

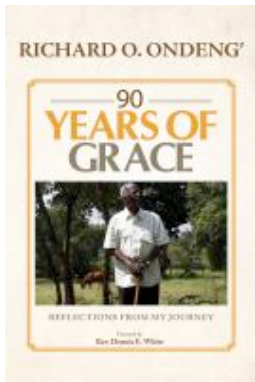
RICHARD O. ONDENG'

90
YEARS OF
GRACE



REFLECTIONS FROM MY JOURNEY

Forward by
Rev. Dennis E. White



90 Years of Grace is the personal testimony of Richard Ondeng, a Kenyan education professional whose contribution to the development of church and education in Kenya is profound. Written just before he turned 90, the book gives a gripping account of God's miraculous and amazing grace at work in the life of a humble recipient. It is a truly inspiring memoir of a servant leader who lived an ordinary life in an extraordinary way.

90 Years of Grace: Reflections from My Journey

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CHAPTER 1

A SAVIOUR AND HEALER

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.

Ephesians 2: 8-9

I could not begin to count the number of evangelistic church services or crusades I have attended, and how many times I have listened to preachers making altar calls. The altar call has become more or less a routine part of the evangelical Christian church service. It usually takes place at the end of the service, and the routine is quite predictable.

“If you want to accept Jesus as your personal Saviour,” the preacher usually says, “please lift up your hand and put it back down.” After a few minutes, those who raised their hands are asked to stand up. And finally, once they are standing, these same people are asked to come to the front of the church to be prayed for.

On many such occasions, the preacher will ask the responders to repeat some words after him, and thereupon, he declares the people “saved”. I have often wondered to myself how many of the people responding to these altar calls really understand that salvation is so much more than

just reciting some words that have originated with an evangelist. How many of them walk away from those services understanding what it really means to commit one's life to Jesus?

My own salvation was quite dramatic. When I gave my life to Christ after many years of denying Him, I did so knowing that, with God, there is no middle ground. You are either a follower of Christ or you are not. I will talk more about some of the struggles I faced in my journey as a Christian, especially when I found myself caught between the demands of my faith as a Christian and those of the culture into which I was born, in a later chapter.

An Invisible, Guiding Hand

Looking back on my early years, I cannot help but marvel at how God literally plucked me out of darkness and brought me into His Kingdom of light. Perhaps the word “pluck” is not completely accurate, because mine was a long journey of resistance and rebellion before I finally submitted to the authority of Christ over my life.

My first encounter with Christianity was in 1935. I was then only about eight years old. My step grandmother had been converted to Catholicism, which was slowly taking root in the western part of Kenya where I grew up. The only other organized Christian group that was visible in that area at the time was the Church Missionary Society (CMS).

My father forbade me and my younger brother from getting involved with either group. However, he did allow me to accompany my aging step grandmother to her church, which was about six kilometers from where we lived. I would walk her to church on Saturdays for confession and then again on Sundays for Holy Communion. I did not understand the rituals and ceremonies that I saw my step grandmother going through, but I remember being fascinated and curious about what they all meant.

In June 1936, my father, who was then around 50 years of age, acceded to pleas from various people from the growing Anglican Church to send me to school. He had struggled with the decision for

two reasons. First, he knew that my going to school would pull me into the Christian religion, and he was firmly against my joining the church. Secondly, as his first son, it was my duty to take care of the family's small herd of cows, and Dad was eager to transfer this burden to me as soon as I was mature enough to manage it. In granting me permission to go to school, Dad set a condition that I would have to arrive back home while it was still daylight so that I could spend a few hours every day taking care of the cows. It was important to him that I did not turn my back on this responsibility.

I was excited about going to school. I had been quietly envious of a few other boys from our village that had gone to school, but I had never imagined that my father would allow me to go.

