



THE STORY OF ELKATAROT

AND OTHER ESSAYS BY JIM SHELBURNE

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal

Preface



"To look after orphans and widows in their distress," writes James, is religion "that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless" (1:27). Believing that, in a way that blesses the needy, requires discovering that they have real faces. On a visit to Africa, Jim Shelburne found his life changed by those faces. As he helps us look into the eyes of some beautiful but desperately needy people, perhaps God will help us see more clearly our own deep need to be of help.

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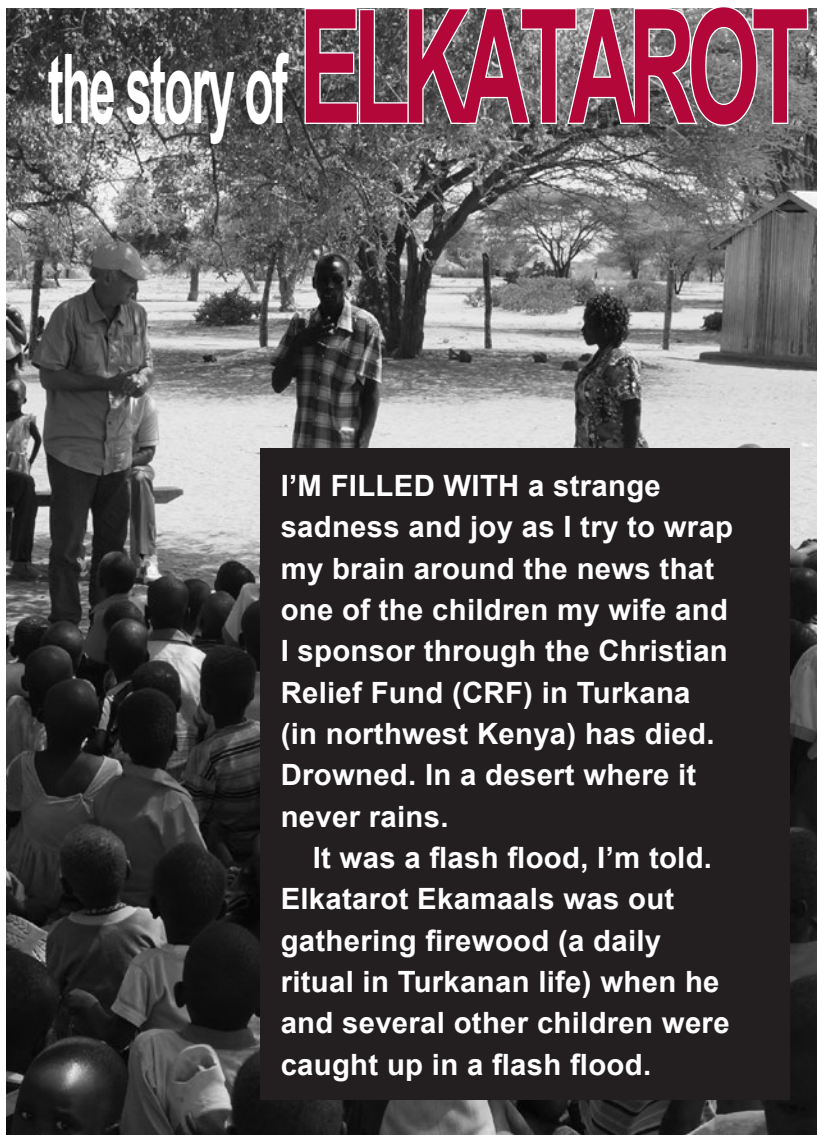
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The Kind That
MATTERS TO GOD**



Real religion,
the kind that passes
muster before God the
Father is this: Reach out to
the homeless and loveless
in their plight . . ."

* James 1
The Message



I'M FILLED WITH a strange sadness and joy as I try to wrap my brain around the news that one of the children my wife and I sponsor through the Christian Relief Fund (CRF) in Turkana (in northwest Kenya) has died. Drowned. In a desert where it never rains.

It was a flash flood, I'm told. Elkatarot Ekamaals was out gathering firewood (a daily ritual in Turkana life) when he and several other children were caught up in a flash flood.

Field workers were able to save the other kids, but Elkatarot could not be reached, and now he is dead, a week before his fourteenth birthday.

