

Eric's Story
James Embree
Wasilla Bible Church
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Pastor Larry: A couple notes...I'm gonna have James come right on up, and... We got a late start with the road conditions today, so we're gonna go a little longer than normal today, with a special speaker. That's ok; the kids go fifteen minutes longer than we normally do anyway, so just relax; your kid's will be taken care of. But we're gonna go a little longer today, after the late start. But part of it is we want to introduce you to a person who is involved in a project we are working with some other churches on. We work with a number of other churches at training pastors in Africa—in some very difficult situations and circumstances.

James and Ella Embree are a couple who are on the point of that ministry. They take the lead of it. They're in South Africa. We have another couple that are in Rwanda, and devoting their lives to serving God and training pastors in some very difficult and amazing situations. Ella grew up in our church, and James grew up in the area. They are now in South Africa on the point of that ministry.

We asked James to come today and basically give you a sense of the grace of God at work in that ministry. And so, without saying any more, James...I'll just turn it over to you.

James Embree: Thank you. I'm very glad to be here this morning. It's nice to be back in Wasilla Bible. And I do want to introduce my wife before I get going here. She's there...Ella Embree...go ahead, stand up and wave, honey! There she is. And you don't get to see any more than that of her today. But if you want to hear my wife speak, you do have a chance to do that in a couple of weeks. She's going to be at the Women's Connection group out at Evangelo's on the 20th of October. You can hear Ella, and that's a great opportunity for you to bring a friend who is not a regular church member or a believer, and you can bring 'em out there to that Women's Connection group and hear the gospel presented out there.

So, in order to tell you a bit about our ministry in South Africa today, I don't want to give statistics about how many students we've trained, or any of that kind of stuff, or just give generalities. But I want to tell you specifically about one guy, one student that we recently taught, and his life story. This guy's name is Eric Chauke [cha-oo'-keh], and he comes from the country of Mozambique. Mozambique is down there in the southeast corner of Africa. It's one of the world's poorest countries, Mozambique. And part of the reason why it is such a poor country is because Eric was born in the early days of an 18-year-long war that was fought in Mozambique. During that war there were nine hundred thousand killed, and five million were forced to flee their homes. It was in those days that Eric was born there in Mozambique.

His mother was what we call a sangoma [san-go'-ma]. A sangoma is a spiritist. The old term that you might be familiar with—she was a 'witch doctor', essentially. We don't use that term very often anymore. But she was a sangoma. And what a sangoma is...is people go to the sangoma when they want to be protected from evil spirits, or if they want to put a curse on someone they can go to the sangoma. Or if they want healing from a disease which...they consider most diseases to have spiritual causes. ("Why am I sick? It's because someone put a curse on me. So I need the sangoma to get rid of this evil spirit.") And so the sangomas work with their magic potions and magical objects and things, and try to convince these people that they're able to help them.

So that was the kind of atmosphere that Eric grew up in. Now, when Eric was about twelve years old he was captured by one of these groups in the civil war, and taken and trained to be a child soldier. They used a lot of child soldiers in that particular war. I've never actually talked to Eric about his experiences as a child soldier, so I can't tell you exactly what his experience was. But what I did is I looked up on UNICEF...the United Nations group there...and found out some information about child soldiers and what their experiences are commonly like. And what I found out is these leaders of these militia groups like to recruit child soldiers rather than adults because "child soldiers are more obedient, do not question orders, and are easier to manipulate than adult soldiers." The UNICEF people went on to say that in some conflicts, children have been forced to commit atrocities against their own families. In Sierra Leone the Revolutionary United Front forced captured children to take part in torture and execution of their own relatives. And then, after that, they were led to the neighboring village where they would repeat that. In other parts of the world, before battle, young soldiers are given drugs—tranquilizers—in order to increase their courage as they go and fight. That's the situation that Eric found himself in.

And being in that place, at age twelve, he decided “No one loves me. Nobody cares about me. And no one will care whether I live or die out here.” But despite his despair, he did look at what was happening around him and what they were doing, and said “This is wrong, and this is evil. I cannot participate in what’s happening here.” And so he looked for an opportunity to escape. And before too long, an opportunity came and he was able to escape from the camp and get away. Unfortunately, shortly after that he was caught again by a small group of adult soldiers.

