

Death in the Stadium

by Jill Briscoe

Festo, a Christian leader in Uganda, showed the power of forgiveness in the face of death and persecution, inspiring many people to accept Jesus.

Topics: "Persecution And Faith", "Gods Grace"

Description

Jill Briscoe shares the courageous story of Festo, a Christian leader in Uganda during the terror of President Amin, who faced persecution and stood up for his faith amidst great danger. Despite the chaos and fear, Festo preached about forgiveness, love, and the power of God's grace, leading many to accept Jesus and find peace even in the face of death. Festo's unwavering faith and willingness to forgive his enemies, even riding miles to seek reconciliation, exemplify the transformative power of God's love in the midst of persecution and violence.

Transcript

Hark flew quickly ahead in time. C.D. had told him to be sure and visit the human year 1973. That was an important time in Festo's life, and there were gaps in the record.

Hark hoped when he landed he would find the country at ease. "By now the terror has surely ended," Hark said to himself.

But he was wrong.

To start with, there were many different tribes in Uganda. A tribe is like a big family where everyone is an aunt, uncle, cousin, niece, or nephew. It's a group of people who speak the same language. They all wear the same sort of clothes and sing their own kind of songs. They are very proud of their tribe, and sometimes they think it is better than any other tribe!

"That often leads to fights," Hark said loudly. He thought it was a shame that people got proud and fought over their differences. Instead, they should see how interesting their differences were, he decided.

Why, if everyone was the same, how boring that would be! Hark thought.

In the past the tribes had argued over their differences. Sometimes they had been angry with each other. But after a while, the tribal groups among the church people began to say they were sorry to each other. They forgave each other for being proud and thinking their tribe was the best.

"Jesus died for every tribe, not just one," a Christian girl told her friend. "We should not fight. We should love each other -- because He told us to!"

But even as the Christians in different tribes began to love and forgive each other, Idi Amin did just the opposite. His soldiers were still tormenting the Christians in Uganda. Many had been sent to jail. Others had simply disappeared.

"People are being arrested, and then they're never seen again," Mera told her husband. "And Festo, Amin has started searching for the church leaders. We are not safe anymore!"

"We are safe in the arms of Jesus," her husband replied.

Festo knew something good was happening, despite the terror. True, it was now quite dangerous to be a Christian in Uganda. But Hark was amazed to learn that many people were inviting Jesus into their lives for the first time. And others who had strayed from God's Word were coming back. Churches were often packed full of people singing praises to the King of heaven. By now more than half the people of Uganda were Christians.

This was not what President Amin had in mind when he started all this trouble, Hark thought happily. He is trying to wipe out the church. Instead, it's growing stronger and stronger every day!

Then Amin ordered his soldiers to execute some of the people they had arrested. They were to take the prisoners to their home towns. The towns' people would be ordered to watch the soldiers shoot the prisoners.

Three of the men were to be shot in the stadium in Kabale, the town where Festo and Mera lived.

"I should go to the president. I should talk to him about what is happening. Maybe he will listen to me," Festo said to Mera. "He thinks we're trying to overthrow his government. We need to convince him we're not."

Now, this was a very brave thing to do! To walk right into the palace and face the cruel president was risky, to say the least. After all, Amin was killing and torturing Christians and other leaders. He might kill Festo, too!

Festo went anyway. He drove to the president's palace in Kampala, with Hark riding nervously in the backseat.

The president greeted Festo warmly. (Hark was surprised by this. And so was Festo!) Then Amin told lies.

"It is all right," he said. "You are quite safe. Yes, some of the soldiers are doing bad things. But I am punishing them when they do. So don't worry about it," he said with a smile.

"Mr. President," Festo said, "I hear you have told everyone in Kabale to come to the big stadium to watch three men be shot. Please let these men live. Forgive them for what they have done."

Hark saw a big scowl on Amin's face. Oh dear, Hark thought, now he's mad.

Festo wasn't allowed to stay any longer. Sadly, he (and Hark) left the palace and headed home.

"How terrible," said Mera when she heard about it. "You mean thousands of people have to go to the stadium to watch the executions?"

"Amin thinks it will stop people from trying to overthrow him," Festo replied. There was nothing for them to do but what the president demanded. When the day came, they went to the stadium.

Three thousand people were forced to attend the shooting. No one was speaking. Dark fear filled people's hearts. Festo turned to two of his pastor friends.

"Let's see if we can speak to the three men before they are shot," he suggested.

"The soldiers will never let us," replied his friend.

"Well, let's ask anyway," Festo said.

