

When Hunger Isn't a Game

"Choose one thing: your family or Jesus!" Ibrahim* demanded of his wife, Esther.*

Esther lived in a small village near Lilongwe, the capital city of Malawi. Ibrahim had always provided food and shelter for her and their six children. Admitting to becoming a **Christian** could mean losing his protection. Could she risk that?

But something had taken hold of Esther's heart. It was something that she could feel inside, and she wasn't willing to let it go.

Esther's struggle began the previous day when she passed an **evangelistic meeting** on her way to the market. At first, she stopped only to hear what the preacher was saying. But then something inside of her made her feel as though she had to stay and listen. Sweat began to pour down her body as the preacher invited people forward to receive **Jesus Christ**. Esther felt compelled to join them.

"I went forward and accepted Jesus," Esther remembers. "My heart was lightened for joy as I continued to the market and then went home." On her way home, she stopped at the home of a Christian and asked for a **Bible**. The Christian gave her one, and Esther went home to prepare supper for Ibrahim and to read her new Bible, starting in the **gospel of John**.

"After reading the Bible, I discovered that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life," Esther says. "I went to my bedroom and got down [on my knees]. I did not know how to pray in Jesus' name. I just said, 'Lord, forgive me. I'm a sinner.'"

Esther soon met the first test of her newfound joy. During the night, she awoke and felt that she should pray. Ibrahim woke up and heard her. He thought that she had gone mad.

"What is happening?" he asked her.

"I have received Jesus Christ," Esther answered. Ibrahim was furious.

And the situation didn't improve in the morning. Esther brought bath water to Ibrahim, but he refused to bathe; she prepared breakfast, but he refused to eat. He then left to work in the fields. He returned during the day and asked her to make her choice: Jesus or her family.

"I will follow Jesus," Esther answered.

Ibrahim erupted in anger and began beating her. "I did not feel bad [about choosing Jesus]," Esther says. But she begged him to stop and to allow her to pray first. Amazingly, he stopped, and Esther began to pray.

"Thank You, God, for You know everything. The eye of the Lord is sharp, and He sees me," Esther prayed. "He alone is going to rescue me." Then Ibrahim resumed beating her, but she refused to turn away from **Jesus Christ**. Eventually, he left and went back to work.

That evening, Ibrahim came home and asked Esther if she was still praying. When she said yes, he answered, "You should move from my house!"

But instead of leaving, Esther went to her bedroom to pray and to ask God to hold her family together. In the days that followed, Ibrahim was still angry and refused to eat in their home. He accused Esther of being an evil woman. He continued to hit her and to abuse her, even burning her across her back. One day, he came home and announced that he had married a new wife—one who would follow his religion and obey him. He moved out of the house, but would return from time to time to abuse Esther and to try to make her renounce Jesus Christ. The abuse continued for months, even after Esther found that she was pregnant.

Eventually, Ibrahim fasted for three days, asking for Esther to die. But his fasting was in vain, and God watched over Esther. Soon after his fast, Ibrahim traveled to Mangochi, a resort area near Lake Malawi. But during his trip he was killed in a car accident. Esther, although relieved to be safe from his abuse, grieved for Ibrahim because she feared that he had died without knowing Jesus. But she still felt the Lord's peace in her heart.

Problems continued to plague Esther and her children, but she continued to **trust in the Lord** and drew her strength from Scripture.

"I'm encouraged by the words of Paul: 'What will sever me from the love of God? Is it going to be hunger? Poverty? Depression or anything?'" Esther says, referring to Romans 8:38-39. "Paul said these words because he knew that there was nothing important apart from knowing Jesus Christ."

Across Malawi, people like Esther deal with these struggles on a daily basis.

When Ibrahim died several years ago, Esther and her children were forced to plant their own crops. Like many Malawians, they plowed sun-hardened fields with large hoes and then planted maize, hoping that the spring rains would come before their crops shriveled and died.

Over the last several years, the rains have arrived late or not at all. Each year, Malawians have been left with less food to eat and less seed for the next crop.

During such times of famine, Esther and her children have put their hope in God, believing that He would provide for them. Eventually, Esther and thousands of other Malawians received maize from relief groups who distributed food through churches.

Still, Esther and her seven children face an obstacle:

persecution from people in their village. Although Malawi is considered a Christian country, there are many communities, such as Esther's, where converting to **Christianity** carries consequences. However, Esther's family has survived through **prayer** and reliance on God.

One group of men offered Esther a large sum of money if she would turn away from Christ. She refused. Soon afterward, a group of women invited her to meet them at a nearby hotel, but Esther felt that something wasn't right. She refused to go and later discovered that the women had planned to give her poisoned food.

One night, someone knocked on Esther's door. When she opened it, she saw six young men wearing masks and carrying knives. They had been paid to kill her.

"Jesus loves you," Esther told them. "Sit down." She then explained that God loved them and that they needed to repent.

"Lady, we came here to do something bad to you—but we will not do it, because you are not in the wrong," the leader said. "Why should we kill you?"

The young men began revealing to Esther all of the traps that her neighbors had laid for her. They asked Esther how they could know Jesus Christ, too. She prayed with them to receive Jesus, and they started coming to her home for prayer.

It wasn't long before some of the women in Esther's village came to her with questions about Jesus. She began teaching them the Bible and encouraging them to accept Jesus—something she still does today, as many of the women are afraid of the **persecution** that would result from becoming a Christian.

"They want Jesus, but they are afraid of the bad things that [could] happen," Esther says. "But the Lord is bringing them to me. I just say, 'Lord, anoint me. Just give me faith that is not easily shaken, ... that Jesus Christ is the Way, the

Truth and the Life.'”

In spite of the costs, Esther has found that **Christ** is all that she needs—and she is sharing that message with everyone she meets.

**Names changed. In October 2003, Esther attended a Billy Graham Evangelistic Association International School of Evangelism in Lilongwe. There she received training in evangelism and received encouragement from the Scriptures and from other Christians. She now is associated with Hope Missions. Esther previously worked with the Evangelical Association of Malawi in their women’s ministries from 2000 and has been a valuable member of their chief’s ministry team since 2006.*

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