

## I. TELLING THE STORY

- A. When Wess attended past Leadership Summits, he wondered what he would say if he were ever asked to speak.
  - 1. He considered such topics as the passion of leadership, integrity, the gift of leadership, the importance of ministry to children or our mandate to care for the poor.
  - 2. But when the phone rang and Jim Mellado asked Wess to speak, Jim specifically asked him to speak about pain, suffering and hardship.
  
- B. Wess is a survivor of hurt—a broken heart from poverty and a broken spirit from abuse.
  - 1. If God can use Wess, he can use absolutely anyone.
  - 2. The key question: How do we leverage pain and hurt in our lives for good in ministry?
  
- C. As he prepared for his talk, Wess found that the pain he was asked to speak about was exactly the catalyst for everything else he originally considered talking about.
  - 1. It's the catalyst for the passion and integrity and the gift of leadership his team gives him every day.
  - 2. It's why he cares about children and the poor.
  
- D. His passion for children and the poor came out of his own tragic past as a small child.

- E. He didn't talk about it for thirty-five years because he felt he would have to apologize on God's behalf for not protecting a vulnerable little boy.
- F. He finally told his story in the book, *Too Small to Ignore: Why the Least of These Matters Most*.
  - 1. He thought he would write a manifesto on the importance of children and a challenge to the church to take care of them.
  - 2. He used strategy, statistics and Scripture.
  - 3. When he submitted his manuscript to the publisher, they thought it was very good, but told him that people wouldn't care about what he knew until they knew why he cared.
  - 4. He realized he had to go back and allow God to redeem his painful story.
  - 5. There were days when he wrote one sentence and then wept the rest of the day.
- G. As he told his story, he realized he'd been looking for thirty-five years at the wrong side of the tapestry—all the mistakes, knots and tangles.
- H. But as he turned the tapestry and around and viewed it from the other side, he realized that God had orchestrated a wonderful life for him to live.
- I. Out of great pain, he became a useful tool in the kingdom of God.

## II. THE CANDLE

- A. Wess received his calling, mission and purpose in life and did his first act of leadership—his most courageous act—all at the darkest moment of his life. It happened in the span of ninety seconds at the age of ten.
- B. It involved a pink birthday candle that was trimmed with wicks at both ends so it could burn from both directions.
- C. The candle was used as an instrument of torture by the house father of the boarding school Wess attended in Africa.
- D. Wess spent nine months a year there.
- E. His entire life can be put on a timeline of B.C.—before the candle—and A.D.—after the damage.

*The house father marched Wess into the school dining room, dragging a chair behind him. He slammed it down in front of Wess' fifty classmates and drew him up on the chair. He put the candle in Wess' hand.*

*He said, “Children, you cannot serve both God and Satan, just as you cannot burn a candle from both ends. You want to see what happens when you try?”*

*The house father lit the candle and said, “Watch!” Wess stood on the chair with his knees knocking, staring at the candle and wondering what it would feel like in a few seconds.*

### III. THE SCHOOL

- A. It was mission policy that when children reached six years of age, they were sent 700 miles across Africa to a boarding school in the jungle. It took seven days to travel to it.
- B. The children experienced many horrors there.
  - 1. The people in charge of the school were missionaries who had gone to Africa to save souls, but they didn’t make it culturally or linguistically.
  - 2. They weren’t fired but were given the lowest priority job you could have: taking care of other missionaries’ children.
  - 3. They were not called or trained to do it, and they didn’t want to do it, so they were angry, resentful and unsupervised.
  - 4. They took their wrath out on the fifty children at the school.
- C. Wess learned at an early age the terrible things that can happen when children are a second-rate mandate, considered unimportant and are the lowest of priorities.
- D. He spent four long years there, from age six to ten.
  - 1. During that time, he and the other children were beaten with belt buckles and truck tires.
  - 2. At age six, Wess could identify the cry of every bird in the jungle as well as the unique cries of his fifty boyhood friends.
  - 3. There were a million ways to get a beating there—a wrinkle in your bed or eyes open during nap time.
    - a. At nine years old, when he was taught how to average in math class, the only recurring thing he could think of to average was how often he was beaten.
    - b. He kept a tally hidden under his pillow. After keeping track for a number of weeks, he did the math and found he was beaten an average of seventeen times a week.
  - 4. The staff abused the children in every way a child can be abused.
    - a. The children were scared of their vengeful God.
      - i. Wess was beaten so often he thought he was a horrible child and God hated him.

- ii. Children at the school felt like they were little sinners in the hands of an angry God.
  - b. There was sexual abuse as well, for wherever evil reigns unchecked, this favored tool of Satan is in place.
  - c. The people reading the children Bible stories were the same ones who, minutes later, would prowl the halls in the dark to take advantage of them. This continued for several years.
5. Older boys and girls, who had been victims themselves, turned into predators and used blackmail and pain to silence the younger ones.
  6. There were no arms to run to; the very people who should have been caring for them were their attackers.

#### IV. THE CHOICE TO TELL

*As Wess stood on the chair with the candle, he was at his lowest, darkest moment. The cumulative hurt, rage, hopelessness and despair that welled up in him was indescribable. At the hands of the school master, Wess had always been humiliated and hurt. The house father turned to the students and said, “The boy here, this is Satan’s favorite tool. He told. There will be Africans in hell because of this little boy.”*

*At hearing these words, a huge rage and passion arose in Wess—something he had never experienced before and hasn’t experienced since. He thought he could endure any treatment by this man, but the words had never cut so deeply.*

*Wess’s crime was that he had told. As a desperate boy he cried out to his mother for help.*

- A. The children had courageously maintained their silence for years.
  1. They were warned that if they told what was happening in that place, they would destroy their parents’ ministry in Africa.
  2. The house parents used the children’s love for God, their parents and Africans to secure their silence.
  3. The children wrote letters every Sunday but were not allowed to tell anything of their sorrow or hurt, or to call for help.
  4. If they did, they were beaten and forced to rewrite their letter.
  5. Even during the three months spent at home each year, the children kept their silence because they loved their parents and saw the sacrifice they made to spread the gospel.
  6. Wess loved his African friends in the village. He determined that if his silence would secure their salvation, he would do it.