This makes me sad in so many ways. Holly and I sponsor several kids from Turkana (my church members sponsor, collectively, some 170 of them!), and I have no less than six pictures of Elkatarot in my office. His photos stand out because he is taller than most of the other kids, older. And there is that smile.

Most kids from this region don't smile much, partly because life is hard in a desert where it never rains and you have to walk miles for water. It's also partly because certain tribes in Africa don't smile in pictures. But Elkatarot almost always did because he wasn't like most kids. He was special, what we'd call here in the U.S. "special needs."

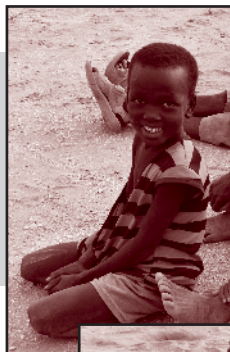
When I first met him four years ago, I was told by the

field workers that he was "slow, not right." But there he was, one of about three kids among more than fifty who kept catching my eye. And he was always smiling, very curious.

We were there in 2013 to tour CRF's project in Turkana, at that time consisting of about one school house and a few wells, the first fruits of a project to save people with clean drinking water. This place was called Nadabal.

Nadabal was truly out in the middle of nowhere, a sort of mini-oasis in a seemingly God-forsaken desert, made into a community by virtue of a new well. The water brought animals, and a village had sprung up around it simply because of the water. A church met there under one of the few shade trees nearby, and that morning hundreds of people were on hand for services. Church. Under a tree. It tends to last a long time in Africa!

It was after a dozen baptisms miles away and a 3 p.m. lunch (a goat, slaughtered and barbecued on the spot, a meal for chiefs and elders) that my good friend Francis Bii came around



behind me, leading Elkatarot. He said, "This child needs your help. He needs



clothes and food and schooling and to know about Jesus." I must have, in my awkwardness, said something to the effect, "I'll bet we can do something; I'll consider it." They left.

In about twenty minutes, Francis came by with a dozen of the most forlorn, dirty, ragged kids you can imagine. He tapped on my shoulder.

"Pastor Jim, these children also need your help."

I felt sure we could find sponsors for thirteen kiddos back in the States, so I nodded, "Sure. We'll see what we can do."

About twenty minutes later, he came back around, this time with about forty kids! "Pastor Jim, these children," he started.

I finished the sentence: "Need my help?" Before an hour had passed every orphan within reach was rounded up, photographed, interviewed, and thus became potential CRF kids, the only thing

standing between their orphaned destitution and a life with love, food, clothing, medical treatment, and education was a willing American sponsor.

I'm proud to say that our church has never failed to sponsor a CRF Turkanan child since that day, given the opportunity. Lord willing, it will always be so!

But Elkatarot was the first, you see. He was the one Francis and God used to finish breaking my heart. He was the one, with needs beyond my imagination, needs that could mostly be met for my "magnanimous" (I'm kidding)



ELKATAROT EKAMAALS
2003-2017

sacrifice of \$35 a month—a pittance out of the well-spring of wealth God has given me and given you. How could I have possibly said, "No"? Saying "Yes" has changed my life and

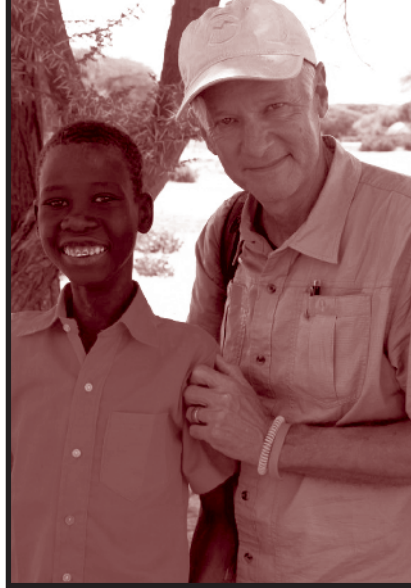
the life of my church. And it changed Elkatarot's life dramatically.

God has used a gangly, slow, mentally-challenged "not right" African orphan as the first seed. Because of Elkatarot a dozen water wells exist today that weren't there four years ago. New school houses and missionary residences and churches and irrigated farms that weren't

there then are now. And ambulances and motor-cycles. And dozens of supported, trained ministers.

