

Mission in the Salt Mines

Wind blew May's hair about her face as she walked out to the mailbox. She opened it and drew out several letters. With quick fingers she flipped through the envelopes. A smile crossed her face when she saw James' handwriting on one of them.

She ran back to the house. Leaving the other mail on the table, she sat down on the couch and opened James' letter.

Dear May,

I am very glad that my visit to Mali is almost over. I miss you and Elizabeth so much, and every day I pray that you are safe and well. I am well, for which I am grateful.

When I return to the States, we will get ready for our move. God has called us to help these people. Of this, I am certain. They need us.

It is very hot here. And it is dry. Never could I have imagined such dry weather. I cannot imagine bringing you and Elizabeth here.

With love and prayers,

James

May looked up from the letter. A soft cry came from the bedroom and sent her hurrying down the hall to get Elizabeth.

The one-year-old lay in her crib. May picked her up and rocked her in her arms to comfort her. She glanced at the clock. It was almost time to feed her.

A half hour later Elizabeth was fed and happy. She was a pretty child, with brown eyes and dark brown hair. Her rounded face was chubby and perfect, at least to May's eyes.

Just then Mrs. Harrington walked into the room. She was old enough to be May's mother. An image rose to May's mind of a young woman. Her dark curls bouncing on her shoulders, her green eyes dancing. This woman must have looked like that when she was younger. She was the mother of May's friend Lauren, who was now dead. Mr. and Mrs. Harrington had graciously taken May in while James was away.

Mrs. Harrington smiled at May and Elizabeth. After a moment she continued to the kitchen. May placed Elizabeth in her walker and followed her. They worked in silence to make dinner.

As they sat down to eat the doorbell rang. Mr. Harrington rose to answer the door. They heard the door open and then an exclamation of surprise and delight.

"May, come and see who it is," Mr. Harrington called.

May slid back her chair and stood unable to imagine who it might be. When she reached the doorway, she gasped and flung her arms around the man who stood there.

"Oh, James, it has been so long."

James held her close for a minute, then kissed her. May laughed. Mrs. Harrington appeared in the doorway, carrying Elizabeth with her. James released May to take his daughter in his arms. She stared at him with wide eyes.

"Elizabeth, this is your Father. He's come home," May said to the one-year-old.

Elizabeth stretched out her arms to May. "Mama."

"Don't just stand there. Come in. Come in," Mrs. Harrington invited.

James and May stepped inside and the door shut behind them. The evening passed pleasantly, with talk and laughter. It was late when May and James went to bed.

The next morning May asked, “How long will it be before we leave the United States?”

“I would like to leave as soon as we can.”

“Then we should start making a list of everything that we will need.”

James picked up Elizabeth and tossed her. The girl screamed with laughter. May smiled. “I’m glad that we are going with you next time. I could not bear for you to leave us again for so long.”

“May, the conditions there are not good,” James said seriously. “I’m not sure I should take you and Elizabeth back.”

“We are a family, James. We must stay together. Do you want Elizabeth to grow up not knowing her father?”

James shook his head slowly. “Yes, it is better that we are together, but I am still not happy with the situation. But I am afraid that there is nothing that can be done.”

Over the next weeks they prepared to leave. Then the day came. At the airport, May and James said good-bye to the Harringtons.

“Our home is yours when you return on furlough,” Mrs. Harrington said as she hugged May good-bye. “Lauren would have wanted that.”

“Good-bye,” they called as they walked to security.

Elizabeth watched it all with wide eyes. She was too young to understand what was happening. She held May’s hand as they boarded the plane. As they rose into the air, James pointed out things below to her.

After a while Elizabeth fell asleep. James and May began to go over the notes he had taken of the Mali language. During the past weeks there had not been much time to do this.

It was dark when they arrived in Mali many hours later. May's first impression of the country was the hot, dry air. Elizabeth slept against James' shoulder. The next stage of their journey would be over the roads of Mali to the salt mines. The Owens climbed into a car.

These last hours were the worst. May was exhausted and she could feel every bump in the road. Gray light was showing on the eastern horizon when they arrived at a few huts. She gazed at them silently out of the car window and could not stop a sinking feeling in her stomach. The huts did not look inviting.

They were small and some were windowless. *How can I live somewhere like this?* she thought miserably.