Now, Eric knew what happens when one of these child soldiers escapes and he gets caught...they kill you. So he thought sure, when these guys caught him, “Well, they’re gonna kill me now.” But they didn’t kill him. They said, “Here, have some food with us.” And so he thought, “Ok, well, as soon as I finish eating, they’re going to kill me.” But they didn’t! After he finished eating they said, “You want to leave?” Yeah, he wants to leave. “Ok, go ahead. There’s the road. Go down the road.” He thought “Sure. As soon as I turn my back on these guys, walking down the road, that’ll be it. They’ll shoot me in the back.” But they didn’t...they let him go. They must have had...well we don’t know what their reasons were, but they had compassion on him somehow and decided to allow him to escape.

So Eric got away from those guys, but he decided, “I can’t return home” to his home in Mozambique. He decided, “What I’ll have to do is, I need to escape to South Africa,” because South Africa has relatively peace and prosperity in South Africa. So in that part of Mozambique, the way to get to South Africa is to sneak through the Kruger National Park. Kruger National Park is a very large national park. It takes about three days to cross the park on foot, and the park...the reason why it’s a park is it’s full of all kinds of animals including lions, leopards, hyenas, crocodiles, all those things. And he has to cross all that on foot. But he made it; he made it across and got to South Africa.

Once he got to South Africa, he managed to survive by going around door-to-door like a lot of people do in South Africa, still, and asking for work. “Can I help you cut your grass?” or “Can I wash your car?” or whatever. They’ll do anything you need. They just come to your door and say “I need work. I need work.” And so Eric found work doing different things as he traveled through South Africa then.

And one woman had him work for her for a period of time. He was doing odd jobs for her and things, and she invited him to church. And Eric said, “No, no.” One thing that he knew from his mother, the sangoma, was ‘we don’t go to church...church is not for us. That’s for other people; that is not for us.’ So he...he didn’t want to go to church. But this woman was so kind to him, and showed him such love, that he decided, “Well, ok. If she wants me to go to church I’ll go and I’ll try it.”

And so he went to church with her. And when he got to church, everything at the church absolutely fascinated him. The songs that they sung were interesting to him. The prayers that people prayed... The preaching especially was...everything about it just fascinated him. And after he’d been going to the church for a little while he had a friend who got very, very sick. And this friend, when he was sick...people from the church came and the guy was healed. And so, shortly after that Eric was at another church service and he responded to the gospel preaching at this service.

There were three things, really, that really impressed him and convinced him that he ought to become a Christian. First of all, the power of God—Eric was very impressed by the power of God. He knew that most of what his mother did as a sangoma was trick people into thinking she had power. She didn’t have much real power. But he could see that God had real power. Secondly, God’s love... Remember I told you Eric was convinced that no one loved him, and no one cared about him. But he hears here God loves him, and that really impacted his life. And the third thing that impressed him was the gospel message itself. It didn’t take much convincing to convince Eric he was a sinner and needed forgiveness, and that he couldn’t be good enough to be accepted on his own. That he had no trouble with. But he heard that part of the message. And then the second part of the message, of course—God loved him; which, as I already said, that was an amazing thing for him, to hear that there was a God that loved him. And God loved him so much that He came to earth to save him from his sins, and that Jesus died for him. And all he had to do was accept God’s forgiveness and he could be saved. And he would be adopted then by God as His son.

So once Eric got saved he was very excited about his new faith. And so he started saving money from his little jobs that he was doing to try to buy a Bible. Eventually he got a Bible. And then he was reading his Bible all the time, reading his bible, especially trying to find the verses that the pastor was preaching about. He wanted to find those verses. And the reason he wanted those verses was so that he could, then, go out and preach the same verses to others. Right from the start he was very zealous to want to go out and preach, and witness, and talk to anybody who would listen to him about his new faith. But pretty soon Eric realized, "You know, I really don't know much about what I'm trying to teach people. I really need to learn more before I can really convince people and tell people about God.

And so it was about this time Eric had made it to Johannesburg, or to the township surrounding Johannesburg, and he met another Mozambiquan guy named Azariah Chamu. And Azariah was pasturing a church in the suburb of Ivory Park, up in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg. Azariah sees this guy, he sees his zeal for the Lord, and he sees his need for knowledge, and he tells him, "You must come home with me. Come and stay with me. I will help you. And also, there is a missionary who comes to my house and teaches us the Bible." And so Eric goes home and he moves in with Azariah.