There are hundreds of souls who have been saved and thousands of people who are alive because they have clean water to drink. And because these people are alive, they will have the chance to drink the living water of Jesus.

Connect the dots, and they all lead back to Elkatarot and the God who made him special, the God who used him to bring about God-sized things. Isn't that God's way?



GOD USED ONE SPECIAL CHILD TO MAKE THE PLIGHT OF MANY NEEDY CHILDREN REAL.

So I'm sad to think of this "son" of mine now dead in a desert somewhere. I need a funeral to go to, some way to do something.

I think about the last moments of his life and hope he wasn't terrified long, hope God granted him a quick transition

from pestilence to Paradise.

The best thing I can imagine doing is making a life-changing difference in the life of some more Turkunan orphans. If Francis shows up today, I'm in real trouble!

I'm sad, but I'm joy-filled

to know that in the last four years of his life, Elkatarot was known, loved, taught, nurtured, clothed, fed, and introduced to Jesus Christ.

I'm joy-filled that this simple-minded-ever-smiling-very-special-special-needs-child was used by God to make "starving African children" real and personal to me, and to do the same for our whole church. I only got to talk to Elkatarot face to face on two occasions. I only wanted him to know that he was loved

and known and indeed special. Now he knows that in a perfect way. And I hope he knows all that God made possible because he was there that day behind my chair.

Elkatarot, the next time I see you will be in a place more different and even farther away, yet closer and more familiar than we can imagine. I'll be seeing you in heaven, along with all of the other people who are there because of you, special child!



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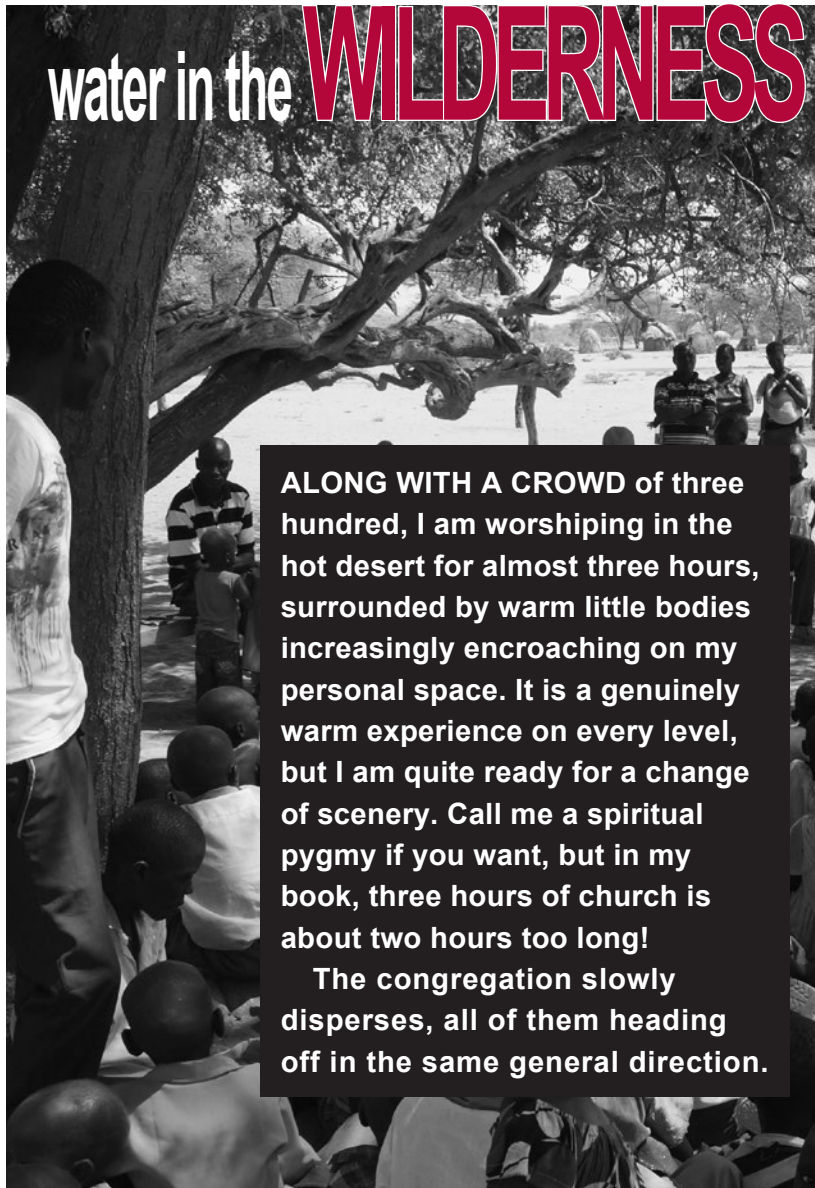
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ALONG WITH A CROWD of three hundred, I am worshiping in the hot desert for almost three hours, surrounded by warm little bodies increasingly encroaching on my personal space. It is a genuinely warm experience on every level, but I am quite ready for a change of scenery. Call me a spiritual pygmy if you want, but in my book, three hours of church is about two hours too long!

