



THE SCHLEHLEINS

Missionaries to the Tsongas of South Africa



COME TO AN AFRICAN FUNERAL

The Long Journey Within the Tsongas Most Prized Possession

A couple weeks ago, a 14-year-old in a nearby village died suddenly of a brain aneurism. The family members were not churchgoers so they asked me to do the funeral.

If you are unfamiliar with the African view of funerals and the history of white-black relations in South Africa, it's difficult to fully appreciate the significance of this family's decision.

If African social gatherings were trees, funerals would be a forest of Sequoias shooting straight from the center of village life. In funerals, Tsongas live, and move, and have their being. They invest extreme amounts of time, money, and planning into the deceased. Weeklong gatherings often culminate with a 6am to noon Saturday burial service.

To attend the internment of their dead is one thing. To preach and officiate is another. Whites in South Africa don't live in rural black villages. Ever. Not farmers, not missionaries, not teachers. Combined with the fumes of decades old apartheid, the idea of a white man conducting a funeral in the local dialect is absurd.

Yet here I was, a half-dozen funerals conducted since '06, and a participant in a hundred more. How did this happen?

THE LONG ROAD TO GET HERE

It took years of humbling. In the early days of village ministry I ministered with my shoelaces tied together—tripping over language, customs and a host of other cultural obstacles.

I didn't understand why such pomp and circumstance was wasted on a funeral. I knew cynically that some of those wailing and writhing in the dirt hadn't visited the now deceased in half a decade. "Just a show, this is."

My language wasn't very good either. I didn't know when to say "died" and when to say "passed", when to use humor and when not, when to use my vehicle and when to walk,

what passages of Scripture breezed by their minds and which verses grabbed them by the lapels. This takes years, something short-term missionaries can't attain.

I began to view the funeral through a gospel lens. I learned to shoulder the plow of cultural expectations. To succeed as a missionary, I had to button up my chinstrap and get in the game. The people began to see I was staying here for keeps.

Today, there are few things I relish more than preaching at funerals—this for good reason. Many sermons of other pastors are vacuous of any gospel content. Some preachers are so boring they start slow and then taper off.

It is imperative, then, that as a gospel minister I cut cross-grain. I talk of heaven and hell, proclaim the good news and the bad, comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I remind them that trials are good, a stick of dynamite in the bow of their Titanic religion: the Prosperity Gospel.

PRAY FOR US

Sins are like grapes, they come in clusters. Historic heresy (like ancestors worship) and modern apostasy (like God always wants you well) leads to a glut of other crimes—like selling the farm to buy a gold-plated casket.

Several years ago, a church member and I took a half year to canvass the village of River Plaats. From that only came a handful of converts. Among them was Wesley. We led him to Christ, baptized and disciplined him and now plan on sending him to Bible College next year.

But at funerals, I share the unimpeded gospel in one week to more people than in six months of evangelistic visits among scowls and gimlet eyes of River. So pray. Pray for more funerals and more death to life.

With much warmth and affection,
Paul & Melinda