

Dear Reader,

Over a decade ago, I visited Juba, in southern Sudan, to research this novel. While I had dreams of encouraging the people in their struggle for freedom and commend their bravery in the face of oppression, something quite different happened. I fell in love with the Sudanese people.

Through interviews and listening to stories, I sensed their incredible faith. We laughed, cried, and even faced danger. I learned to rely on “Jesus is enough.” My two-story home and double-car garage, my full pantry, health insurance, church, and freedoms I took for granted took on new meaning. I was convicted of my selfishness, and my spirit weighed what was essential to life. Did I understand “Jesus is enough” through the eyes of someone who’d lost his family in the fighting, limped without a leg, or lost loved ones to disease? I wanted good things for the Sudanese, but more importantly I wanted them to experience the peace of their children walking the roads of their homeland without fear.

Long Walk Home is a snapshot of how three people from separate cultures faced the realities of southern Sudan. I shed many tears in the writing process, and I imagine you will too as you read it. Don’t forget the Sudanese. They need our prayers and our support.

Thank you, my friends.

DiAnn

Long Walk Home

by

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Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Carol Stream, Illinois

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed.

2 Corinthians 4:8–9

Chapter 1

Warkou, along the Lol River in southern Sudan

2003

Paul Farid drew in a breath and held it, the magnificence of the unfolding springtime terrain filling his senses. Captivated by the lush earth below him, he scanned the area for signs of government soldiers who might have his plane in their sights. He could see for miles across the vast southern Sudan. Herds of gazelle, antelope, and zebra, along with an occasional lion, dotted the plain—some finding shelter from the scorching sun beneath a lone tree while others raced aimlessly about. Birds scattered in a rush of flapping wings, rising above the tall grass into a cloud and soaring gracefully across the sky until they found another spot to roost. A tingling fluttered in Paul's stomach. The sensation greeted him every time he flew over Sudan. The mystery and splendor lured him in, like an intoxicating spell that refused to let him go. He was the intruder, the only one who had not dwelt among the southern Sudanese for centuries.

Paul did not intend to lose his Mitsubishi MU-2—a twin-engine turboprop aircraft, the missionary cream of the crop—to any Muslim bent on destroying or confiscating food and medical supplies targeted for the needy civilians. Sometimes Feed the World (FTW) had permission from the government in Khartoum to deliver provisions to the starving masses caught in the civil war strife, but not today. Despite the danger, Paul was bringing much-needed aid to the village of Warkou in the province of Bahr al-Ghazal. It lay along the Lol River in a setting so breathtaking that it rivaled man's thoughts of paradise. He had committed to help those affected by the government's genocide in this beautiful but turbulent land.

The countryside looked peaceful, serene, as though untouched by the forces that could erupt at any moment into an explosion of violence and mayhem aimed at the innocent. Not far to the east, the White Nile snaked through Sudan. Some called the river the lifeblood of the country. Others claimed the waterway as the entrance to Eden. To the inhabitants, it served as a symbol of hope.

Just to the west of the plane, a worn path would serve as Paul's landing strip. A few cows and goats ambled in the middle until the noise of the jet engine seized their attention. At the sound of the aircraft's high-pitched screams, the animals scrambled.

Paul focused his attention beyond the makeshift landing strip and noted the grass huts of Warkou, which meant "bend of the river." He peered closer to view the several craters below. How many had been killed or wounded in the latest bombing? Not a single person roamed beneath him. When the distinct hum of a plane alerted the villagers, they ran for bomb shelters. He didn't blame them. They had learned to keep their mouths open so as not to damage their ears from the concussion of the bombs and to run for shelter when the bombing and shooting started, but many still became casualties. Nothing saved their churches, schools, and medical clinics. The bombs were crude—metal drums filled with explosives and metal—designed to inflict maximum death and destruction.

With the area cleared before him, Paul put down the flaps and cruised over the rough landing strip. He studied the area in all directions for debris and ruts along the dirt path, taking special note of blowing dust to calculate the direction of the wind. He laughed at three cows headed in different directions from the incoming plane. The following moment, he circled the area and repeated his inspection.