James slowly got out of the car and took Elizabeth from May. People began to emerge from somewhere nearby. They watched the Owens with unconcealed interest and curiosity.

May silently took in the group. There were men and boys but no women. She was shocked by how young some of the boys looked. They were dressed in rags. One stepped out and held a dirty hand out in greeting to James.

James took the man's hand. Then he turned to May. "This is my wife May. May, this is Ben."

"Welcome," the man said in a deep voice. "I did not think that any woman would come here. So when James told me that you were coming, I thought he was crazy.

Though I find it equally difficult to understand why he would choose to come and live among us.”

“God has called us to teach you of his ways,” May answered. “That is why we are here.”

“As I said before, I do not understand it,” the man replied. He turned away and spoke to the men in their own language. They smiled and nodded, then turned away, and James led May toward the huts. A path led through the middle of the buildings. James walked to the end of the row and pointed to a hut a little distance on from the others. He opened the door to reveal a small room with some broken chairs and a table. In one corner was a bed. The room was badly in need of a good cleaning.

May was tired, but not too tired to feel disgusted. “We are going to live here?”

“I’m sorry, May. There is nothing better.”

May did not reply. Slowly she walked the around the room. She turned back to the door, but James was gone. A moment later he returned, carrying some of their luggage.

As best as she could, May swept the floor. Tired and cranky, she moved slowly. Then she began to clean. By nightfall, the hut was more livable than it had been. May made beds on the floor with blankets they had brought with them. Completely exhausted she and James fell onto them and slept well.

Over the next few days May recovered from the journey and began to make the hut into a home. She had to keep a constant eye on Elizabeth. The toddler seemed intent on exploring every nook and cranny of her new home. The workers often gathered to watch the family in the evenings when their work was done.

James spent much of his day with the workers. He came back to the hut at night so worn out that he could barely walk. And yet he always found time to talk to one or another of the workers in the evenings.

The workers were curious but not exactly friendly. They seemed suspicious of the foreigners. James had explained why they were here. People who couldn't pay their debts were sent to work them off. Usually they remained until they died. To May it seemed cruel that they were forced to live and work here for the rest of their lives, especially the boys. But she could do nothing about it other than offer them hope.

Before she had left the States, May had taken a course in nursing. She and James had been sure to bring plenty of first aid supplies with them. Aside from her housework May now began to minister to the medical needs of the community.

One night, a few days after they arrived, May noticed a young boy among the workers watching them. She smiled and motioned to him to come closer. He could not have been more than fifteen. His brown eyes held a starved look. May's heart went out to him.

Warily the boy approached until he stood in the doorway. May sliced a piece of bread off the loaf she had just made and held it out to him. The boy's eyes widened. He stood undecided for a moment and then darted into the room and snatched the bread from May. She watched in satisfaction as the hungry child crammed it into his mouth and hurried away.

The boy returned the next night and May again offered him some bread. Again he took it and went away. May did not know enough of the language to say much to him, so she kept silent. When other workers came, she began to offer them something to eat, too.

Gradually, the Owens picked up enough of the language to converse and it became easier to speak to the people and explain why they had come. Ben was a great help, as he spoke English. Despite this, they did not seem to be making much headway in communicating the Gospel message.

One night Ben said to James, “We have our own religions and they are good enough for us. Why do you think that we need yours?”

James seemed at a loss for an answer. May spoke up. “All people need God. And they need hope. Without him there is no hope.”

“There is no hope for us anyway,” Ben replied.

For days afterward James was very quiet. A few nights later as sat at the table May finally got him to talk about what was troubling him.

“They are not responding. Some of them do not even listen. I do not know what more I can do.”

“We can’t give up,” May said with determination. “They need help.” She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, “Would Jesus give up? He died for them, too, you know.” She opened the Bible that lay on the table and began to read.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

James only sat with his head in his hands. He looked discouraged. “No,” he said after several minutes. “We can’t give up. Even if we did, we would have nowhere to go. I just don’t understand.”

“Neither do I,” May replied. “I don’t understand how a government would be so cruel. Or why God would allow things like this to go on. But it’s up to us. If we can’t stop it, we will do whatever else we can.”