The school that would serve as my entry point into formal education was run by the Church Mission Society (CMS). The school, then called Usingo Sector School, was approximately four miles away from home. Young as I was, I knew that a new world was about to open up for me. I was eager, and determined to do well. What I did not know was that my journey into Christendom was also just beginning.

In retrospect, I can see how God gently guided my steps and drew me to Himself. The Bible says that it is by grace that a man is saved. It is not by our works or anything that we can boast about. Over time, I would come to learn that God's wish is that no one should perish. I would also come to learn that, while His hand of grace is extended to all, it is by choice that each individual person is saved. It is also by choice that a person is not saved. It would take me several years before I would finally make the choice to submit my life to Christ.

A week or so after joining the CMS primary school, I learned that I would have to attend Sunday school. Attendance was mandatory. I also found out that all students were expected to go through the Anglican confirmation process. The confirmation process is designed to lead a person to become a member of the Anglican Church. It involves doctrinal training and preparation for Baptism and Holy Communion.

While keeping much of this away from my father, I dutifully enrolled in the confirmation process and entered the first stage, which was then referred to as the “Seeking Class”. I went through the stage mechanically, and passed the tests that were given. As it turned out, many of those who took the test with me failed. Those of us who passed were allowed to go to the next stage, called “Promise”. This second stage involved a lot of memorization of scripture, which I did quite well. After one year, I again took an exam and I passed. I then moved on to the next stage, which was the “Baptism” class.

I sat for the Baptism test in August 1938 along with a small group of other young people. This time, only two of us passed – I and a lady called Mariam. I was now qualified to be baptized. As was the Anglican practice then, baptism of Africans involved the assignment of a name from a character in the Bible. For reasons that I cannot explain, the name given to me was Richard. From that day on, I would be considered a “Christian”, and my first name would be Richard and not Onyango, the latter being the name that my parents had given me.

A Bumpy Journey

The one word that best describes my experience as a student from the time I entered primary school to the time I finished my post secondary training as a teacher is “bumpy”. I will talk about that journey in some detail in chapter three. For now, let me just say that the things that I achieved were not because of who I was, but in spite of who I was. As I grew up and interacted more and more with the world outside of my village, I became cynical about Christianity. Although I did not show it on the outside, I developed a negative attitude toward the church, which I increasingly associated with European dominance over us Africans.

Throughout my high school and subsequent teachers’ training years, I stood out as a good student, a star athlete and a leader among my peers. I also grew in my self confidence. Over time, this gave way to a certain arrogance that would, on many occasions, land me into conflict situations. In many ways, I was a non-conformist. But for some reason, when it came to Christianity, I conformed and played along for years,

not wanting to be seen as a “sinner”. I attended church and went through the rituals, including communion, but none of those things had any personal meaning to me.

When I completed my teachers’ training course at the then highly acclaimed Kagumo Teachers Training College, I earned my diploma and prepared myself to enter the world of employment. It was gratifying to find that, with my good pass, many schools were prepared to offer me a teaching job. After reviewing all of my options, the choice came down to two Western Kenya schools, both of which I had attended. The first was Nyang’ori Junior Secondary School, owned and operated by the Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada (PAOC). The second was Maseno School, a highly rated CMS school. In the end, I chose to accept the offer by the PAOC to join the teaching staff at Nyang’ori Junior.

I have often wondered how my life would have turned out if I had taken the job in Maseno. Once again, I believe it was the hand of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, which gently nudged me and led me along His path of righteousness – for His own name’s sake. It was at Nyang’ori where I met the girl who was to later become my wife and mother to our eight children. But most importantly, it was at Nyang’ori where I came face to face with the Lord Jesus and made the most important decision of my life: to accept Him as my Lord and Saviour.

Jesus Knocking On My Door

In accepting the Nyang’ori offer, I had put a condition to Rev. Brown, the missionary Principal who had interviewed me for the job. My condition was that I would be given different accommodation from the dilapidated staff housing where the African teachers were housed. Rev. Brown had acceded to my demand, but I could see the concern in his face, and I knew that my entrance would stir some discontent among the other staff members.

