

HEART SQUEEZE

“Paul, please see Isiah as soon as you come to the hospital this morning. He came in a week ago with a deep stab wound over his heart. To stop the bleeding, I sewed up the wound quite tight. Now he has a fever and is having pain when he swallows.” Dr. Kenneth Stark, superintendant at RFM Hospital in Manzini, Swaziland had phoned me at home. I had returned the night before from a two weeks’ vacation in the Republic of South Africa.

I immediately went to the hospital and examined Isiah. He had an inch long wound, with stitches, just to the left of his breast bone. His wound was red and swollen. His chest X-ray showed swelling around the heart and gas along the esophagus. He now had pericarditis and mediastinitis! He was taken to surgery and the stitches in his sternal area were removed and infected blood clots were drained. Wound cultures showed a “staph” infection.

With drainage and antibiotics, Isiah improved and was discharged, but a week later he was readmitted to the hospital. His whole body was swollen and the veins in his neck were enlarged. The X-ray showed that his heart shadow was very large. The infection around the heart had caused protein rich fluid to accumulate in the pericardial sac, squeezing the heart, a condition called “pericardial tamponade”. In the emergency room a long needle was inserted below the sternum and about three ounces of straw colored fluid was removed. Isiah lost ten pounds the first two days but the pericardial fluid kept returning. His face would become so swollen that his relatives no longer recognized him! But each time less and less fluid was able to be removed from around the heart. The fluid had become like gelatin and the pericardium was becoming thicker and thicker! Then the gelatinous fluid became solid and turned into scar tissue. Then the scar tissue started to thicken and contract, squeezing the heart to a smaller and smaller size. He had developed ‘constrictive pericarditis. Isiah’s body was swelling and his pulse was becoming weaker and weaker. He needed a pericardectomy.

When Isiah was placed on the operating table his pulse could not be felt. Rita Denniston, the nurse anesthetist, somehow kept the patient alive while his chest was being opened. The pericardium, which was thick as an orange peel, was cut into one inch squares. Great care was taken not to cut into the heart muscle. Then one by one the squares were pried off the heart muscle. “I can feel a pulse”, Sr. Denniston shouted after the second piece of pericardium had been removed. As the squares were removed, the heart muscle bulged into the opening. After all the pericardium had been removed over the left and right ventricle, the heart regained its normal size and was beating vigorously; it had been compressed to about half its size! Isiah lost twenty pounds of fluid over the next week and had a normal pulse and blood pressure!

Isiah had been a very bright student. As a grade school student he had been converted when Rev. Juliet Ndzimanze held youth revival meetings at his school. He had graduated from the Nazarene High School, where he had been an outstanding student. He felt called to preach. But after graduation he stopped going to church and joined the wrong crowd. His spiritual heart was being squeezed more and more. He started drinking and had several narrow escapes. He finally was in a drunken brawl and was stabbed over the heart.

Spiritual relief came in the form of Rev. Douglas Alexander, a Nazarene Missionary who had come from Mozambique to have surgery. He remembered Isiah from when he was working in Swaziland. While recovering from surgery, Rev. Alexander made several trips by wheelchair to Isiah’s bedside. He read the Bible and prayed with Isiah. Gradually the Devil’s grip on Isiah’s spiritual heart was released. Isiah soon realized that God had given him one last chance! He turned back to God and was wonderfully saved. He stopped drinking, left his old crowd, and started a new life!