Certain of flying into the wind, he snatched up his landing checklist with his left hand and gripped the control wheel. With both feet on the rudders, Paul used his right hand to quickly flip switches and levers in a steady, organized flow. Once completed, he ran through the checklist, then replaced it in a tight, upper-left-hand corner until needed

again. No matter how experienced the pilot, one little mistake could make the difference between a safe landing and tragedy.

“Here we go.” Adrenaline raced through Paul’s veins. He loved flying, but he loved his mission and the God who had called him to serve the southern Sudanese more. The cost did not matter, only the purpose.

At the beginning of the runway, he placed the landing gear switch in the down position. The speed of his plane decreased and created tremendous wind noise inside the aircraft. He lowered the airspeed to 130 knots, then to 110, using the precision necessary for a smooth, safe landing. When the wheels touched down, dirt and dust flew everywhere, alerting the countryside to his presence. If the Government of Sudan soldiers were in the area, they now had no doubt of his location.

Once the engine ceased its earsplitting hum, Paul double-checked his procedures before climbing from the cockpit and taking shelter under one of the wings. He wiped his forehead, already beaded with sweat.

“Hello,” he called to the still-unseen villagers. He knew they understood Arabic. “I have food and medical supplies from Feed the World.” His gaze swept over every hut and tree in the area, knowing those who hid among them could hear every word but were afraid to show their faces. He would be fearful too. “I need to speak to Dr. Larson Kerr.”

From behind a hut an elderly man appeared, then three more men and two women. Slowly more people crept forward with mothers and children lagging behind.

“Greetings from Feed the World.” He waved, grinning. “Is Dr. Kerr available?”

“Yes, I’m here.” A woman stepped from the group. Shorter than the towering Dinkas, she had a ruddy complexion and thick mass of sandy-colored hair, worn in a ponytail, that immediately set her apart from the ebony-skinned, dark-haired villagers native to this land.

Larson Kerr is a woman?

He'd heard tales about the doctor's tenacious ability to work incredibly long hours and travel to remote areas in the name of healing. Dr. Kerr also ventured into the oil-rich regions to aid the injured and help the victims caught in the cross fire of war to reach safety. He had skimmed documentaries of how the doctor was the first to climb from the bomb shelters to seek out the wounded. The words flooded his memory. As he gazed into her impassive face, respect and admiration sealed his thoughts.

Dressed in khaki shorts, a faded T-shirt with the logo of Ohio State, and hiking boots, she walked toward him with long, purposeful strides. In the States he would have been amused at her pace, but not here. Here he understood what drove her.

Her calloused hand reached to grab his. "Paul Farid?" she asked in an American accent. "You have the supplies?" Her striking blue eyes bored into his. They were not the least bit friendly— instead suspicious, challenging.

"Yes." He'd seen and felt the animosity before. In this part of Sudan, his Arab nationality and surname labeled him the enemy before he opened his mouth.

"You're an American?"

He nodded.

"Then you speak English?"

"Yes," he said in the requested language. He experienced a mixture of awe and curiosity about the noted Dr. Kerr.

"Your accent is heavy." One of the children, a small, naked boy, crept closer and wrapped his arms around her leg. "Move back, Mangok." Her gentle tone reverted to the language Paul believed to be Dinka. The child slipped into the small crowd, and a young girl lifted him onto her hip.

“I’m a naturalized citizen.” Paul breathed friendship into every word.

“Many Arabs are American citizens.”

He clenched his fist. Since September 11 and the free world’s war on terrorism, he had encountered a stream of hostility everywhere he went. “Do you want to see my résumé?”

“I might.” A thin-lipped smile met him.

He bit back a remark. “While you contact Feed the World for my personal credentials, I’d like to get these supplies unloaded.”

“Of course.” She turned to those behind her and motioned for them to join her. “What do we have?”

“A few thousand pounds of grain and medical supplies.”

She focused on him for a moment as though attempting to read deceit. “Thank you.”

