

A Child Shall Lead: A Forbidden Freedom

Isaiah 2:1-5

Iqbal Masih was born in 1983 in the small commercial city of Maridke, a few kilometers from Lahore, the provincial capital of Punjab in southern Pakistan. His Christian family had little income to survive, made worse once his father, Saif, deserted the family when Masih was barely of an age to walk. When his mother, Inayat, borrowed money from a local businessman, Arshad, a carpet master, she found herself in a far worse situation financially. Two years passed and she was still in debt, forcing her to do the only thing she could do, i.e., offer Arshad her youngest child as collateral to work in his carpet factory to pay off the loan. The agreement called it an “apprenticeship.”

Iqbal, only four years old at the time, joined dozens of other bonded laborers (children and adults alike) making carpets to sell in foreign markets. In this all-too-common arrangement, the debt, of course, was never intended to be paid off, as Arshad charged for Iqbal’s tools and food, along with adding interest on the loan and “penalties” for Iqbal’s mistakes, while paying him only the equivalent of 3 cents a day for 12 hours of work, six days a week. It was, by design, to be a lifelong form of slave labor. Though this practice had been already outlawed in Pakistan, because of local corruption and bribery, bonded labor was rarely prosecuted.

Iqbal spent his childhood tying knots into the ends of carpets. By the time Iqbal turned ten, he made up his mind to escape. Like all the children in the factory, he suffered from chronic malnutrition and unbearable work conditions (especially in the severe heat of the summer), while routinely being beaten or whipped for any slowdown in pace. One day, along with a few of his friends, Iqbal escaped and immediately went to the local police to

report the deplorable conditions of the factory. However, rather than listening, let alone intervening, the police simply returned all of them to Arshad (and collecting the “finder’s fee”) and even went so far as to assist him in punishing the boys, chaining them to the carpet looms. A miserable fate made worse.

It didn’t take long for Iqbal to find another way to successfully flee the factory. This time, instead of heading to the police, he left the city altogether, hoping to secure his freedom. Nearby, he came upon a street celebration sponsored by the Brick Layers Union, which proclaimed workers’ rights and protections. There he was told child labor had already been outlawed and that the government had canceled all debts which had justified bonded labor. Except Iqbal’s situation exposed the ongoing practice, so he made his way to the front to tell his story. Immediately upon this revelation, one of the organizers took Iqbal under his wing and orchestrated a protest to bring public pressure upon Arshad’s factory. Within weeks they were successful, as Iqbal’s carpet master was forced to free all of his bonded laborers.

Iqbal’s story immediately became celebrated and representative of the entire crusade against child labor in Pakistan and beyond. One perk for Iqbal was the opportunity to begin school for the first time; he entered the Bonded Labour Liberation Front school for former child slaves where, in a few months, he established a pace to complete his studies in half the normal time. As his understanding of labor laws and human rights grew, he dreamed of becoming a human rights lawyer someday while speaking eloquently of his experiences at public rallies and protests. “Children should have pens in their hands, not tools,” he proclaimed.

Because of Iqbal's powerful testimony, Pakistan itself began to change. In less than a year, over three thousand child laborers were freed under the BLLF's efforts to bring political pressure on local government and businesses. "I would like to do what Abraham Lincoln did," Iqbal often commented. "I want to do the same in Pakistan." His passion and youthful energy gained him prominence in the anti-slavery movement not only in his country, but increasingly around the world. As he proudly noticed, "I used to be afraid of the carpet masters, but now they're afraid of me!"

In 1994, Iqbal, now eleven, was invited to Boston to receive the Reebok Human Rights award. He came to realize that many of the Pakistani carpets were selling for thousands of dollars in the West on the backs of child labor. He pressed this point especially when invited to speak in nearby schools and left his impact on thousands of students and teachers. The Broad Meadows Middle School in Quincy, MA, for instance, took up the cause of child labor and raised nearly \$150,000 to establish a new school named for Iqbal in his hometown.

However, what few people in the West knew was the impact he was leaving on the carpet industry back home. It soon became clear months later when on Easter Sunday, April 16, 1995, Iqbal was shot to death while riding his bike. He was just shy of thirteen. The police arrested a local farmer and charged him with the crime, but behind this cowardly assassination were the carpet masters.