And that missionary who was there, teaching the Bible at Azariah's house, was one of my co-workers in South Africa, Dr. Stew Snook. And Dr. Snook was teaching at Azariah's house a group of men there—a leadership training program called "Theological Education by Extension," TEE we usually call it. But that was happening there at Azariah's house. So Eric joined that group and started to learn.

At Azariah's house Eric also met Letina, who is a sister of Azariah's wife. And the two of them ended up together and had two children together, named Sarah and Gift.

Azariah also convinced Eric, "Come with me to this new Bible college that Dr. Snook is heading up. You should come with me, and we can both go and study there." It's called "International College of Bible Admissions," ICBM, which is the school that I teach at now. So Eric and Azariah both went and enrolled at ICBM.

But Eric was in for a bit of a surprise when he arrived there at ICBM. You see, at Ivory Park where he'd been doing the training with Dr. Snook, it was being taught in Sotho [tsu'-too]. Dr. Snook is a...he speaks about five different languages, and he was able to teach them in one of the African languages that they spoke. Well, he gets to ICBM...everything's in English! And Eric, at that time, spoke almost no English. So here he is at this school, facing another great challenge. But as you've already seen, Eric was not one to back down from a challenge. He wasn't afraid of challenges. And besides that, God had plans for this guy, to use him greatly in ministry. And so Eric stuck it out and kept on at ICBM despite the language problem.

Another problem, another difficulty that Eric had at the college, was his previous lack of education. Remember, he was captured at age twelve, never went to school past that. And I'm not real sure what his education was before that. ICBM is a university-level accredited Bible college, where we expect our students to read and understand college-level textbooks. They have to write research papers and pass fairly difficult exams. Add to this lack of education that Eric is an oral learner. That is, he can hear and understand well in class. But he had a difficult time reading anything and understanding and learning from the written word.

So Mrs. Snook, who also taught at the college, described his academic ability to me when he arrived as 'hopeless.' Eric failed almost every class he enrolled in. He simply wasn't capable of doing the work that was required of him. But Mrs. Snook and other teachers at the school wouldn't give up on him. They could see 'this guy is very zealous for ministry. He's already being used by God. We can help him.' And they gave him help in their classes, and they wouldn't give up.

Another distraction that Eric faced in his class work was his involvement in ministry. He was...a few years before he came to ICBM he had decided that he would move his family down to the other side of Johannesburg, to a suburb called Palm Ridge. Palm Ridge Eric described as a place full of criminals and gangsters. And that's where he felt that God had called him to start a church.

Let me tell you a little bit about Eric's living situation in Palm Ridge. When he got to Palm Ridge he built the house that his family lived in himself. Now Alaskans might not be so surprised at that; a lot of guys in Alaska build their own house, but probably not like the one Eric built. He built his house using scrap lumber and sheets of corrugated iron. And his house, this little house, was about the size of...I would say about three rows of chairs, and maybe about six chairs wide. That's about the size of the place he built for his family there. The dirt floor inside...of course after a while it gets packed down so it's not too dusty. You spend all your time in there and the dirt floor gets packed down. But actually the roof, in a shack like Eric had, those only leak more as time goes on.

Now it's true...after a while the government came in. There were all these shacks being built in this area, so they came and put in basic sanitation for all the people there. They put in like...looks like a little outhouse made out of tin, but it's actually got a real flush toilet in there. They have running water, and there's a little concrete sink on the outside of the little outhouse building where you've got clean water to use. And so they had basic facilities like that.

And then, after about ten years of living in the shack, the government built a house for Eric...which they do in these township areas. It's a little concrete block house about the size of a small two-car garage. And that's sitting right next to where the shack still is. He uses the shack as a spare room now. And he has that little place now. And there's still no electricity. They still use the little outhouse thing in the back, and the running water is back there. But at least the roof doesn't leak, and it's actually a decent place to live.

Eric also built the small church building there in Palm Ridge. The church was built the same way he built his house—scrap lumber, tin—and he constructed it that way. And the church is still that way. After a while they did expand the church. They'd outgrown the first small building that he built. And he recently got a big window, so now there's light inside. They've got a nice, big window to let in the light. And someone gave them enough chairs so that most of the older people in the congregation can sit on chairs now.