In January of 1949, I moved into a guest house at the compound of the Nyang’ori Secondary School Principal and started my teaching career. As expected, the show of preferential treatment toward me by the Principal did not go down well with the other staff. My arrogance

did not help matters much, and I quickly found myself isolated and rejected by the people who would be my colleagues.

Rev. Brown was aware of the animosity that his decision had created, but he remained supportive and never wavered in his confidence in me. That first evening, he took me around to meet the staff, some of whom had taught me when I had attended the school years before. The reception I received was very cold.

The next day, at my first staff meeting, a big argument erupted over the teaching timetable. The contention was that the schedule was unworkable, and some teachers were overworked while others were under-worked. The discussion went back and forth, and no one seemed prepared to take up the task of rethinking the schedule and coming up with an alternative. I was silent through most of the discussion, wondering what all the fuss was about. Toward the end of the meeting, I offered to take up the task of reworking the timetable.

Everyone looked at me sceptically, but no one objected to giving me the assignment. This was my first opportunity. I poured myself into the task and, by that afternoon, I had resolved the issues that had caused the whole uproar. The icy reception that I had received thawed slightly, and I slowly gained credibility among my colleagues.

Over the next several years, I would prove myself to be a faithful and diligent worker. In 1951, I was promoted to the position of Deputy Principal, serving under Mr. Arthur Rosenau. Mr. Rosenau was the missionary who had taken over from Rev. Brown when Rev. Brown had chosen to take up other full time mission work in the region. By the time I was taking on this new job, I had moved out of the Principal's guest house and into my own house – a relatively large, two-bedroom brick house at the edge of the school compound.

I was a strict disciplinarian, and my students scored highly on their exams. The PAOC missionaries with whom I worked treated me with respect. In spite of my ambivalence toward their “loud” evangelical brand of Christianity, I was accepted and felt genuinely appreciated.

That same year, I was assigned to take over leadership of the school's athletics program. Things were going well for me. My future looked bright and I felt unstoppable. There was just one nagging issue that sometimes kept me awake at night. My closest friend, the man who would later be the best man in my wedding, had just given his life to Christ.

Owen Gumba was a friend closer than a brother. I had been instrumental in getting him a job at Nyang'ori, and everyone knew that we were inseparable. Owen's salvation was a direct challenge to me, but I refused to budge. God was knocking on my door, but I would not let Him in.

My Turning Point

If there is one thing that we tend to take for granted, and which God sometimes uses to remind us of our mortality, it is our health. When it comes to sickness, no man or woman can claim immunity.

My first bout with a life threatening illness came when everything seemed to be going so well. It started off with a slight cold, which I ignored, and which progressed in ways that I could not have predicted. In my stubbornness, I made some foolish decisions and pressed on with my work including an ill-advised trip with our school football team to Kakamega High School.

When we got back from the trip, I was immediately hospitalized in Kisumu and then later transferred to the Maseno Mission Hospital. There, it was discovered that my cold had developed into pneumonia. Due to my negligence, the pneumonia had also progressed into another disease - pleurisy, a disease that involves inflammation of the tissue layers (pleura) lining the lungs and inner chest wall. I was informed by Dr. Leech, the missionary doctor attending to me, that there was no cure for the disease. "Only God can cure you," he told me.

That, to me, was a death sentence. I was weak, depressed and helpless. I could hardly eat, leave alone do anything else. I was discharged and, for the next five months, I would be virtually bed-ridden in my house, merely waiting to die.

People came and went. My friend Owen would encourage me, but I could see in his eyes that he too was struggling to remain positive. My mind began to go blank. I stopped caring about things that used to be so important to me. I didn't want to die, but there was nothing I could do to stop what seemed to be inevitable.

