

HEROES + HERETICS

Kelly Hibbert looks at a missionary pioneer

HERO + HERETIC 27: HELEN ROSEVEARE

'Even in the midst of unimaginable cruelty and suffering and danger, his grace was sufficient'

How is Helen Roseveare remembered?

As a pioneering medical missionary? A renowned speaker and author in the late 20th century? A role model for Christian women? She may have been all these things, but I suspect she would not want to be remembered for them. She overcame enormous challenges, but she would not want us to think that they were overcome in her own strength. Helen Roseveare's identity was firmly rooted in Christ; her longing was to know more of him and to point others to him. She was unashamedly honest about the struggles she faced throughout her life. Through these struggles, God was able to use her (albeit unwillingly at times) in amazing ways. As we look at her life, we can learn much from her experiences.

background

Helen Roseveare was born in 1925 in Hertfordshire, England. She was the second of five children, and described herself as 'endlessly active, restless with animal spirits, always in mischief, with an urge to excel, to be noticed'¹ – traits that would remain



Helen Roseveare

IMAGE: PA

with her for life and which would underlie many of her personal trials as well as successes. She first resolved to become a missionary at the tender age of eight, whilst hearing about mission work in India² – *'When I grow up, I will go to tell other boys and girls about the Lord Jesus.'*

But it was during her teenage years at boarding school in Wales that Helen consciously began searching for God. Yet she later writes that her beliefs at this time were merely superficial:

*'I've no idea what I thought of God, or who I thought He was; but there was Somebody, God, who was bigger than everything around me, and I needed Him.'*³ At that time, she believed: *'I could reach Him only if I were absolutely honest.'*⁴

I imagine many of us can relate to that instinct that we can somehow reach God by our own efforts. Helen was keenly aware that everything in the world, including life itself, seemed useless and meaningless; there had to be something more. This led to further efforts on her own part to reach out after the 'Unseen' – she dabbled in Anglo-Catholicism and regularly attended Confessions and Mass.⁵ Yet there was still a great sense of emptiness and futility. It seemed that however earnestly and sincerely she tried to help others,



Kelly Hibbert is an FY3 doctor in Birmingham and CMF Deep:ER volunteer

there was a great void in her life.

Helen went to study medicine at Newnham College, Cambridge, in 1944. She experienced the same fears of leaving home, the same loneliness in starting university, and the same feelings of ignorance in her studies that many students at medical/nursing school can surely relate to! During her first term, she was struck by the friendliness and welcome of a group of Christian students in her College, and particularly by their love of Scripture. She writes of these students, *'Their lives and faces radiated a happiness and peace that was very nearly infectious, and quite obviously satisfying.'*⁶ Elsewhere, she writes: *'They had a peace about them that I found very intriguing.'*⁷ She began to accompany them to the Cambridge Inter-Collegiate Christian Union. A providential outbreak of mumps at home left her unable to return for the Christmas holidays, and this led her to attend a house party for training Christian leaders. Here it was that *'God poured out His grace in forgiveness, in cleansing from all the uncleanness of sin, and in revealing, at this time, the amazing wonder of the friendship of Christ.'*⁸

With a renewed determination to become a missionary, Helen joined the Worldwide Evangelisation Crusade (WEC) and spent several years living at the mission's headquarters. On one occasion she overheard herself being described as *'proud, always knowing better than others, unable to be told things or warned or criticised, difficult to live with.'*⁹ However, eventually, she was accepted as a member of the mission and following extensive



Helen Roseveare

preparations including a four-month crash course in French, and another four months studying tropical medicine, she departed for the Belgian Congo in 1953.

At first, Helen was based at Ibambi where she worked hard to set up a hospital and training centre. She was passionate to train national workers as 'nurse-evangelists',¹⁰ who could use their medical skills as a springboard for taking the gospel to the Congolese.