In order to have money to feed his family while he's in school Eric did work here and there, including doing yard work and things for some of the missionaries who taught at the college and lived nearby. One day, when he was working for the Snooks, he asked if he could go home early, because he hadn't got any sleep the night before. They said, "Well, why didn't you get any sleep last night?"

"Well, you see, yesterday in class, Dr. Snook taught us John 3:16." And so after Eric heard this message on John 3:16, he went down...went home on the mini-bus taxi that afternoon; and he got down there and he decided to go out onto the street corner and to start preaching this new knowledge that he had. Since the people in Palm Ridge...they all live in these little shacks and little houses...they spend most of their time outside. They don't stay in their homes like people here do. So they're walking up and down the dirt streets and doing...going about their business and visiting people, so it works pretty well to just go out on the street and preach there.

So that's what Eric did. He says, "Do you think there's no one who loves you? I know that the Bible teaches us that there is someone who loved you. In fact, God loved you so much that He sent His Son to come down and save you." That was the part of the message that had impacted him so much. So that's what he's preachin' that day. And that day he witnessed to two brothers that he met there out on the street. One brother heard the message, believed, and prayed with Eric and accepted Christ right there that day. The other brother said, "No, I'm not ready yet. Maybe some other time, but I'm not ready to accept Christ now. OK?"

So that night Eric decides, "I think I should spend the night in prayer tonight, praying for my church." So he's there in his home. His family is sleeping on one side, and he's there praying on the other side of the house. But about three o'clock in the morning he starts hearing something going on outside. There's people all running around and yelling, and all kinds of chaos and shouting, and he doesn't know what's happening. And then, pretty soon, someone comes knocking on his door, **boom, boom, boom!** "Pastor Eric! Pastor Eric! Come quick! Terrible things are happening! Pastor Eric, come quick!"

And so he gets up and he comes to the door, and the guy who'd been knocking on the door there takes him, and leads him to the house where that brother that he had led to the Lord earlier in the day lived. And there's the man, lying on the floor, dead, with multiple gunshot wounds. And so Eric starts to help... We don't know why the guy was killed. Probably...Eric's guess is that he and his brother were part of a criminal gang or a group of criminals, and that when this brother was saved he'd gone and told them "I'm not going to help you commit crimes anymore," and they weren't willing to let him go.

So Eric, when he sees this, he starts helping the family. There's lots of things that have to be done when someone is killed, and so Eric, as the pastor, is helping them to go about the business there. And he meets the other brother that he had witnessed to earlier that day. And the brother says, "Where is my brother now? Is he really in heaven?"

"Yes, he really is." And so Eric says, "Yes, your brother really is in heaven."

"Well, I want to see my brother again some day. I'm ready now to accept Christ."

And so Eric leads that guy to Christ, right there in the middle of the night, when his brother had been murdered.

So Eric says, "That's why I didn't get any sleep last night. And I'd like to go home from work early so I can get some rest." So what would you say? Yeah.

Let me tell you about another thing that happened to Eric while he was studying at Bible college. He was in his lessons, and he was studying the Bible and learning more about God and His expectations on people's lives. And he realized that there was something that was wrong in his life that he needed to correct. You remember how I told you that he had met Azariah's sister-in-law, Letina, and that they had had two children together? I never said that she was his wife. They weren't married; and Eric decided that "That's wrong. I shouldn't be living with this woman that I'm not married to." And so, after ten years of marriage...or ten years of being together, and two children, Eric decided that "We must be married." And so they finally got married there after ten years. And it was his study of the Bible and his learning about God that helped him to see, "My life must be lived in accordance with what God's teaching."

Once Eric invited me to come and preach at his church. As I was there preaching he was translating for me. And I was preaching the message there. He introduced a man from Mozambique who was there visiting. And this guy got up and said a greeting in Tsonga language. I don't know even a single word in Tsonga, so I had no idea who this guy was or what he was talking about. All I knew was he was a kinda middle-aged guy with a big smile. Ok.

So then after the service we went to Eric's house, my family and I went, for lunch. And this man also came for the lunch with us. I thought, "Ok, I wonder who this guy is." So as we're sitting and talking this guy couldn't speak any English, so Eric had to tell me the story and started telling me about who this guy was. This guy was a bishop from seventy churches in the rural countryside near a city called Xai Xai [shy-shy] in southern Mozambique. And his churches had scraped together just enough money to send him on a bus to Johannesburg. His task—"Find someone who can come back and teach us the Bible."