The congregation slowly disperses, all of them heading off in the same general direction.

They seem to have done this before. Desert extends as far as you can see in all directions, a bland palette of sandy sameness. We four white guys load into the truck and begin our drive. I'm wondering as we drive west, where in this desert can you find a collection of any kind of water suitable for a baptism? It is desert—hot, dusty, and dry—but with surprisingly large trees dotting the landscape with leather leaves and branches covered with two-inch-long needle-sharp spines. I ask my friend Francis what they are called. He waits, and then, with perfect comedic timing, answers, “Thorn trees.”

There are also smaller shrub-like plants, and tufts of tough clumpgrass, mostly dead. Termite mounds rise fifteen or more feet into cathedral-like spires of insect devotion. We motor through the desert making up our own road as we go, and suddenly the landscape changes, a

literal shift of the sand color as if the great Artist opened a new tube of brown that didn't quite match the previous. The sand darkens more as we near the river, and as almost instantaneously we find ourselves in palm groves, the humidity quadruples. We drive as close as we can, then hike a quarter mile on to the river's edge, through a tropical jungle somehow finding itself lost in the middle of a desert.

Aided by modern horsepower, we arrive there long before those walking, and I wonder out loud why people struggling to find water don't live near the river. Three answers. One, this river floods drastically in the rainy season when the far-off mountains empty their load in terrifying torrents. Second, a month or two from now, this will be as parched and dry as a West Texas river. Good reasons.

The third answer is more telling: typhoid is in the water. It seems almost a cruel joke

that a people dying for a drink can just as easily die from a drink. It is so in many places around our globe. But I am thankful that, due to the generosity of believers from the church I serve in Amarillo,



Texas, thousands of poor people do have clean water, and fewer of them will



die. Water is life.

It's hot and now very humid, the intense near-equatorial sun bearing down. We scout about the river a bit, and then I look for shade. Then comes the sound of distant drumbeats, an apropos soundtrack in the African jungle; it announces the impending arrival of the hundred and a half who have made a three-mile walk in the searing sun to witness baptisms.

Maybe a hundred more emerge upstream and stand in the river, close enough to watch the miracle of water soon to come. I'm envious of their cooler position, but I've heard enough stories about water-borne parasites that I don't care or dare to join them. Two African ministers step down into the water, the "shore" quickly becoming extremely full. Then one by one, the candidates filter through the crowd and step into the swirling river; they submit to burial, each then rising to walk in newness of life.

They are all sizes and shapes, sexes and ages. I see teenagers. I see grandmothers. I see a man who is the goat dealer in town; he strikes me a bit as a flim-flam

man with a quick smile and the ability to make a quicker shilling. Perhaps he is being baptized because it will be good for business? Or maybe, I hope, it is because Jesus really has won his heart. (It worked that way for Zacchaeus.) He comes up smiling.

This ceremony moves slowly like everything else in Africa, and those of us in the riverbank gallery are wilting. We sit for a bit in a tiny shade under a banana tree, but many spiders got there first, and we



soon opt to stand. I then withdraw to another shady area, and find out too late that I am in fact in the nursery, complete with babies that have been laid

on the ground asleep. Before long, a lot of nursing is going on in the nursery, but no one seems to care that a couple of white guys are standing there.