And then it happened. I will never forget that day. It was Friday, the 9th of May, 1952. Arthur Rosenau, the Principal, together with his wife, Edna, and June Deacon, another missionary on the teaching staff, came to the house to pray for me. Arthur and June had been coming to see me almost every day for five months to pray for me and to persuade me to accept Jesus as my Lord and Saviour. Evidently, they had understood that I was a "practicing" Christian, but not a "born again" Christian. It was an interesting distinction that I pondered over as I lay on my bed, waiting to die.

Throughout that particular week, Arthur and June had been trying to convince me to come with them to an evangelistic crusade that was being held at the church compound of the mission station. The week-long crusade was an annual event organized by PAOC, and each year a special guest evangelist was invited. That year, the evangelist was a South African Pentecostal preacher called Nicholas Bengu.

I had repeatedly declined the invitation from Arthur and his wife to attend the crusade. I just did not have the strength. I appreciated their concern, but I had lost the will to live. Nothing really made sense to me anymore. I just wanted to be left alone.

"Today is the last day of the crusade," Arthur said to me on that memorable Friday. I looked at the three missionaries blankly and wished that they would stop disturbing me. Rosenau pleaded with me to come and let the evangelist pray for my healing. "God wants to heal you, Richard. Why don't you come and let God do a miracle for you?"

"A miracle? What miracle? Why would God do a miracle for me?" These were the thoughts that passed through my mind. And just then, the first miracle happened. The door to my heart, which had been shut tightly, suddenly loosened. For the first time, I wished that what these

noisy missionaries were saying could be true. Reluctantly, I nodded my head and whispered that I would come with them.

It took me some time to get dressed. I had not been out of the house for almost five months. It took a lot of effort to walk. Arthur and Edna supported me and I slowly got into the car. June drove the car gently to the crusade, which was less than a kilometer away from my house. When we got to the tent where the crusade was being held, I was helped out of the car and motioned to them to let me walk unassisted.

It was a long, slow but steady walk to the front. I could feel every eye in the place looking at me. Many of the students and staff had not seen me for months. I had become thin and gaunt. Everyone knew that I was terminally ill, and that I was only marking time.

I sat down in the front row and tried to concentrate on what the preacher was saying. The sermon was from Hebrews 9:27:

“And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.”

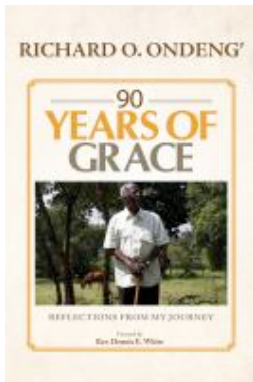
I listened to the preacher talking about the finality of death and the irreversible outcome of the choice we make before we die. I knew he was talking to me. I began to shake as he closed his Bible and made an appeal to those in the crowd who wanted to accept Christ as Saviour. I did not wait for anyone to prompt me. I knew for certain that God had brought this man to Nyang’ori for me. I stood up and walked unsteadily, but with great determination, to the front and repeated the “sinners’ prayer” after the evangelist.

I felt tears coming to my eyes. I was saved. Now I would not have to fear death. I stood there with my head bowed, wondering why it had taken me so many years to respond to Christ.

And then the voice of the preacher came again – this time with an intensity that startled me. “If you are sick or in pain, put your hand on the place where you are hurting, and I will pray for God to heal you,” he said.

I didn't know what part of my body to touch. I was sick all over. I was like a dead man walking. I put my right hand on my chest and listened as he prayed. I wanted so badly to believe that I would be healed, but my mind was full of doubt. God saw the desire of my heart, and He heard my feeble prayer. In that moment – without a shadow of doubt – I knew I had been healed. Almost involuntarily, I bent down to touch my knee. I had not been able to bend for months. My soul was suddenly flooded with joy. God had saved me. And then He had healed me.

I was still weak, and I knew that I would have to work on restoring the weight and strength that I had lost. But that was nothing. I was a new person, and a new journey was about to begin.



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