In 1955, four of her students passed the state examinations to qualify as assistant nurses. While rejoicing in their success, Helen was informed that the medical programme, and therefore herself, would be moved seven miles north, to Nebobongo, a disused leprosy colony. Here, she had to begin work from scratch. Initially she resented this change and was filled with anger. Seeing her rage, a fellow-missionary prayed for her, and Helen began to see that it was the Lord himself who was sending her to Nebobongo.¹¹ She fully trusted that God would use this move to make her more like Jesus, and she submitted willingly to his purposes.

Helen's life as a missionary in Nebobongo was filled with daily difficulties - the work there involved building a new hospital, constructing a village for the workers, teaching orphans based at the station, administrative tasks, medical responsibilities and leading Bible studies. She faced problems of understaffing and overworking to the extreme. Along with local Congolese staff, she established a 100-bed hospital and training centre and set up 48 local clinics.¹² Yet this was not the end of her story.



privilege of suffering

The Belgian Congo achieved independence in 1960, and a time of great political unrest followed. The constant threats, particularly for Westerners, led many of Helen's colleagues to leave the country, but she remained faithful to her call and steadfast to her African brothers and sisters. In 1964, the Simba rebellion broke out and Helen endured five months of captivity and savage mistreatment at the hands of the rebels. She was taken captive, humiliated, beaten and raped on two occasions. When speaking about this ordeal later, she stated that during the wild panic, horror and unknown fear '...suddenly, there was God. I didn't see a vision, I didn't hear a voice, I just knew with every ounce of my being that God was actually, vitally there... He surrounded me with his love and he seemed to whisper to me, "Twenty years ago, you asked me for the privilege of being a missionary. This is it. Don't you want it?"... it was as though he clearly said to me, "These are not your sufferings. They're not beating you. These are my sufferings. All I ask of you is the loan of your body." And an enormous relief swept through me.'¹³

After suffering much, Helen became aware again of God's 'wonderful, unchanging love, the full peace of his forgiveness'.¹⁴ This experience shaped her subsequent ministry, as she boldly testified that God's grace is all-sufficient. She was overwhelmed at the privilege of being trusted by God to endure suffering. She knew that whatever happened was part of God's plan, even if she couldn't see how or why.

dependence on grace

One of the wonderful themes of Helen's life is her

DOCTOR AMONG CONGO REBELS



This is the dramatic, most moving human story of the Congo Doctor—Dr. Helen Roseveare — during the days of the 'rebel' movement in Congo. In peril in an isolated mission station in north-east Congo Dr. Roseveare and her colleagues maintained their work against all odds. Those odds included personal assault, the death of colleagues, and the constant fear of brutality. But through the story shines the light of an inner calm which rested on a personal faith in the living God and the power of the Gospel. This is not only the story of a missionary miracle but a witness to the deliverance of a soul from the fear of death, and from the fear of worse than death.

The photo is of Dr. Roseveare with Lieut. Joe Wepener leading Command 54 which liberated her and her colleagues.

My Lord Katie. bit.ly/2LH579i

dependence on God's grace: 'My grace is sufficient for you' (2 Corinthians 12:9). Yet this is not something which came naturally to her and she is very honest in speaking of her reluctance to fully accept God's grace. During her first furlough in 1958, she resigned from being a missionary. This was partly borne out of frustration that she was a single woman without a husband to help with the work. Following this decision to resign, she

found 'I had no peace. I knew I had acted rashly and without seeking any guidance from God.'¹⁵ Yet at a Christian convention, she wrote: 'God graciously renewed my call to serve him'.¹⁶ She knew she would need God's grace every day to persevere in the work he had called her to - the grace of God made possible through Jesus's death on the cross.

battle against pride

Linked to this lesson in dependence on God's grace was a battle against pride. In a 1975 sermon entitled 'The Cost of Declaring His Glory', Helen said 'The first major cost was to my pride.'¹⁷ She writes of her early years in the Congo, 'I was so often critical and proud in my outlook. Along with this my communion with the Lord shrivelled... I longed for liberation and peace and joy.'¹⁸