One day while May was bandaging the hand of one of the workers, she heard shouts. She looked up and saw the overseer standing over one of the workers. A whip was raised in his hand. He brought it down on the figure lying below him. “Get up and get to work,” he shouted. Again the whip rose and fell and the worker screamed. “Get up.”

May sprang to her feet, eyes flashing. The screams continued as the whip rose and fell. She hurried over and saw that the overseer was beating the boy she had been feeding. Without thinking twice she cried, “Stop!”

The overseer stopped more from surprise than anything else. “You can’t beat him,” May said, surprised at her courage.

“Can’t,” the overseer growled. He raised his whip again. “He would not get up and continue his work.”

“That’s not surprising considering the way he is treated,” May replied with some vehemence. “He does not get enough to eat or enough rest. Now you will let me tend to him.”

The overseer scowled. “He has work to do.”

“You can hardly expect him to work well while he is hurt like that.”

“Very well, but he will get no food if he does not work.”

May lifted the skinny boy and carried him to their hut. Once in the hut she laid him down on a blanket and began to clean his wounds. He screamed every time she touched him. Elizabeth watched wide-eyed.

When the wounds were clean, she gave him a drink and left him to rest. When James returned that night, he heard the whole story.

Over the next weeks the boy began to recover. May looked after him carefully, despite the fact that she did not feel well. Every morning her stomach felt sick, but by noon she usually felt fine.

About a week after she rescued the boy from the overseer's whip, the overseer came to see James. May listened nervously to the conversation. "We have no problem with your being here or even preaching your religion, as long as it does not disrupt our activities. You need to control your wife or we might have to ask you to leave."

"We are following God's calling, and we will do what is right whatever you think," James replied.

"Be careful," the overseer snarled.

That night May was so distracted that James spoke to her twice before she heard him.

"Is something wrong?"

"I'm just afraid that what I have done is going to cause trouble."

"We cannot let that stop us. It is what Jesus would have done," he replied.

"You don't seem very concerned."

James smiled ruefully. "I have the same fears about this that you do. It is one more problem that we must work through."

There was no more trouble immediately, but May's actions had made their impression. Ben spent more time with them and became a close friend. One night he said to May, "I want to thank you for what you are doing here. No one else would have had the courage to stand up for us."

However many of the workers feared that they would get into trouble, and they became more hostile. Whenever an opportunity arose, May and James took every chance to tell them of God's love.

One evening James asked, "May, at times lately you have seemed preoccupied. Is everything all right?"

"You know me well, but everything is just fine." She smiled suddenly as she remembered her secret.

"Come on, May. What are you not telling me?"

Her smile broadened. "I have good news. Do you want to guess?"

"We have our first convert?"

May shook her head.

"I give up. What is it?"

May could not keep it back any longer. "We're going to have a baby."

"When?"

"In July."

"Oh, May."

After a few weeks the boy went back to work, but every evening he would come to see James and May. However, what really brought the Owens joy was the openness he was showing toward the Gospel. Before the end of the year he had accepted Christianity.

As the time of the baby's birth drew near May and James began to discuss seriously what to do about it. "I'm nervous about this," May admitted. "How are we going to manage it?"

"If you are nervous, then I am frightened," James said with a shaky laugh. "This is not a good place for the birth of a baby. Maybe we could go to a larger city in Mali when the time comes."

Though this might be difficult, try as they might, May and James could think of no other solution. Then in May a letter arrived, the first letter that they had received since coming to the salt mine. Without waiting for James to return May tore open the envelope and extracted the letter.

James came back that evening exhausted and upset. It had been a hard day. Tempers had been on edge among the workers, and they had taken it out on him with mean looks and words and uncooperativeness.

"What has happened?" he demanded as soon as he came in the door. "You're bursting with good news. I can tell. What is it?"

"We received a letter today, James. In June we will be returning to the United States on furlough."

James read the letter carefully. "It is a miracle! God is so good!" he exclaimed.

June came and with it the anniversary of May and James' arrival in Mali. It was time for them to take a furlough. The boy was sorry to see them go, and it was only after May repeatedly promised him that they would return that he was at all consoled.

It was nice to be back in the States, but May and James both found that they were beginning to think of Mali as home. Still, May enjoyed the companionship of other women. There had been times in Mali when she had felt very lonely.

