is doing in this community of ours. It's the most exciting thing in my life."

Abach himself is confident that his work in Oyam is not finished.

“There is a reason why the Lord saved me while others were dying,” he said. “There is a certain mission that I have not yet accomplished for the Lord.”