

Book review: Can you hear the angels sing?

Reverend Professor Seth Ayettey

Vraeyda Multimedia Inc, Langley, British Columbia, 2013, 268pp.

ISBN: 978-0-9921188-0-8

At 01.20am on 6 October 2010, at their home in Accra, Professor and Mrs Ayettey were subjected to a robbery at the hands of five armed and violent men. When Seth and Cecilia first realised that their house was being broken into, five strong wooden doors separated the robbers from them, but their alarm and fear greatly increased as they heard one-by-one the doors being smashed apart. The robbers were moving quickly towards them and Seth could not find the telephone number of the police. However, he did have time to bring the only other member of the family in the house, their seven year old daughter Naakai, into their bedroom before the robbers arrived there.

The five young criminals were armed with guns and clearly believed that there was a much more substantial amount of money in the Ayettey's house than was actually there. This circumstance alone meant that this violent and terrifying confrontation was most unlikely to have a happy ending and when Seth was shot he received life-threatening injuries. In his book he describes this devastating crime and the subsequent events in hospital, presenting the account of what he and his wife experienced and suffered from a thoroughly Christian perspective.

At the time when Seth Ayettey came face to face with such wanton wickedness he was in his mid-sixties. His distinguished medical career had begun with degrees in anatomy and medicine at the University of Ghana, and then a PhD in England at the University of Cambridge. He subsequently became Professor of Anatomy at the University of Ghana. For some years he was a leader of the Prison Ministry of Ghana and he is the minister of Faith Congregation, Shiashsie, of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana. From 2000, he was a member of the Board of Directors of World Vision International. He and his wife Cecilia have five daughters.

When well meaning friends and family visited Seth after his ordeal, some showed their sympathy with him by expressing bitter anger against the perpetrators of the crime and some wondered why God had not stopped the robbers. Should not true servants of God be spared such horrific experiences? Furthermore, if the leader of the

Prison Ministry could suffer so mercilessly at the hands of such criminals, why support the Prison Ministry? (pp130-131)

Seth's own reaction when lying badly injured on the bedroom floor and facing death, the 'last enemy', was very different. He recounts that 'there was no fear in me, or feeling of regret that I was departing this life sooner than I had expected'. 'I was concerned for the family, quietly committing them to the Lord in my heart. I was also waiting for the time to commit my spirit into the Hands of the Lord.' As for those responsible for the appalling crime 'I prayed for their forgiveness.' (pp126-127)

How was Seth able to remain calm in the midst of such dreadful and traumatic events? 'I believe most sincerely that the peace that characterized my life in the storms that night was from God and not from me. That peace of God had been in me as a gift through faith.' (p127)

Carefully analysing the events of that night has led Seth to the conclusion that 'God is active in our lives and involved in daily events far more closely than we can imagine and appreciate.' (p39) This truth was illustrated by a number of providential occurrences and some sequences of events that mitigated the effects of the crime. One of the most significant of these providential events was that his wife had drawn some money from the bank the day before the robbery. The thieves took this money which 'probably also saved my life', since a total lack of money in the house would probably have been seen by the robbers as a sufficient reason to kill him. (p60)

God knew who he wanted to be in the house when the 'storm' came. There were no international visitors and only Seth and Cecilia's youngest daughter was present. Two adult daughters, Hannah and Ruth, who had expected to be there, were separately kept away in remarkable ways. (pp40-44) After the shooting, help was obtained using the landline telephone in the house much quicker than could have been expected. The presence of appropriate medical staff and the availability of blood at the under-funded hospital were also providential. (pp25-30)

For the two weeks following major surgery Seth heard the singing of beautiful hymns. Initially he heard the hymn 'Hark, hark, my soul, angelic songs are swelling' and thought this came from a CD player

in the intensive care unit. However, the CD player was not switched on and then he found that no-one else could hear the music!

If the wonderful hymns Seth was hearing were not from a CD player, were they a trauma-induced delusion or an auditory hallucination? Perhaps he needed psychiatric help? Then, 'It began to dawn on me that God was visiting me in a special way through his angels.' In retrospect, Seth sees that these angelic hymns were a most essential part of his post-operative care, keeping him 'extremely calm in the face of life-threatening situations'. (pp 64-70)

Sometimes in secular works one reads of 'near death' experiences from which all manner of dubious conclusions are drawn. It is good to read this near-death testimony of a Christian man who writes not to satisfy our unholy curiosity about such things or to intrigue us with tales of bright lights, but rather to praise and glorify the Lord our God. Towards the end of the book the words of Isaac Watts are quoted 'I'll praise my Maker while I've breath, and when my voice is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler powers, my days of praise shall n'er be past, while life, and thought and being last or immortality endures.' (p256)

Seth reminds us 'Whatever suffering we experience in this life as Christians must be considered and appreciated as part of God's means of preparing us to grow in faith, to become more like Him and to hope more in Him, looking forward to the Day that we shall see Him and be free from this world of trouble and decay.' (p105) The angelic singing he experienced at a time when he was suffering life-threatening complications was a reminder that 'The worship of God should preoccupy us and be in every part of our lives'. (p255)

The remarkable testimony given in this book to the grace of God in devastating circumstances should be of particular interest to us, because the traumatic events in Ghana occurred during the time when Professor Ayettey's daughter Sarah and her husband Ebenezer were living in Hemel Hempstead and in fellowship with us at Alexandra Road.

JAC

(This book review appeared in the May 2014 edition of the ARCC newsletter.)