Paul set out to make small talk about the heat, the cloudless sky, and the villagers, but Dr. Kerr chose not to reply. He stopped the questioning and idle remarks. Whirling around, he opened the plane’s hatch to where packed grain lay inside several large bags. They were tied to wooden pallets in case the village did not have a cleared landing path or the GOS threatened the pilot’s safety. If not for the precious medicine, he would have released the load from the air, and the bags and wooden pallets would have separated once they hit the ground. The people wasted nothing. The villagers would have snatched up the pieces of wood to construct furniture and the packing straps for whatever purpose the finders deemed fit. Even the cloth bags would be sewn into clothing or stretched over poles for shelter.

The sound of shouting women stole Paul’s attention. Two women who wanted the same bag of grain tugged with one hand and slugged with the other.

“There’s enough.” Dr. Kerr stepped between the women and nearly took a blow to the chin. She yanked on the bag. The struggle ceased. Larson Kerr could definitely hold her own.

Paul had seen this type of interference before. A woman needing food for her family was a formidable opponent. He couldn’t blame them. They were most likely mothers who only wanted their children to survive. The villagers’ emaciated bodies evidenced the need for proper nourishment, more than just grain, but this food offered the difference between life and death.

Once the last bag of grain was dragged away, Dr. Kerr lingered with a young woman and a tall boy as Paul unloaded the medical supplies from the plane.

Dr. Kerr scooped up a box of sterile gauze squares and gauze wraps. “I really need these. I’ve been using my old shirts as bandages.” She peered into the storage compartment. “Look, Rachel, antibiotics to treat malaria.” She laughed. “And lidocaine. And sutures. And plenty of Betadine.”

The tall, thin young woman smiled and held out her arms for a box. “God has blessed us.”

Paul handed Rachel a case of sterile gloves and took a glimpse at her. “Indeed He has.”

She couldn’t be much more than sixteen—high cheekbones, flawless skin, and huge eyes. She would no doubt bring a high bride-price to her family.

“You’re a Christian?” Rachel said. “I didn’t expect . . .”

Paul waved away her anxiety with his free hand. “I understand your reservations, but I do serve Jesus Christ.”

“I will pray for your dangerous missions.” Rachel stood erect.

“Thank you. I’m always in need of prayer.”

The boy stepped forward, his arms outstretched. “I want a heavy one.”

“Oh, you do?” Paul chuckled. “What’s your name?”

“Nyok, and I’m twelve.”

Paul saw the V-shaped lines etched across his forehead. The boy had gone through the rites of manhood. “And I see you’re a warrior.”

Nyok thrust back his shoulders, accenting his nearly six-foot height. “I protect Dr. Kerr.”

“I’m sure you do a fine job.” Paul doubted the doctor needed much protection, but he knew well the boy’s role. From the looks of Warkou, there were not many cattle for Nyok to tend—a shame for a culture that had revered its cows for hundreds of years. He piled two heavy boxes in Nyok’s muscular arms.

Paul gathered up two cases containing prescription medicine and headed after the small troop. Dr. Kerr turned around. “You stay here. I don’t want those supplies disappearing.”

“All right.” He glanced about him and saw no one, but that didn’t mean a thief wasn’t lurking nearby. “One more load will do it.” He grabbed a bottle of water from inside the cockpit and again waited beneath the wing. The temperature felt around 43 degrees Celsius—almost 110 degrees Fahrenheit—noticeably hotter in the sun. It matched the upheaval in the area and in Paul himself.

A rustling caught his attention, and men in camouflage carrying Kalashnikov rifles filled the area. *Guerrilla soldiers*. Their Russian-purchased weapons made him inwardly squirm. He hadn’t heard a shot fired or the sound of resistance. Paul carried a handgun inside the plane, but it was useless against these weapons. Although the soldiers fought for the south, they didn’t always have the best interests of the civilians in mind—at least in Paul’s opinion.

A few moments later, Rachel and Nyok hurried back. Paul piled their arms with the remaining boxes and pulled the last two into his own. “Why are the soldiers here?” he said to Nyok.

“They’re watching you,” the boy said. “They don’t trust anybody.”