Helen worked extremely hard to overcome many challenges whilst in the Congo, putting in long hours and carrying out a variety of tasks, often with little recognition. She strove for high standards in all aspects of her work. She resolved never to turn anyone away - to 'receive every visitor, whatever the hour, in His name and for His sake, showing His love.'¹⁹ She was dependent on prayer and walked closely with the Lord, prioritising

time with him. Yet despite testifying to the all-sufficiency of God's grace, Helen sensed God saying to her 'you want "Jesus plus". Plus a sense of success...' ²⁰ It was a personal spiritual battle: 'My heart ached. A battle was raging inside me... Yes, I did need others to think of me as a success. Yet, at the same time, my heart knew that Jesus was all I actually wanted or needed.' ²¹

What was the solution to this raging war? 'At last, broken-hearted, I confessed to God my pride, and told him 'Yes, I only want Jesus - not "Jesus plus."' In confessing her pride, and fixing her gaze on Jesus as the one who can meet all our needs, Helen experienced God's peace restored in her heart.

longing to know Christ better

On the night Helen became a Christian, a Bible teacher named Graham Scroggie wrote in her Bible, Philippians 3:10: 'I want to know Christ - yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.' ²² This became an immense desire for Helen - to know Jesus more deeply, even in the depths of suffering, and therefore grow to be more like him. Her wholehearted and earnest longing to please God, compelled by his love, shone through her life.

During an interview for the London Women's Convention in 2010, she was asked for any advice to share with the next generation of women. Her response is filled with passion and wisdom: 'Have you fallen in love with Jesus? I know you know he died to save you; I know you know you ought to love him. But do you love the Lord Jesus? Not just as Saviour and Friend, but as Lord and Master. Is he all in all to you?... Are you allowing God to be totally in control of everything, because of your love for him?' ²³

conclusion

Helen returned from the Congo in 1973 due to her mother's declining health. During her later years, she travelled around the world to speak of her experiences and wrote several books. She went to be with the Lord in December 2016.

reflections:

- Helen became a Christian at university through the witness of friends. Are we making the most of opportunities to share the love of Christ and to speak about him?
- Are we seeking 'Jesus plus'? Or are we resting in the knowledge that his grace is all-sufficient to meet our every need?
- Do we, like Helen, long to know Jesus better? Do we prioritise seeking to know him?
- Do we trust that God's plans are perfect, and that he uses all our experiences to make us more like him?

Recommended listening:

- Howard BC. The Extraordinary life of Helen Roseveare. The Gospel Coalition Podcast 28 September 2018. bit.ly/2Z1ydD7

Without doubt, she was a truly remarkable woman, a great hero of the faith, and we all have a lot to learn from her legacy. ■

REFERENCES

1. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*. Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2012:12
2. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:13
3. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:16
4. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:17
5. Howard BC. The Extraordinary life of Helen Roseveare. *The Gospel Coalition Podcast* 28 September 2018. bit.ly/2Z1ydD7
6. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:26
7. Roseveare H. *Enough*. Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2015:15
8. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:32
9. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:67
10. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:80
11. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:87-88
12. Jesus is worth it. *WEC*. bit.ly/2TqVIX6
13. Voelkel J. Helen Roseveare: courageous doctor in the Congo. *InterVarsity Urbana Students Mission Conference* 18 February 2007. bit.ly/2VGcAqI
14. Roseveare H. *Enough*:28
15. Roseveare H. *Enough*:24
16. Roseveare H. *Enough*:24
17. bit.ly/2lbeKL1
18. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:102
19. Roseveare H. *Give me this mountain*:93-94
20. Roseveare H. *Enough*:40
21. Roseveare H. *Enough*:40
22. Taylor J. A woman of whom the world was not worthy: Helen Roseveare (1925-2016). *The Gospel Coalition* 7 December 2016. bit.ly/2G9wUJw
23. Helen Roseveare: Have you fallen in love with Jesus? *10ofthose* June 1 2010. bit.ly/2G7jevT