Though tragic on so many levels, Iqbal's life inspired people everywhere. Twelve-year-old Canadian, Craig Keilberger, was moved by Iqbal's story and started his own charity, Free the Children, which has now grown to over 5,000 chapters worldwide; in Pakistan a foundation was also established in Iqbal's name. He received many awards during his short life,

and was recognized posthumously with the World Children's Prize in 2000. Around the globe to this day, Iqbal is still remembered and honored by the thousands of people who have been freed from child slavery and by those who continue his work, including 2014 Nobel Peace Prize co-recipient, Kailash Satyarthi, who dedicated his award to Iqbal's memory. The legacy of hope for so many from this Pakistani child, a true victim of poverty, who fought for freedom from a cruel form of slavery continues to change the world for good.

Iqbal's story is not unique by any means. There are so many children who have stood up and accomplished a great deal in combatting the evils of human civilization. It's hard not to be impressed by the way children can see the world as it should be and in cases of injustice, often will state things more clearly and forthrightly than adults, even if they are less sophisticated in how they comprehend matters. Many children seem to be wired to have a keen sense of justice—of what's fair, of what's not right—something that they want corrected, even if they aren't sure why it's wrong. It's evident in sibling squabbles, or in playing sports or games, or when they take note of something that bothers them or hear about some injustice in the news. Adults usually are less idealistic and more cautious—more likely to put things into perspective, or to qualify or explain things away, whereas kids are likely to be indignant and take injustice to heart. They don't merely want to think about correcting wrongs; they want to act in concrete ways to make things better. Perhaps, that's why we are often charmed by the voices and actions of children who see a wrong and want to make it right. Or, in their innocent suffering, they help us recognize a terrible injustice done to them so we will remedy it.

Such is the story of Nkosi Johnson. Nkosi was born Xolani Nkosi on 4 February 1989 in a black township east of Johannesburg, South Africa—almost a year to the day before Nelson Mandela was released from prison. In those eventful times, the cracks in the apartheid system were beginning to show, but another prejudice was taking over. Nkosi’s mother was HIV-positive, which was passed onto her son; he became one of more than 70,000 HIV-infected babies born in South Africa every year. Nkosi was more than a statistic; he survived beyond his second year—considered unusual given the prognosis. The virus took its toll on his mother and him, and soon they were admitted to an AIDS care center in Johannesburg.

It was there he met Gail Johnson, a volunteer who had lost a family friend to AIDS. “It was a very personal and mutual understanding,” Gail said looking back. “I had a graphic encounter with an AIDS death close to my family, and I wanted to do something more than talk about it. And there was Nkosi. All I had to do was to reach out to him.” Nkosi’s mother asked Gail to take care of her child upon her impending death.

Nkosi, who was already living on borrowed time, was 8-years-old when Gail became his foster mother. She attempted to enroll him in school, but was denied when his HIV status was discovered. The two of them fought for his right and eventually won their case. However, it would take much more to convince parents and students that he, and others like him, were not to be feared and ostracized. Their case became a litmus test in South Africa, as prejudice against blacks was often replaced with fear of those with AIDS. Proper information and education were a must, which became their new cause for hope and justice. Workshops and educational encounters were organized, not only in Johannesburg, but around the country with Nkosi speaking for the rights of HIV-infected children. He

became an instant celebrity with his passion in humanizing so many South Africans battling AIDS.

According to one report,

[Nkosi's] big moment came in July 2000, when he addressed delegates at the 13th International AIDS conference in Durban. A tiny figure in a shiny dark suit and sneakers, 11-year-old Nkosi Johnson held an audience of 10,000 delegates in occasionally tearful silence as he told his story.

“Care for us and accept us—we are all human beings,” he said at the conclusion of his speech. “We are normal. We have hands. We have feet. We can walk, we can talk, we have needs just like everyone else. Don’t be afraid of us—we are all the same.”¹

Later in the year, he came to Atlanta to speak at a similar conference held there.

Upon his return from the U.S., his health took a severe downturn. Nkosi was diagnosed with HIV-related brain trauma, causing seizures and leaving him in a coma. He passed away on the first of June 2001 after 12 years of unexpected, yet profoundly remarkable and productive, life.

At his funeral, the now former Prime Minister of South Africa, Nelson Mandela, raised Nkosi up as a true hero for their country and for the world. The government stepped up their efforts to address AIDs and to bring victims in from the shadows of society for effective treatment and support. Nkosi’s legacy continues to this day in the development of two health centers in Johannesburg, called “Nkosi’s Haven,” dedicated to help AIDs patients live as productively and well as possible. Nkosi in his young life brought hope to thousands of people in his country and around the world by being the face and name of HIV/AIDs-infected children. Indeed, a child shall lead.

