

# Paul the Leper and Olive the Servant

*By David Deuel*

## Introduction

As the stories in this book make clear, God's people have infinite value, regardless of whether they accomplish great works. They are his great works. This is supported by biblical argument. There is an important place for those who are weak, whom God gifts uniquely, and whom he uses to accomplish his mighty deeds. Many people with disabling conditions are called and gifted to be leaders and their weakness can become God's platform to bring glory to himself. No one accomplishes great works for God unless God enables his children in their weakness. The story of Olive Doke and Paul Kasonga demonstrate further what the weakest of the weak can do with God's enabling.

## Olive Doke's Early Life as a Missionary

The story of Olive Doke, a missionary sent out through the South African Baptist Missionary Society (SABMS), and her student Kaputula Kasonga, a Zambian national who developed leprosy, is buried treasure in the history of missions. Their testimony reveals a special kind of ministry relationship in God's theatre of weakness. From his youth, Kaputula had multiple, severe, and worsening disabilities that came with leprosy, including difficulty in walking, chronic pain, inability to write, and recurrent illnesses. What the Lord accomplished through him during his brief life is amazing by any standard. But the story is only half told if we neglect the role of Olive Doke. She does more than encourage and advocate; in addition to ministering to the young women in Zambia, the work for which she was sent out, she facilitates Kaputula's work. In every case we know of, she respects his dignity.

Olive and Kaputula's story begins with Baptist missionaries Henry Masters and Arthur Philips who planted the Kafulafuta mission in 1905, in what was then known as Lambaland, in former Northern Rhodesia. Masters explains their plan: "Africa can never be evangelized by the direct effort of the missionary alone. After the pioneering has been done, it is for the missionary to train, inspire, and organize a staff of local evangelists."<sup>1</sup>

Olive Doke was born in Bristol, England to a family passionate about missions. The Doke family moved to South Africa when Olive was very young. In 1916, at the age of twenty-five, Olive left the comforts of her home in Johannesburg to serve at the Kafulafuta mission, far out in the Zambian jungle. Olive describes the state of the mission's work when she arrived:

The work was still in the pioneer stages, and a great deal of 'trekking' had to be done, involving long journeys of hundreds of miles on foot through African forest infested by wild animals of every description. It was still the days of primitive travel with native porters carrying the necessary camp

equipment and barter goods. One had to depend on one's rifle to secure meat for the pot, as well as to buy meal for the carriers. The country inhabited by the Lamba tribe extended over 30,000 square miles of forest—and this was our parish.<sup>2</sup>

The Kafulafuta mission already had a boarding school for boys. Within a decade, Olive opened a boarding school for girls, a ministry passion that continued throughout her time there. But God had plans for Olive that went far beyond her own vision for the work at Kafulafuta.

### **Kaputula “Paul” Kasonga’s Conversion and Training**

Kaputula Kasonga was around fourteen when he arrived at the boys' school. Precociously bright, he listened attentively as Miss Doke explained the gospel in her Bible lessons. Kaputula says:

“I was then a schoolboy and heard the word of God. . . . The words of a hymn we sang, ‘Jesus is coming again’ arrested me and made me think, so I went to Shikulu Doke [Olive’s brother, Clement], who also served at the school, and that night had a talk with him, and there and then gave my heart to the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

When school let out for the holidays, the children returned to their homes with the expectation that they would return once school was back in session. But Kaputula did not return and no one knew what had happened to him. Months passed by.

Standard practice at the mission was that teams of missionaries would go out ‘trekking’ into the villages to find places where the gospel had not been preached. Upon arrival, the missionaries would ask the villagers if they had heard about Jesus. The response was often that they had not. One day, a team entered a new area and posed the question. The response was that the people of that village had indeed heard the gospel. When asked how they had heard, their response was that Kaputula had told them. After more inquiring they discovered that Kaputula had contracted leprosy and lived across the river in a hut. Olive explains: “Food and water was taken to him there, but he was by himself, an outcast, unclean! He had been faithful in witness and now was cast-out! This was his first great lesson. ‘Have faith in God’.”<sup>4</sup> The missionaries took him back to the mission to care for him and with medication they stabilized the leprosy so that he was able to return to school.