Least of all an Arab. Fortunately, he had all his papers with him, and they could peruse his flawless record. He had nothing to hide.

He trailed behind Rachel and Nyok. This wouldn’t be the first time he’d been the object of debate, and he certainly didn’t want to risk the lives of the two young people in front of him.

“You there, stop,” a soldier said in Arabic. “We want to see your papers.” He raised his rifle and pointed at Paul’s chest.

“Some are inside my shirt, and the rest are in the plane. Can I put down these boxes?”

The soldier nodded, but his weapon didn’t sway.

“Rachel, Nyok, take your load on to Dr. Kerr,” Paul said. He lowered the two boxes to the ground, making sure none of the contents would break. Holding out both hands, he turned his attention to the soldier. “Go ahead, take them from me.”

The soldier reached inside Paul’s buttoned shirt and pulled out the papers. He scanned them before calling for another soldier to take the FTW verification to their colonel. Paul wondered if the man could read English. Meanwhile, he waited once more in the torrid sun with sweat streaming down his face and neck and a familiar churning in his stomach. The longer he lingered, the more frustration at the situation ate at his heart.

“He’s all right.” Another soldier strode toward Paul, his Arabic rough. “Colonel Alier wants to talk to him.”

Paul inwardly sighed. Colonel Ben Alier of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army had a reputation for his clever tactics, courage, and

ruthlessness. His guerrilla soldiers offered him undeniable allegiance. Under more pleasant conditions, Paul might have welcomed an opportunity to speak with the rebel leader. Plenty of media sources in the States clamored for such interviews.

The SPLA had interrogated Paul a few times, and none of them had been enjoyable. The forces held a common distrust and accused him of spying. He would probably do the same if his people had been persecuted by the Islamic-controlled government. Of course, who could be trusted when the different rebel factions warred against each other while fighting the GOS? If only the SPLA would recognize Paul's name and the humanitarian organization that fed and administered medical aid to the suffering civilians.

“Move ahead.” The soldier stuck the rifle in Paul's ribs.

“Can I take these supplies?”

“If you hurry.”

Paul had no idea where he was going, but he plodded ahead in the direction he'd seen Dr. Kerr, Rachel, and Nyok venture. This circling of soldiers appeared to have the villagers a bit tense. They spoke in Dinka, and Paul didn't understand the dialect. He could only surmise the meaning of the conversations from the rise and fall of the voices and the facial expressions of those speaking. From Paul's observation, the soldiers seemed more intimidating than hostile.

“To the right,” said the soldier behind him, and Paul picked up his pace toward a far hut.

Dr. Kerr stood outside a dwelling that must be serving as a clinic. Some of the bags of grain were stacked outside the door along with the medical supplies. Nyok was at her side like a sentinel, and a soldier had his arm around Rachel. The young woman smiled, and the soldier planted a kiss on her forehead. Suspicions mounted in Paul's mind at the gray woven through the soldier's hair. He looked old enough to be her father. He had to be Colonel Ben Alier.

“Ah, Paul Farid,” the man said, releasing his hold on Rachel. A wide smile prefaced his words. “I’ve heard much about you.”

From information inside Khartoum? “I’ve flown several missions throughout Sudan.”

“Yes, and you are noted for your food drops in dangerous areas—Nubia one of them.” The smile did not leave his face while he extended his hand. “Ben Alier.”

Paul responded and noted the firm handshake. “It’s a pleasure, sir.”

“Your planes have never been shot down.” The colonel stuck his thumbs inside his belt loops. “How lucky you are when others face enemy fire constantly.”

“For the record, I have been fired on and nearly lost a plane. God is with me.”

“Not Allah, I presume.” Alier’s tone deadened, the pleasantness erased.

“I am a Christian, Colonel, and I believe you are too.”

“Rare for an Arab to follow Christianity, don’t you think?”

Paul refused to cower to the man. “There are many Arab Christians in this world.”

“Wealthy ones?”

“Sir, I don’t believe our Lord chose only the poor to follow Him. Those who have monetary means to aid the less fortunate are a blessing to those they serve.”