One last story of hope and freedom from here in the U.S. Ruby Bridges was born on September 8, 1954 in Tylertown, Mississippi, growing

¹www.nkosishaven.org

up on the farm that her parents and grandparents sharecropped. When she was four, her parents moved to New Orleans hoping for a better life.

Ruby was born the same year that the Supreme Court changed the laws of the land in the sweeping anti-segregation decision, *Brown vs. Board of Education*. When Ruby was in kindergarten, she attended an all-black school miles away from her home, though a whites-only elementary school was a mere five blocks down the street. Implementing a desegregation mandate was not easy on the local level. Due to the court decision, the district had to prove they were abiding by the federal mandate to desegregate. So they administered a test for black students across the district to determine if they qualified educationally to attend a white school (which says a lot in itself!). Apparently, the test was deliberately made difficult to minimize success.

The results were not made public until the local chapter of the NAACP pressed the issue. It turned out, Ruby was one of six students who passed the test and qualified. That, however, would be the least daunting challenge. The real test took place on November 14, 1960, when federal marshals escorted Ruby and her mother five blocks down the street to her new school. They were greeted by protesters screaming racial epithets and obscenities from behind a line of police and barricades. Ruby didn't realize they were directed at her. When she was brought into the school, the gravity of this situation became all too evident, as she shunned by students and staff, and was not allowed to attend class, but was placed in the Principal's office for the entire day.

Her second day passed by in a similar way. On the third day, one teacher finally stepped up to volunteer to teach her. Her name was Barbara Henry—a first year teacher from Boston. As the story is told:

“Mrs. Henry,” as Ruby would call her even as an adult, greeted her with open arms. Ruby was the only student in Henry’s class, because parents pulled or threatened to pull their children from [what would have been] Ruby’s class and send them to other schools. For a full year, Henry and Ruby sat side by side at two desks, working on Ruby’s lessons. Henry was very loving and supportive of Ruby, helping her not only with her studies but also with the difficult experience of being ostracized.²

Her counsel was warranted. For months, Ruby had to face daily abuse from hostile protesters—one who threatened to poison her, another who put a black doll in a small wooden coffin—but this little girl stood up through it all to continue attending school. The administration, however, feared violence and wouldn’t allow Ruby to eat in the cafeteria with other children, or go to the bathroom without federal marshals escorting her. Later one of the marshals remarked about her courage as a six-year-old, who didn’t cower or complain, but just kept coming to school marching in “like a soldier” to prove she belonged there.

Ruby’s resilience was extraordinary. By her second year at the school, she managed to make it on her own. Marshals no longer protected her, nor was Mrs. Henry there, as her contract was not renewed by the district. But Ruby remained and to her credit, things seem to change. She eventually finished grade school and then attended integrated junior and senior high schools. She went on to a career as an American Express travel agent and lives to this day in New Orleans.

For all she went through, Ruby Bridges received few awards or public honors. She faced the pernicious monster of racism as a courageous six-year-old and stands as one of the pioneers of school integration. In her adult years, Ruby reconnected with Barbara Henry (actually meeting again on Oprah Winfrey’s show). She has returned to her grade school as a

² “Ruby Bridges,” www.biography.com.

volunteer to encourage parents to get involved with the schools their children attend. In 1999, she formed the Ruby Bridges Foundation,

promoting the values of tolerance, respect, and appreciation of all differences. Through education and inspiration, the foundation seeks to end racism and prejudice. As its motto goes, “Racism is a grown-up disease and we must stop using our children to spread it.”³

Today, sixty-two-year-old Ruby Bridges Hall continues to carry the stubborn courage she demonstrated as a child to bring hope to her world.

“A child shall lead”—this is our Advent theme this year. These three—Iqbal, Nkosi, and Ruby—in their own way brought hope to their world which denied them freedom. There are countless examples of extraordinary children who have faced the challenges of their time and found freedom forbidden to them and others. We can learn from the minds, voices, and examples of children and youth to our great benefit.

Indeed, the prophet Isaiah had it right—for us to find our way back to the way we should be—where being fair and just and merciful lies at the heart of who we are—where the peaceable kingdom begins to be realized—where swords are made into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks and goodwill is cultivated—it takes a child (or child-like vision and aspiration) to lead us there. May we take this to heart and embrace such idealism and hope while we ponder the meaning of the divine presence in the lives of God’s youngest messengers.

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³ Ibid.