

Tell Me Again About Your First-World Problems

Americans are blessed in so many ways, and we should be the most thankful people on earth. But we quickly show our ingratitude when our Internet signal gets weak or when our iTunes download takes too long. Our first-world “problems” are pitiful. We complain of cramped seating on planes when only a tiny percentage of the world’s population has ever flown.

I’m not pointing the finger at everyone else. I’ve been guilty of whining about silly stuff that doesn’t belong in the problem category. So God sends people into my life to remind me about the real world.

This week I spent six days with my friend Peace Pound from Lilongwe, Malawi. This year, at age 48, he took his first trip on an airplane. He is the first man from his village to visit the United States.

Peace was raised in a nominally Muslim family. His father died when he was three, so his mother had to take care of him and his seven siblings. They lived in a one-room hut with a thatched roof, and they usually ate nothing but msima, a corn porridge, and fish they caught from Lake Malawi. Occasionally he was fortunate enough to eat some goat meat. He slept on a mat made of palm leaves.

When he was a child, Peace only had one pair of shorts to wear—and no underwear. The shorts were tattered from repetitive use. He remembers once washing his shorts to rid them of lice and then hanging them next to the fireplace to dry. When he woke up the next day the shorts had burned to ashes, so a friend gave him an extra pair—until the friend’s mother found out and reclaimed the clothing. He had to wear a vegetable sack to cover himself.

Peace's family had no electricity and no running water. He bathed in the lake, his mother washed clothes in the lake, and he drank his water from the same lake. He did not have a toothbrush or toothpaste, so he used sand to clean his teeth. He and his brothers and sisters were not allowed to attend school because local Muslim elders said pork was served to the students. So Peace never learned to read or write.

As a child, Peace had no toys, no bike and certainly no video games. He and his friends would act out dramas to entertain themselves. Often they asked Peace to pretend he was John Chilembwe, a national hero who challenged British rule in Malawi after he was educated in the United States.

Peace had little access to medical care, so if he got sick his mother would visit a local herbalist to buy a cheap remedy. One day his eyes got infected so his mother tied a rag around his head to keep his eyes from popping out of his head. He cannot see out of his left eye today. He also walks with a pronounced limp because of a serious car accident that put him in the hospital for more than three years.

After such a difficult life, Peace heard the gospel 20 years ago and he gave his life to Jesus. He made a living (less than 50 cents a month) herding goats. He eventually left that job to help his local church in Lilongwe with evangelism.

Peace wanted to go to Bible college, but that seemed impossible because he was illiterate. "I decided to pray like Moses, that God would give me an Aaron to help me," Peace said. Then God opened up the door for him to attend a theological school in Zimbabwe, and a friend there translated the lessons from English to Peace's native Chichewa language. He took his exams orally.

In 1996 he graduated with a degree in biblical studies. He is the first man from his village to get a diploma.

He got his first pair of shoes when he was 26. He got his

first phone three years ago.

Today, Peace has planted more than 10 churches, including a congregation in neighboring Mozambique that has grown to more than 300 members, and another in Zambia. He has never owned a car, a bicycle or a horse (he says “horses are for very rich people”). He takes a bus to do his mission work, or walks up to 10 miles to reach local churches.

Once, Muslims who didn't want Peace to bring the gospel to their village beat him up. But opposition has never stopped him. And when I visited Kenya six years ago, Peace rode on a bus for four days to meet me—so that he could ask me to come to his country to preach.

I took my first trip to Malawi in 2013 and will return there next year. On my next trip I hope I will visit the lakeside village where a poor African boy in tattered clothes dreamed of coming to America. His story will always remind me that I have nothing to complain about. {eoa}