

**INSPIRED**

**SIMON GUILLEBAUD**

# **INSPIRED:**



**STORIES OF ADVENTURE,  
RISK-TAKING &  
GOD'S FAITHFULNESS**

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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Simon Guillebaud

1

CHAPTER ONE

Rachael Mutesi

15

CHAPTER TWO

Sarah

31

CHAPTER THREE

Duncan Dyason

45

CHAPTER FOUR

Alli Blair

65

CHAPTER FIVE

David Campbell

83

CHAPTER SIX

Dieudonne Nahimana

*103*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Marcia Suzuki

*125*

CONCLUSION

Simon Guillebaud

*145*

# INTRODUCTION

BY SIMON GUILLEBAUD

I felt some unease as I rounded the last bend on my motorbike, seeing a shifty figure a few hundred yards up ahead waiting outside my gate.

It was Aloys.

I couldn't quite make out what he disguised in his hand, but I discovered later it was a grenade. He planned to blow me up, it would seem.

I knew things were serious because he had written me a letter a few days earlier saying he was going to cut out my eyes. I'd had some sleepless nights over the threat, and informed the head of police. I'd also gone to stay at someone else's place and was varying my routes around town so that Aloys wouldn't know where to lie in wait.

My guard waved at me as a greeting, but it was actually a pre-arranged sign not to come any closer.

'God, what on earth shall I do? If it has to be, I'm ready to die. Let's go...'



What you have in your hands right now is a compilation of vivid snapshots from the life stories of seven friends of mine, who have seen and done remarkable things. Each of them shared their life experiences on the *Inspired* podcast. As so many people were impacted by listening to them, we wanted to catch some of the inspirational tales in a book.

So get ready to be challenged, stirred and blown away by these modern-day accounts of how God can lay hold of ordinary people who take him at his word, and how he does extraordinary things through them.



As the host of the podcast, here is some of my story, by means of introduction.

Over a quarter of a century ago, I moved to the most dangerous country in the world – Burundi. I didn't know this was the case until my dear mother sent me a newspaper cutting with Burundi at number one on the list of places not to go if you were wanting to remain alive. (Was she hoping to encourage me?!)

I arrived in the middle of a civil war which eventually came to an end after twelve long years. It was a conflict that didn't make many headlines, but it dragged on and on. Everyone's heard of Rwanda because of the 1994 genocide in which about 800,000 people were killed in just three months. Well, at one time Rwanda and Burundi were one country called Ruanda-Urundi until the two

kingdoms split at their independence from Belgium in 1962 into Rwanda and Burundi. So these two nations had a similar ethnic make-up (and tensions) of 85% Hutus and 14% Tutsis, although very divergent post-independence histories. In Burundi, the genocide started at the end of 1993 and continued far too long, with several hundred thousand people dying – but it wasn't as extreme as Rwanda's, hence being less well-known.

My arrival date was 10 January 1999. I'd had most of my money stolen in Rwanda by a 'friend', so was down to \$300 in the world. That wouldn't last long, but instead of being anxious about it, I was excited because I knew God would be faithful in providing whatever I needed. How could I be sure? Well, I'd seen his hand so clearly already leading me up to this point.

Backtracking a few months, I'd been in London when I'd received a piece of paper with a name and number scribbled on it. 'This man's looking for you and wants you to give him a call.' It was the penultimate day of my year doing some theological studies on the Cornhill Training Course, and I'd been praying for months, 'Here I am, Lord. I'll do anything for you; I'll go anywhere for you!'

Thus far there had been a resounding silence, and time was running out. 'Lord, come on! I'm serious. I'll do anything, go anywhere. I don't want security. I just want to be in your will. That's the safest place to be!' Everyone else on the course seemed to have something lined up, but I was still waiting.



Little did I realise when I rang that number, making an appointment to meet the mystery man the next day, that my life was about to change radically. It was now the last day of the course. We met in St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate. I was intrigued. He said, 'My name's Robert de Berry. I lead an organisation called Mid-Africa Ministry. I've been praying, and I believe God has sent me to you and he's calling you to go to Burundi to be involved in youth, in mission and in evangelism.'

My heart thumped in my chest. Was this some random nut job? Either he was or, alternatively, God had sent him. We talked further and then parted, with my agreeing to pray about it and get back to him in due course.

For full disclosure, I, unlike most people, was already acquainted with Burundi. My great-grandfather is buried there; my great-aunt translated the Bible into Kirundi, the national tongue; my grandparents were the first *bazungus* (white people) to get married in Burundi. In short, there was a lot of Guillebaud family history in that part of the world. A year earlier I had driven a truck with friends through twelve countries from Wales to Kenya and then jumped on a *matatu* (taxi-bus) through Uganda into Rwanda and Burundi to spend time with my Granny and Auntie – who were teaching rural pastors in the north of Rwanda – and explore my heritage there. It was a precious experience, but I left assuming I'd never return. My desire was to go to a nation and people group which had never heard about Jesus at all, whereas both Rwanda and Burundi had fast-growing churches.