As the thirty baptisms wind down, another post-baptismal service commences closer to the water, and my friend Travis and I are called from our shade to say a word and then have a prayer. I assign the word to Travis, and I lead the prayer—a rather soggy one. The last time I was this damp inside my clothes I was

preaching a
July funeral
in Hope,
Arkansas!

We slowly
dismiss and
begin the
drive back to
the Nadabal
community.
As we were
leaving, I had
noticed a
fire, a grate,
and a guy in
native dress
with a bow
and spear,
carrying
a freshly-
skinned
something.

Yes, this
is “dinner on the ground” at
the Nadabal Church of Christ.
We are escorted back to the
only four wooden hand-crafted
chairs in the village, seats of
honor. We are told to relax.
Water is provided to wash our
hands, British hospitality at its



**“WE ARE ADOPTED
BY THE SAME
FATHER, AND WE
SERVE THE SAME
KING.”**

we are given a very large, very
sharp knife. A handful of salt
is placed near the meat. I love
barbecue, but I don’t usually
kill a beast, skin it, slice it with
a spear, and cook it the same
day. We’re a long way from the
USDA, but who could refuse

best, even
in the bush.
Then we
are served
dinner. On
the ground.
Literally.

Roasted
pieces of
goat meat—
ribs, shanks,
shoulders,
and parts
I don’t
recognize—
are laid
before us
on card-
board. It is a
king’s meal.
The meat
is dropped
there, and

such elegant hospitality?

The meat is extremely
hot, and it tastes wonderful.
We each eat a respectable
amount, then our bones and
leavings are carried to a group
of men who re-gnaw them
and eat every piece of fat and
gristle we could not chew. Even
the dog, evidently a believer
himself, gets a bone. That we
are the only people eating
at this point humbles me;
meat will certainly not be on
everyone’s menu.

After the meal, water is once
again poured over our hands;
the next course is Chai—
Kenyan tea—a mixture of tea,
water, sugar, and milk, heated
over charcoal. I love it!

As I sip the last of my tea,
Francis Bii brings around a
little orphan girl. Chroline
suffers from a club foot and
some hand deformity. Then
he brings Elkatarot. Mental
challenges. No home. They
need someone who will pay
\$35 a month to see that they
are housed, fed, clothed,

schooled, remembered, loved,
and taught about Jesus. In
about fifteen heartbeats, I
am their sponsor, and they
suddenly have “a place at the
table,” the first of a hundred
our church will sponsor.

These Kenyans living
in a dauntingly extreme
wilderness 12,000 miles from
my doorstep live a life as
different from mine as fire is
from water. They have their
rituals; I have mine. They
have their language; I have
mine. We have different
worries, different hopes. We
dress differently.

But the simple, mysterious
act of baptism has bound
us this day. We are adopted
by the same Father, and we
serve the same King. We are
saved by the same Lord, and
indwelled by the same Spirit.
In Christ we are exactly the
same.

How could I not have known
that before? I’m sure that I did,
but it makes me feel
good to know it again.



kipkaren's **PIED PIPERS**

AS I WRITE, I've been waking up in Africa for about a week now. What a week it has been! By nightfall we will be hundreds of miles away from here in the northern desert town of Lodwar, up in the desert region of Kenya called Turkana. We'll be seeing what a water well can do, and we hope to see the proposed sites for wells our church will be drilling.

But our first stop today is just around the corner as we set out to visit the homes of church members and school faculty in a slum known as Kipkaren.

As we walk down the road into Kipkaren, the streets are abuzz. It's Saturday, and the sixty percent of the kids fortunate enough to go to school are out of school. It's Saturday, but the work of survival goes on. A water channel beside the road is filled with rushing water the color of detergent, like dirty dishwater. Dirty dishwater may be the best thing flowing in this channel. Standing in the "stream," countless women are bent over, washing clothes in that wastewater.

All along these streets are little stores and shops, some housed in dilapidated shacks, most smaller than a snow cone stand; many are just set up on the dirt street. They sell bananas, potatoes, tomatoes, or onions; one grinds corn.

There is a butcher shop with some unknown mystery meat hanging unrefrigerated in the open air. Charcoal sellers are all over the slum, their little paint and coffee cans full of homemade charcoal. One

vendor sells dried fish—tilapia—and another will, believe it or not, sell you minutes or re-charge your cell phone, for a charge!