"Please, sir," said Festo approaching the soldier in charge. "I am a minister. I'd like to speak some words of comfort to the three young men before they die."

No one expected the soldier to agree. But to Festo's surprise, he said gruffly, "All right. You can talk to them in the arena just before they are killed!"

Festo began to pray. Hark could hear the quiet prayers (angels can, you know). He wrote them down carefully.

"Please, Lord," prayed Festo, "give me the right words to say to these men."

A truck drove into the arena. The soldiers unloaded the three prisoners in the middle of the stadium. They were in handcuffs. Their feet were chained together. The firing squad stood at attention, their rifles ready.

In the stands, the silent people sat as still as statues. There was a horrible feeling in the air. Festo and his friends walked across the huge arena and came up behind the prisoners.

"Oh, dear Lord Jesus! What shall I say? What shall I say?" Festo said out loud. The three prisoners heard him and turned around to face the church leaders.

"Oh!" gasped Festo when he saw their faces. They seemed so peaceful!

Festo didn't have to say anything. As he approached the prisoners, one of them suddenly thanked Festo for coming! The man told Festo he knew Jesus had forgiven his sins. Then he asked Festo to tell his wife and children he would be waiting for them in heaven. He hoped they would accept Jesus, too, so he could be with them there.

The second man said the same thing. He raised his hands in joy and smiled bravely at Festo. Then the third man said, "I am at peace!"

Festo looked at the wonderful smiles on the men's faces. "Why," he said to his friends, "we need to talk to the soldiers in the firing squad, not to these men!"

Festo explained the prisoners' words to the soldiers. When they heard what Festo said, they were shocked. For a moment, they didn't seem to know what to do!

The three prisoners stood tall, smiling at the huge crowd of people. Then they raised their handcuffed arms and waved. Everyone waved back! People who were near had heard the brave words the prisoners had spoken. They saw the peace of God on the men's faces.

Then the shots rang out, and the three men fell.

Now they're safe in heaven with Jesus, thought Hark, standing beside Festo.

Then everyone went home.¹⁰

In the days following the shooting, Festo preached to lots of people. They had heard what had happened in the stadium. They were amazed that Christians could face death with such peace and joy. It made them want to be Christians, too!

Even some of the soldiers in the firing squad found Jesus. Boys and girls in the schools wanted to belong to Him, too.

One Sunday, 8,000 people streamed out of their villages. They settled on the grass to hear Festo preach. He told them to ask Jesus to forgive their sins. Many people accepted Jesus into their hearts that day.

Hark couldn't write fast enough. Festo's sermon kept him on his toes. He worked hard to listen and write at the same time. He wished he had paid attention in his angelic shorthand class. The humans seemed to hang on Festo's words. They were wonderful words of life and comfort.

"God gives us power to forgive our enemies," Festo told a crowd of people another day. "Some of us think power is force and guns. But God gives us a greater power. It is the power to love. We should forgive our enemies like Jesus loved and forgave His enemies when He was on the cross."

"It's hard to forgive our enemies, Festo," a man called out.

"It is hard," Festo agreed. "And it's hard to ask someone else to forgive you, too. But God will give you the power to do it."

"Have you ever asked God to help you do that?" the man in the crowd wanted to know.

"Oh, yes," replied Festo. "Years ago I rode my bicycle fifty miles to see a man I hated!"

"You hated someone?" asked the man, surprised.

"Yes, I did," said Festo. "But I told him Christ had forgiven me. And I asked him to forgive me for hating him so much. I told him I was a Christian now, and I saw him as my brother."

"What happened?" the man wanted to know.

"The man cried," replied Festo. "And so did I. Then we put our arms around each other. I had no weapon -- no real gun. But I had used God's gun to shoot hatred dead! That is the best power!"¹¹

The president heard about the wonderful meetings Festo was having all over Uganda. "You must be careful, Bishop," Festo's friends said. "People are disappearing every day. Amin will not like what you are doing, speaking out against the cruel ways of his soldiers and their guns."

"We are safe in the arms of Jesus," Festo kept saying.

Then one day the president decided that people in Uganda could not be Christian anymore.

"But more than half of Uganda's people are Christians," gasped Mera when she heard this news. "Is he going to kill more than half of the people in the whole country?"

Festo didn't know the answer.

Then the worst of the terror began. By the time it ended, nearly half a million people in Uganda would be killed by Amin's soldiers. Most of them would be Christians.¹²

By now everyone knew that Archbishop Luwum and Bishop Festo were high on the list of those to be killed!

Some people said Festo was already dead.

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