The Monday after my course ended, I returned to my previous place of work in marketing. My former employer had created a short-term position for me. I sat in front of my desk and prayed, ‘Lord, if that Robert isn’t a nut job but was actually sent by you, and if you do truly want me to go to Burundi, well... It’s a dangerous place. It’ll mean leaving family, friends, security, career, everything. It’ll be a dramatic change. So please, as I fast and pray today, give me a radical sign right now in front of the computer about Burundi to justify such an extreme life-changing decision.’

The ball was back in his court.

I didn’t have to wait long. I took a phone call in which, out of the blue, the voice on the other end said, ‘Do you know anyone who wants to work in Burundi?’

Boom! I was off!

A few weeks later, after a family holiday and a farewell party, I packed my bags and was ready to leave. Then came the bombshell. Robert rang me to say, ‘Simon, I’m really sorry. There’s been some miscommunication with the folks in Bujumbura. I thought they were requesting a youth evangelist, which is why I approached you. But it turns out they want you to be the bishop’s secretary.’

What? I had no desire to fulfil that role. I’m not the most ecclesiastical of people, and that position didn’t align with my passions, skills or calling. But it was too late. I’d had the farewell party and had to go! So I flew to Rwanda, initially to live with my Granny and Auntie. The former would teach me the basics of

the language for four months before I headed south to Burundi.

I flew out in some confusion, now lined up for a job I didn't want, but ultimately trusting the Lord. My consistent prayer was along the lines of: 'Lord, have mercy on me! I don't want to be secretary for the bishop. Please let me work with Scripture Union as a non-denominational organisation with access to all the youth nationwide.'

Granny and Auntie Meg joined me in that prayer over those four months together. The internet was new back then and I set up an email address for the first time to ask a few dozen friends in England to pray the same prayer. Unknown to me, Scripture Union (SU) in Burundi had heard that a *muzungu* (foreigner) called Simon was coming in January, and they were praying God would direct him to them.

Can you see the threads coming together?

On the last night of my time in Rwanda, Granny prayed me off: 'God, we've had enough of Simon! He's surrendered to you, so just make it clear whether you want him to be secretary for the bishop or evangelist with Scripture Union.'

I said goodbye and headed to friends in the Rwandan capital, Kigali. I stopped off for just ten minutes at the SU guesthouse to greet Robert, who had just arrived from London. At that very same moment, the head of SU Burundi arrived on a three-day drive to Kenya. It was extraordinary timing. Here were three different men, from three different countries, in transit to two different

countries, praying the same prayer, meeting in the same guesthouse in the capital city at the exact same time! Coincidence? No, rather a God-incident! The bishop too saw God's hand and released me to work with SU instead (which in retrospect was a very magnanimous but costly decision to him personally).

I love the nugget hidden in 2 Chronicles 16:9 which says, 'For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.' That was my heart's desire – total surrender, full commitment, anywhere, anytime, bring it on!

And to God's glory, the outworking of that prayer more than twenty-five years later has been literally hundreds of thousands of lives coming to Jesus, through developing a wonderful expanding network of hardcore Burundian disciples being mobilised and equipped for the transformation of the nation. What a privilege!

There are too many stories to tell, but that first day in Burundi – remember, I had just \$300 left – I found an internet café and sent out my first email ever from there (of what became just under 200,000 over the coming two decades). I wrote to my small group of prayer supporters, 'Folks, keep praying. I trust God to open up the way for me to work at SU. And I really need a computer!' That very morning, a friend woke up and prayed, 'Father, I sense you're telling me to give my computer to someone. Show me who.' He turned on his computer and got my request from central Africa for a computer!

I love God's promises in his word, and one I have claimed time and time again is: 'And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 4:19). He would go on to do that repeatedly in the following years. Note that the promise is to meet our needs, not our wants.

Even that first weekend, the SU team wanted to show me that they were active, so they organised a weekend of evangelism up-country. Unfortunately, because of an international embargo and the ongoing civil war, the economic situation was dire. SU was bankrupt, had debts and staff hadn't been paid in two years. They had one pathetic excuse of a vehicle, which was a risk to drive through rebel-controlled territory. But we went for it! Sure enough, it sputtered to a halt in the hills and we broke down five times that day on the most dangerous roads in the world. I remember thinking as we were sitting ducks on the roadside, 'Am I going to die on my very first weekend here? That'd be a bit of a waste!'

We eventually crawled into town later that evening, having missed one of the two days of activities. I wrestled with God, 'Come on, Lord! Folks missed out on hearing the good news today because of our useless vehicle. Please, get us out of debt and with a vehicle that works by the end of the month!' For that prayer to be answered, we needed £15,000, which was a huge sum to me at that time. But sure enough, £15,000 came in by the end of the month, including a cheque for £5,000 made out 'for

a vehicle', which the generous giver could not have been aware was a crying need.