When Lambas—the people of that region—came to Christ, they changed their names to Bible names. At his baptism, Kaputula changed his name to Paul, the Apostle of weakness who also had an infirmity. Olive tells the story of baptismal renaming: “How prophetic was this name of Paul to be! A man with a thorn in the flesh! And what a thorn! Leprosy! He too proved that the grace of the Lord Jesus was sufficient for him, his strength was indeed made perfect in weakness.”<sup>5</sup> Even Kaputula’s new name, Paul, reminded all who knew him of his weakness. Paul was the first national to be baptized at the mission, and his weakness associated with his leprosy shaped the mission and its witness to the surrounding villages, and out to distant areas.

### **Producing Materials for Ministry**

Paul’s ability to read and write made him stand out. As his committed teacher, Olive describes Paul in school: “So Kaputula continued his schooling. In school he did well. He was easily top boy. Then he became a pupil teacher, but, best of all, his example of Christian living told on his companions and, one by one, they too came out for Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> In spite of the challenges presented by his illness and disabilities, Paul demonstrated his gift and calling as a very young man. The Lord’s blessing on Paul gave his beloved leaders who trained him confidence to take him along when they launched a new school in Kawunda Chiwele. Paul tells the story:

“Shikulu Doke and Walona Doke went with me and Mose Katanga to open the school. They left us there while they went off itinerating in the villages. Whilst there, Mose and I constantly preached the word of God in the surrounding villages, and quite a number responded to the message and became hearers.”<sup>7</sup>

As his advisors entrusted Paul with gospel treasure, Paul accepted these opportunities with both zeal and a measure of caution. His passion to serve carefully was guided by his study of God’s word.

Olive taught Paul to love Scripture, an attribute that he nurtured and never lost. It was the passion that fueled his skill in handling Scripture like a noble Berean. With a keen intellect, Paul was able to read carefully and interpret the Bible faithfully. This commitment was perhaps facilitated by the time granted him due to his lack of mobility caused by his disability. Paul’s ability with language made him a highly qualified candidate for working on literacy projects of all sorts, one example of which was his ministering through writing letters, in which he emulated the Apostle whose name he bore. In short, the Bible was the fountain of Paul’s ministry and the impetus for all of Paul’s work in missions.

Because Paul knew the various shades of meaning behind the Lamba words, he was able to assist Olive and the missionaries to find the right words as they translated various biblical texts and other books from English into Lamba.<sup>8</sup> They worked at meeting the great need for a written language with a Bible and study tools. They understood, in the words of Conrad Mbewe, “the need to learn the language of the indigenous people, reduce it to written communication, teach the indigenous people how to read and write, [and] translate the Bible and other relevant books into the language of the indigenous people.”<sup>9</sup> Olive helped in the translation of the first Lamba Bible and wrote many readers, primers, and other educational and religious materials in Lamba. Paul helped in many of these projects and contributed in particular to the Bible translation into the Lamba language.

Paul Kasonga was also a gifted preacher and leader. Paul preached from his weakness and in God’s power. Some of the Lambas believed that Paul’s greatest gift was his preaching. He became “the very first local leader of the Baptist church in Zambia, . . . and was the first local person to whom the missionaries first gave actual leadership and authority.”<sup>10</sup> Although the date is uncertain, this probably occurred in 1931. In 1934, Anasi Lupunga joined Paul as his assistant at the Kafulafuta mission, until Paul’s death twenty years later.

## Evangelizing and Shepherding

At about eighteen years of age, Olive Doke’s student-teacher was offered a teaching role at a remote area that could only be reached on foot, even though Paul could hardly walk. He accepted the invitation and became a trusted teacher for a white settlement owner who had multiple wives and six children, all of whom became Paul’s students in one way or another. Here again, Paul used his time off to go out into the villages and preach the gospel. When he returned to the mission, he learned the trade of carpentry but continued to go out to area villages to preach the gospel, sometimes with his colleagues, other times alone. Regardless of whatever else he needed to do, this became his common practice. He had to preach Christ to his countrymen.

Paul’s knowledge of Scripture and his giftedness for preaching and teaching might easily eclipse his gift for counseling others, particularly those in conflict. His own brokenness in disability became fertile soil for the roots of a compassionate, understanding, and humble counselor, such as he became. His preaching and teaching was accompanied by strong and effective relationships with church people, and this could be seen in their family lives, with and their marriages. His commitment to his people, and the way he labored among them was almost incomprehensible. People would line up at his doorway to listen to his advice, and here he would sit with his Bible resting on a makeshift tray fastened to the chair in front of him. “At almost any time of the day and night, enquirers would be found in his hut, where he would point them in

the way of salvation, or strengthen, advise and guide them in their spiritual life, showing how it bore on their daily round in the village.”<sup>11</sup>