- B. In school, the children were not allowed to have pictures of their parents or allowed to cry from homesickness.
1. Each year, Wess held in his mind the image of his parents waving goodbye.
  2. Every night he pictured them when he closed his eyes and he risked everything crying himself to sleep as silently as he could.
  3. By the ninth month he could not remember what his parents looked like, and he worried that he'd break their hearts by not knowing which ones they were when he returned home.
- C. Wess's big crime—that led to the candle punishment—occurred at the airport as he was on his way back to school by plane, while his parents would go by ship.

*At the gate, Wess took his mother's face in his hands because he didn't want to forget what she looked like. When he looked at her too long, she asked what he was doing. He said that he didn't want to forget what she looked like.*

*She burst into tears, as did he, and then he blurted out, "Please don't send me back! They hate me! They beat me! Please, please, please!"*

*Wess would never forget the look in his mother's eyes.*

*Wess was pulled straight onto the plane, and his friends who had heard him tell looked at him like a dead man walking. He had done the unthinkable and broken the code of silence.*

*His mother, confused and brokenhearted, had an emotional and psychological breakdown. It took the ship a month to bring his parents to Africa, and as soon as they got there, his mother was sent back to the U.S.*

*Word spread across the mission field of his mom's illness and its cause. When the news reached the boarding school, the house parents were filled with rage.*

## V. THE DEFINING MOMENT

*Wess was resigned to the humiliation. He knew the candle would burn through to his fingers; that he would scream and throw it down; and that the house master would laugh and Wess would lose again.*

*But when Wess heard the house master say that there would be Africans in hell because of him, his rage took over. He could take any humiliation or pain but he loved Africans and felt like in his heart he himself was African.*

- A. After nine months of hell each year, he returned to a poverty-stricken village where the people would bring him in and nurture his heart and soul.
- B. From the poor people in that village, Wess learned everything he needed to know to lead Compassion's worldwide ministry.
- C. He prayed every night, asking to be black like all his friends.
- D. He was his dad's right-hand man, going into villages to bring the gospel and walking hand in hand where no white man had ever gone.
  - 1. He shot his slingshot into the trees to scare the noisy birds away so people could hear his father speaking the gospel.
  - 2. When he was gone at school, Wess was concerned how his dad was able to do this work without him.

*The idea of Africans in hell because of him caused a great strength to come that Wess cannot explain. As the flames drew closer and closer to his skin, he had a desperate thought: "I could win this time. If I'm strong enough to endure enough pain, I could win." The house master had unwittingly put himself on a level playing field for the first time—and Wess felt he could actually win if he were willing to endure it.*

*He knew the man was wrong. Wess knew that he was just a little boy who was hurt and had found his voice to ask for help. He thought, "Enough. Enough shame, enough abuse, enough lies." It had to stop sometime and Wess determined it would stop now.*

*He decided he would not drop the candle. He would not give the house master the satisfaction of crying out. He was taking his stand.*

*Wess shook, knowing the pain was coming in a second. The man turned back toward Wess in his tirade, but Wess could not hear his words, only the blood pounding in his ears.*

*Wess tightened every muscle in his body and clenched his teeth. He pinched the candle as hard as he could and his rage consumed him. He watched as his fingers turned red, and then a blister popped up, then another one.*

*He looked over the flames to his friends, whose eyes were screaming, "Drop it, Wess!" But he could not.*

*He was transported out of himself and found himself looking down on a terrified little boy.*

*One of the kids couldn't take it anymore and slapped the candle out of Wess's hand. The children scattered, the meeting was over and Wess stood alone on the chair.*

## VI. THE CALLING

- A. Wess received his calling in an instant—he had gone from victim to victor. He determined from that day forward he would always protect children and speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves.
- B. The school was shut down.
  - 1. Many years later, the abusers were held accountable. They were not put in jail but they were censured by the mission.
  - 2. His boyhood friends walked away from the school, many of them with lifelong scars.
- C. Wess's passion against injustice, his crusade against abuse and his fight against poverty led him to Compassion International.
  - 1. Had Compassion not already existed, he would have started it.
  - 2. Through Compassion, last year 187,000 children accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and 50,000 were Africans.
- D. The passion that gripped him at age ten still grips him. Poverty and abuse speak the same language to a child: "Give up. Nobody cares about you and nobody is coming to your rescue. Just give up."
  - 1. Across the world, Wess sees Satan using the same weapons.
  - 2. He sees Satan's fingerprints on children who once had the spark and fire of being made in the image of God but who are now defeated by hurts and pains.
  - 3. He joins the church and Compassion International sponsors as they fan the dying embers in these children's hearts until a little flame appears again and a child is restored to the glory of God.
- E. Wess may never have the courage he had at ten years old, but he is a joyful and excited leader.
  - 1. He is honored to lead what he thinks is one of the most strategic and dynamic ministries on earth.
  - 2. After thirty-two years, people expect him to slow down and grow weary, but he doesn't because of his story.
  - 3. He is never more than ten seconds away from tears, but they're not always tears of sorrow.
  - 4. Sometimes the tears come from the great joy of what he gets to do, the victory he sees in children's lives or seeing evil pushed back.
- F. By God's grace, Wess is still useful in God's kingdom.