Alier chuckled. “I’ve been told as much. Would you like to contribute to the SPLA’s cause? We are in need of food, tents, weapons, uniforms, medical supplies. The list is endless.”

“My ministry is to the civilians suffering in this war. I’m sure there are others who would consider financing your army’s equipment.”

“But not you?”

“No, sir.” Paul stared into the colonel’s eyes. He would not waver from his cause or his purpose.

“Most men are afraid of me, Mr. Farid. And you are not?” Alier paused. A wry look met Paul’s gaze. “Do you know the power I have? I could have you killed on the spot, tortured for suspected spying.”

“I am very well aware of your capabilities.”

Alier studied him a moment longer. A hush had crept over the village. Paul sensed the villagers and soldiers observing the friction between the two men.

“Give me one reason not to kill you.”

Paul nodded slowly. He felt an amazing peace, a sense of calm that flowed through his veins, warm and comforting. “If you kill me, then thousands of people will not receive the benefit of the food and provisions my money buys. They’ll still get the aid of the many humanitarian organizations dedicated to Sudan, but their assistance is not enough, and you know it. If you kill me, how many Sudanese villages will harbor your men knowing you destroyed their chance for survival?”

Alier’s eyes narrowed. He clenched his fists and swallowed hard. “I asked for a reason, and you gave it to me. For now, you live. But I don’t trust you. I’ll be watching for you to make a mistake.”

“I don’t doubt your words, Colonel.” Paul forced a smile. “Now, may I take my plane and fly out of here?”

“I won’t delay you a moment longer.”

Paul turned to Dr. Kerr. He'd felt her scrutiny during the interrogation. Curiosity was evident on her face, along with a mixture of something else he couldn't quite discern. If given the time, he'd like to get to know this woman.

“Thank you, Mr. Farid. I am most grateful for the provisions and your willingness to deliver them.”

The lines around her eyes softened, and for the first time he saw her beauty. Even here, in the wilds of Africa, without the aid of those things women used to make themselves more attractive, she was a rarity.

“Good luck to you.” Dr. Kerr crossed her arms over her chest.

“May God bless your work here.” Paul turned and walked toward his plane. He had no doubt Colonel Ben Alier would have enjoyed nothing better than to blow a hole right through him. Sometimes when Paul contemplated his own vile past, he wished someone would put him out of his living nightmare.

A small gathering of children was playing around his plane, most likely inquisitive as to how the flying machine worked, if they had ever seen one up close at all. Any other time, he would have spent time with them. Since most of his work was from the air, Paul seldom received an opportunity to mingle with the villagers.

“I have to leave,” he said to the children and hoped they were old enough to understand Arabic. “Make way for me. Perhaps we'll talk another day.”

The children scattered, their laughter giving him the lift he needed. He opened the door and spied a small, fragile container meant for Dr. Kerr. The item, a wound staple gun, had been an afterthought from a medical adviser for FTW. *Alier may have the opportunity to shoot me after all.* Snatching up the box, Paul retraced his steps to the clinic where the rebel leader and Dr. Kerr stood talking.

“Put the bag down,” Dr. Kerr said. The doctor was facing Alier, who had hoisted a bag of grain to his shoulder.

“My men need the grain. You can contact Farid for more.”

“I said put it down, Ben.” Anger rose in Dr. Kerr’s voice, not loud but emphatic. “These people are starving.”

Alier laughed. “What can you do, Larson? And how can my men defend Warkou if they are hungry? It’s not as if we can put down our weapons and plant a garden.”

Dr. Kerr stepped inside her hut while the colonel continued to laugh. Before Paul had an opportunity to tell her about the additional box, she pushed back through, rifle first.

“So help me, I’ll blow your head off before I let you take that grain.”

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Previously published in 2005 as *When the Lion Roars* by David C Cook Publishing Co. under ISBN 978-1589190306.

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Designed by Dean H. Renninger

Published in association with the literary agency of Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409.

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Repackage first published in 2019 under ISBNs 978-1-4964-3324-4 (Kindle); 978-1-4964-3326-8 (Apple); 978-1-4964-3325-1 (ePub)