I look back on those early days with amazement and gratitude. My amazement is because God did so many beautiful things through us. My gratitude is because we survived to tell the tale. I genuinely expected to die. Others did die. Once, after driving through the hills, I found out that forty people had been killed in four different ambushes. One time I was cruising along with a colleague, he said with a glint in his eye, 'Isn't it exciting, Simon? We are immortal until God calls us home!'

It was thrilling to be completely trusting God day-by-day, but there was a price to pay as well. This price involved seeing so much suffering; receiving death threats; grieving for others who were killed; contracting many varied tropical diseases; being betrayed and slandered; the breakdown of relationships; separation from family and friends back home...

...but now Burundi was my home. Indeed, in due time I became Burundian. Now I – together with my wife and three children – are five of maybe only a dozen white Burundians in the world. Lizzie agreed to marry me back in 2003. My proposal, made while slightly delirious with malaria, included the winsome invitation: 'Are you ready to be a young widow?' She counted the cost, agreed and became a wonderful partner in the work.

That same year, Great Lakes Outreach was set up as a vehicle to support not just Scripture Union but a burgeoning network of superb leaders working across

many spheres of society for the transformation of the nation. Peace came in 2005 and lasted for a decade. During that time, Lizzie and I started a family, and the work exploded in growth and impact. Sadly, in 2015, there was renewed violence and Burundi to this day is one of the poorest and hungriest countries in the world.

A lot more detail on that journey is covered in my book *Dangerously Alive: African Adventures of Faith under Fire*. My spiritual logic and DNA involves asking the question: how far is too far when Jesus stretched his arms wide on the cross and went that far for us? I dream of being part of an army of servant-hearted, bold, risk-taking Jesus-followers who act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with their God in whatever context they find themselves. Hopefully you're one of them!



As we embark on this book together, let me whet your appetite at the start.

You will read of **Rachael Mutesi**, a fearless Ugandan woman who rose from the humblest of backgrounds to study at Oxford, and who has chosen to return to live in the slums of Kalerwe. She risks her life fighting for the rights of sexually abused girls, and is heroic in being a voice for the voiceless and marginalised.

Next is **Sarah**, who right now chooses to live in a nation in south-east Asia with ongoing conflict and violence. She has to be wise in how and when she shares her faith

because the regime in place is antagonistic to the gospel – so much so that we can't even name this country.

Then there's **Duncan Dyason**. He had a criminal record by the age of thirteen before being dramatically converted. He ended up spending over three decades in Guatemala working among street children, where he has seen the situation transformed to such an extent that there are almost no more street children now in the whole country. My favourite story of his is of the hitman who came to kill him but first allowed him to preach the gospel, at which he melted and admitted he'd tried to shoot Dunc in the head a few days earlier but the bullet simply hadn't fired. So Dunc's still alive, and his contribution to Guatemala was recognised by Queen Elizabeth with the award of an MBE.

**Alli Blair** is one of my best friends and a total eccentric! We spent a couple of decades together in Burundi, and she took plenty of risks in the war years. In fact, I suspect we were the two most likely white people in the whole country to get killed because of our constant travels through rebel-held areas. But now, as you read this, picture her in a hammock in the jungles of northern Cambodia, with rats and pigs squeaking and squealing around her as she seeks to promote the translation of the Bible into Kavet to help that isolated people group come to Jesus.

**David Campbell** was expelled from his first boarding school, and then as a seventeen-year-old he disappeared mid-term from his next one. Most kids who run away from school at least stay in the same country rather than flying



to another continent. But David cashed in his savings and flew to Jamaica to start a new life! Guns, knives and drugs were his new patch. His story could only have been woven by God's guidance and protection as he engaged with the toughest of Trench Town. His work was also recognised with the award of an MBE.

**Dieudonne Nahimana's** father was buried alive in a pit during the 1993 genocide in Burundi, so Dieudonne was left on the streets in the war with nothing. But having tasted the life of a street-connected child, he founded an organisation to rescue such children and give them a hope and a future. Forgiving his dad's killers, he returned to the spot where his father was murdered and spoke to one of his murderers, then preached reconciliation there. As if that wasn't enough, though that man has now died, Dieudonne is sponsoring the children of his father's murderer through school. How do you do that? Dieudonne actually stood as a presidential candidate in the 2020 elections and changed the whole tone of the debate, helping to keep violence and bloodshed at bay.

**Marcia Suzuki's** story is almost unbelievable in the true sense of the word. It encompasses ending up in the deepest jungle, working with a naked tribe, getting infanticide outlawed in Congress in Brazil and having to subsequently flee the country.

Wow!

So get ready to read about some modern-day miracles, to be challenged to imagine what might be possible in your life, and to be inspired to count the cost and be 'fully

committed' to God. Remember: 'For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him' (2 Chronicles 16:9).  
May that be you, dear reader!

Enjoy, and be inspired!