The slum is vibrant, in its own way. People mill everywhere accompanied by a cacophony of sights and sounds and smells. Garbage is everywhere, rotting in the humid tropical sun. Wastewater runs out from the shacks, flowing in channels and ditches through the community. At one time the concrete channels were probably a fairly ingenious British-designed system that served rudely but capably, but the British left long ago, and infrastructures have long since failed.

We are on a walking mission this cool early winter morning. We start by visiting a new apartment complex, nothing like what you'd expect, but nonetheless materializing from piles of building materials on a dirt lot in the slum. One of the local CRF directors, my good friend

Francis Bii, is the visionary who has taken out loans to provide these new houses for rent. The rent will be about one hundred dollars a month, for a two-room apartment about the size of a single car garage, maybe; but it will have electricity, concrete, and tile floors,

running water, a toilet, a shower, and a kitchen sink. It will become home soon to some lucky slum dweller who can afford it. Not many can. But some can.

This first new construction in this slum in decades is a reassuring sign of hope that lives



**“I WILL BE
WRESTLING FOR
A LONG TIME WITH
WHAT MY WEALTH
REQUIRES OF ME.”**

and want to get a closer look. The group gets larger by the minute. At each house we visit we are invited inside. Guests must sit down, and proper customs must be observed.

We stop at one home of a teacher, Nelson, who is also

can change for the better and cycles of poverty can be broken.

We trek deeper into the slum. All along the way, we’ve been attracting a following of children. Some of them attend the school we support here; most are just intrigued by the strange parade of white people

using a micro-loan from CRF to start a small farm with chickens, sheep, and a few cattle. Others will borrow a little money to buy a sewing machine, or a maize grinder, or a cinder-block press—or even to buy bananas to resell for a tiny profit.

These people are amazingly resourceful and brimming with appreciation. I find myself feeling filthy rich; I will be wrestling for a long time with how much I have and how responsible that makes me for the welfare of these in Kipkaren. The cure for self-centered greed and the idolatry of materialism is simple: give it away. I know it will please God if I do more of that. I must. And now.

I will forever remember the homes of Nelson and Simon and Emily and many others; I will remember their joy in our visit, and I will remember to share from my abundance.

As we round the corner back to where we started a few hours ago, our entourage has grown from four to forty! We are the pied pipers of Kipkaren.

We say some good-byes. The mice following us disperse back into the bubbling fabric of humanity that is Kipkaren. I will remember it not as a slum, but as the home of some joyful, loving, caring, intelligent, faithful, generous, beautiful people—all just trying to live another day. You would think that our visits today were an unimaginable blessing. But we are the ones who have been blessed.

A long time ago, a visitor named Jesus traveled all the way from heaven to come into the slum of sin, not just to visit but to live with us right here in the dirt and muck and sewage. It’s remarkable that he would come so far and stoop so low and then be treated so badly. But because he came, and lived and died, and then lived again—one day I’ll be leaving the sin-slum myself. I can’t wait to see what his place is like!

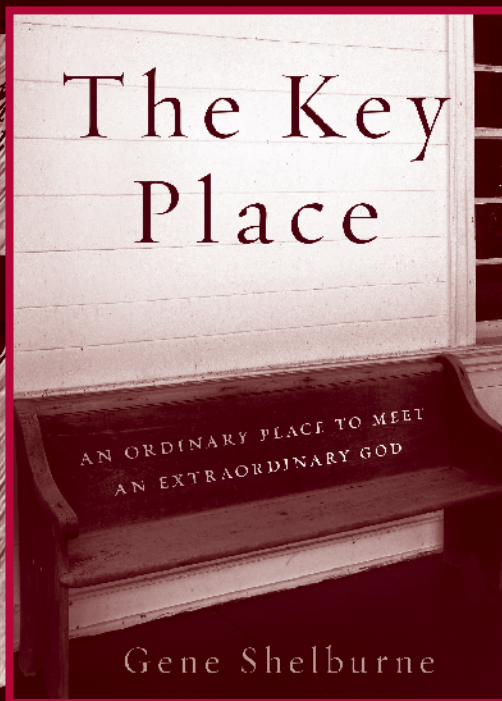
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GOD SEEMS TO WHISPER
IN OUR EARS AND TUG
AT OUR HEARTS.

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