The churches that he represented are independent African churches. They mix a lot of traditional tribal beliefs with their Christianity. This particular group doesn't really know or follow the Bible; they don't even know what it teaches. These guys living out in the Bush are polygamists still, some of the pastors having up to six wives. And some of these pastors, who call themselves prophets, they function very similarly to the way the sangoma functions. So this was this group of churches that somehow...they'd decided that "We need to learn the Bible. We need to find someone who can teach us the Bible." And somehow they had decided "Johannesburg—that's where we can find someone who can teach us the Bible." So they had sent this guy off, and somehow they had found Eric Chauka just as he was finishing his time of studies at ICBM. And he...and were asking him to come back to Mozambique to teach them.

Of course, Eric and I were very excited about that opportunity to teach the Bible to seventy church leaders. And so we...we encouraged this man that we would help him. Eric has now made about a half a dozen trips to Xia Xia in order to teach these guys. Whenever he goes there, all these guys come out for several days of teaching. He's developed a theology curriculum that...Eric developed it himself, even got somebody to draw up illustrations for his major points. And he's been teaching theology to these guys. When they... He's explaining the gospel message to them, helping them understand many truths that they've missed. Whenever he comes back to South Africa where he's working at his church, these guys are calling him every few days. "When are you going to come back and teach us again?" Very eager to learn from him.

I've got two more quick points that I want to make. I know we're out of time, but let me tell you another thing that Eric is doing in his community. In his community of Palm Ridge there are several other churches there besides the one that he leads. But none of the other pastors there have had the privilege of studying at a Bible college like Eric has. And so Eric is a broad-minded guy. A small-minded, narrow-minded person would say, "Those guys are my competition for members and tithes. I'm not gonna help them." But Eric says, "No. I want to see people saved and the Bible preached, and people coming to serve God." So he leads a Bible study group with six other pastors from his church who don't have any Bible training. And he teaches them the word of God.

One more thing... After he graduated from school Eric was coming back to college a couple days a week to do work for us, doing some painting and maintenance things in order to make some money. His little church there in Palm Ridge isn't able to pay him very much, and so he needed money in order to support his family. But one day he was there working for me, and he said, "I can't keep coming any more. I can come again tomorrow, and then I'm not going to come and work anymore."

I said, "Ok. Why is that, Eric?"

"Well, I feel like God has called me to full-time ministry, and I can't be spending so much time working and trying to earn money. I'm supposed to be in full-time ministry. My church needs me to be there full time."

So he didn't know how he was going to support himself, how he was gonna support his family, but he knew he couldn't keep doing this extra work. He needed to be busy in ministry full-time. So he just stepped out on faith.

Now since then, good things have happened. One of the other teachers of the college is also the pastor of a medium-size church there in one of the nicer suburbs of Jo-burg, and that church has decided that because of Eric's work in Palm Ridge in the township there, and also his international ministry, he's worthy of missionary support. And so that church has started supporting him from their monthly budget to do the work that he's doing. And also, since then we've also convinced the church that I've been attending in Jo-burg that they, too, should be supporting Eric as a missionary. So now he's able to do his ministry full-time and not worry as much about finance. And he's...doing that has helped those churches that are supporting him, because those churches have now taken another step toward real maturity as a church in supporting outside ministries.

I've talked a lot about Eric. Now we get to see Eric briefly here, on a video. We get to see where he lived. Here he is. This is Eric and I...there's Eric and I, and one of his church leaders together. This is Eric and his wife, Letina, standing near their home. This is his church that he built, Evangelical Church at Palm Ridge. This picture is the shack that he lived in for ten years. And this is the house that the government has built for him and his family. Unfortunately you don't get the sound. But you wouldn't have been able to understand him anyway.

Larry: We'll close in a word of prayer, and then I'll ask you to be sure to pick up your kids downstairs. They're gonna be loose in about two seconds. ☺

Our Father in heaven,

We thank you for James and Ella, Your touch upon their lives, and the fact that through them You've touched others. And we thank You so much for Eric, and what You're doing in him and through him. And Father, we today here, at this moment, pray and ask for Your hand of blessing upon Eric and others like him in that area; and Father, that You would bless his ministry in Mozambique, and there would be an outreach that brings glory and honor to You through him.

In Jesus' name we pray, amen.