

In the Shadow - #9

Here in Rwanda, as in much of Africa, a significant portion of goods is hauled by bicycles. Fruits and vegetables, milk cans, bricks, cement sacks, chicken feed, furniture, roofing sheets, animals, people – you name it and it will be seen on a bike. To be sure, there are trucks of all sizes on the road, but the sheer number of “bike truckers” is absolutely amazing. In the US and Canada, over-the-road truckers have achieved folk hero status for the role they play in the economy. The young men with the bicycles in these parts are every bit as important.

Unfortunately, their job is arduous and very dangerous. With loads exceeding 300 kg (over 600 lbs), it can require 2 or 3 men to push up the hills and just as much muscle to hold back going down. Most of the roads are dirt, with rocks, ruts and potholes. It is not a quick trip to the market and back.

There is, though, a network of paved roads that are genuinely decent. Since Rwanda is referred to as “the Land of a Thousand Hills,” the manpower is still necessary on the uphill. Coming down is of course another story. These guys will fly down the hills. I’ve run alongside of them in the car doing more than 60 kph (40 mph). You can imagine the results if they have to stop. A flat tire, rain, road hazards - and it’s usually a disaster. Papa Timo says, “They die every day,” which might be a slight exaggeration, but probably not too far off.

Recently we were coming down off the mountain between Mutura and Nyundo when we came upon the African version of road flares – a few small tree branches lying on the roadway. Soon we saw a stopped tractor-trailer truck, a couple of police cars and a crowd of onlookers. Underneath the lorry was a mangled bicycle, busted sacks of carrots – and the lifeless body of a young man.

I’ve been around long enough to have seen my share of dead bodies, so it didn’t particularly gross me out. But it was sobering nonetheless. Here was a man simply doing his job and his life came to an end quite suddenly. As Grace pointed out, he was likely supporting a family.

I mentioned in a previous blog that I’m not trying to elicit sympathy or deep emotions from you by telling these stories. For that reason, I’ve struggled over considering whether I would send out this email. But regardless of where in the world one lives, there is the reality of life’s brevity and tenuousness. We can rant and rave about highway safety, viruses, vaccines, food security, military actions, etc, etc, etc, but we all must face the reality of our humanity, our lostness and helplessness (apart from Christ).

This blog might be getting a little preachy, for which I don’t apologize, but for me personally – and I think I can speak for Grace as well – our time in Rwanda has made the old Gospel song “This world is not my home,” speak into our lives all the more strongly.

- This world is not my home, I’m just a passing through,
My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue;
The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door,
and I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.
- I have a loving Savior up in glory-land,
I don’t expect to stop until I with Him stand;
He’s waiting for me now in heaven’s open door,
And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore. *Anonymous/public domain*



For the Master, Chris Elliott with the Church of the Brethren Rwanda.