And they added another member to their little family. Peter Mark was born on July 21. Elizabeth was fascinated with her little brother.

Then their three month furlough was up, and they were heading back to Mali. To May's surprise, when they arrived at the salt mines, the workers welcomed them back enthusiastically.

"We are glad that you are back," Ben said sincerely.

A few days later James told her, "They are still not responding to the Gospel, but I think some seeds have been planted."

"That is good," May said with a smile. "Hopefully, there will soon be a breakthrough."

This news was encouraging, but disaster soon followed. The very next evening James reported that there was an outbreak of cholera among the workers. May immediately gathered her medical supplies and started toward the door. James stopped her with a hand on her shoulder.

"You can't go out there, May. Cholera is very contagious."

"I must. God will protect me. Stay here with the children."

James' hand dropped from her shoulder. "Be careful."

"I will." May hurried out into the night.

Cholera continued to spread during the next week, and some died, but some recovered. For some it helped to open their hearts to the Gospel.

One night the boy and Elizabeth were playing in the hut, while May was making dinner. Peter lay nearby.

But Elizabeth did not seem her usual active self. After a while she plopped herself down in the boy's lap and began whimpering. May quickly crossed over to them and took her daughter into her arms. Elizabeth felt very warm. When May took her temperature, it was above 100 degrees. She immediately put Elizabeth to bed.

The next two days were May's worst nightmare. As she had feared, Elizabeth had cholera. Within another day Peter was sick as well. May spent all her time caring for them. She and James prayed constantly.

Early on the third morning when May got up for the millionth time to check on her children, Peter seemed to be doing better. He was asleep, and May could see his flushed cheeks, but he felt cooler to the touch.

"Thank you, Lord," she whispered, relief in her voice.

Then she moved to check on Elizabeth. The girl's cheeks were pale, and she lay very still. At first May thought that Elizabeth, like Peter, was asleep. But then it occurred to her that her daughter might not be breathing. Panic filled her, and she shook Elizabeth, but the girl did not stir. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she sank to her knees.

James woke with a start. "What is wrong?" he asked in alarm.

May buried her head in her hands. "Elizabeth is dead," she sobbed.

"No!" James swung his legs over the edge of the bed and came toward her. He reached for their daughter. "She can't be dead! She can't be!"

"Oh, Lord, why?" May cried. "Why?"

The next day May and James buried their two-year-old daughter. May moved through the ceremony, but her mind refused to acknowledge it. She felt completely numb. Only a few of the workers attended.

The time after Elizabeth's death passed as a blur to May. Her heart had been torn in two. She moved through life as in a dream. Why? Why did God have to take their little girl? Everything seemed to remind her of Elizabeth.

She could tell James was worried about her. In her grief, she clung to him and Peter. But she wasn't sure she could talk about it, not even to James. At night she wept in bed.

One night as she wept, James drew her toward him and stroked her hair. "I can't bear this," she said. "I want her back so much."

"So do I."

Minutes passed. Then James asked, "May, do you believe that God loves us?"

"Yes."

"Then can you believe that he took Elizabeth for a reason?"

May paused. "I don't know."

"I'm struggling, too," James admitted softly. "I loved Elizabeth more than life. I don't see why this happened. But God loved us enough to send his Son to die for us."

"Then why couldn't he have let Elizabeth stay with us? Surely he knows how we love her."

"I've told you, May," he said gently. "I don't know."

May could not stop thinking about what James had said. He seemed to have thought this out carefully.

The next morning she opened the Bible as soon as she finished her housework. Wrapped in her grief, she had not paid much attention, to what she and James had been reading lately. She flipped through, reading here and there. Then she began to pray. Tears fell from her eyes.

“Lord, I don’t understand, but please help me to accept this.”

She sat there crying for her daughter for a while afterward before she continued her day’s work. May’s heart slowly began to heal. She began to reach out again and embrace life anew. Many of the workers were amazed by May and James’ ultimate response to losing their daughter. They began to listen more willing to the good news of God’s love. Some accepted Christianity.

On Christmas day the believers crowded into the Owen’s hut to celebrate. May looked over the gathered men and boys with peace and contentment. None of this had been in vain. *Whatever you have ahead for us, Lord, we are ready*, she thought.