One by one, he addressed their needs from Scripture and sent them on their way better equipped. Olive captures the impact of Paul’s counseling:

“He, with his wisdom, was instrumental in saving many marriages which would have come to divorce. Those who were determined to separate, after long conversation and prayer with Paul, have gone away in a different frame of mind, and, with God’s help have kept together.”<sup>12</sup>

Paul Kasonga never married and had no children, but he had a deep grasp of Scripture’s teaching about marriage. So, as Olive adds regarding those whom Paul counseled, “They are with us today as happy families, living witnesses to Paul’s loving tenderness and understanding, and yet persistence, in maintaining God’s laws about marriage.”<sup>13</sup>

As time went on, Paul’s mobility became limited and his travel decreased. He began an extensive letter-writing ministry, following in the path of his namesake, the Apostle Paul. “Where he could not go physically, he went through his letters. Elison Chimbila, who was a deacon in the church at Kafulafuta, became his scribe because Kasanga could not write very well, having lost his fingers.”<sup>14</sup> From his own pain, Paul spoke to the hearts of his people through correspondence. Mbewe adds, “Kasanga wrote letters of encouragement or admonition or guidance and comfort to various churches, and to various individuals in those churches who needed help right across Lambaland. It is a wonder how much God did through his servant despite his infirmity.”<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, perhaps because of his infirmity, and immobility, he had the time to commit to composing powerful pastoral letters that encouraged and guided the growing church in Zambia . . . very much like the Apostle Paul.

Clearly, Paul Kasonga’s disabilities shaped him into an outstanding, and yet humble, pastor. He lost all his fingers and toes and eventually a lower leg. He was chronically ill. At the time he was ordained, he could neither walk nor write without assistance. Most of the time, he was restricted to his house like the Apostle whose hired house in Rome became a center for Christian mission (Acts 28:30–31).<sup>16</sup> For any travel, he relied on others to transport him on a stretcher. Yet others valued his giftedness, commitment, and spiritual insight. This dependence on others, due to disability, was part of his *ability* to build a healthy church. It created a healthy interdependence. Yet another example of God reframing disability as ability!

Paul’s suffering, often severe, gave him a rapport with the suffering poor, sick, and outcast. He understood their pain, responded with empathy, and was slow to judge people in their struggles. He cared deeply for those who were infirm and weak. In his own weakness he ministered to their needs as well as he possibly could. The impact of his kindness in weakness was seen and heard across Lambaland. Olive explains that Paul and his assistant pastor were “ever helping the weaker and more backward, and zealously watching over the purity of the church membership. It is their individual work which tells perhaps more than anything.”<sup>17</sup>

Through Paul, his people understood and accepted their need to draw upon weakness. “If a man in his condition could do so much, how much more should those of us who are able-bodied do?”<sup>18</sup> Olive describes the impact of Paul’s ministry:

“It soon became evident that Paul was a born leader; the people seemed naturally to look to him. He was far ahead of them in spiritual things; he had been taught of the Holy Spirit by his very suffering. . . . Paul soon became the acknowledged leader in Lambaland in spiritual things, and everybody naturally went to him with troubles and difficulties.”<sup>19</sup>

Zambian church planter, Conrad Mbewe’s conclusion is that all believers “ought to read the life of Paul Kasonga and put aside their excuses for not serving God because of their alleged inabilities.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps hidden

to the casual observer, Paul's disabilities gave him ministry integrity among his peers and valuable spiritual insight for preaching and counseling, both for which he demonstrated extraordinary giftedness. The church today needs pastors, missionaries, Sunday-school teachers and other leaders with disabilities. Perhaps ironically, it suffers spiritually without them. Their weakness, like Paul Kasonga's, should be cherished.

### **Completing Their Mission**

Within ten years of beginning his ministry, Paul was at the top level of leadership at the Kafulafuta church, but it took another twenty-two years before he was ordained. Paul was selected to be the first national elder of the church and was ordained to the gospel ministry a little over one year before the Lord took him home.<sup>21</sup>

At around age fifty, Paul's leprosy took its toll. Olive wrote,

“Paul the Leper has finished his course. The earth of Lambaland has received his mortal remains, so marked by suffering. The rivers flow past his grave on either side, trees and palms lining their banks. In weakness of body he had ‘fought a good fight’ and in the midst of Central African heathenism he had ‘kept the faith’. His is the ‘crown of righteousness’, a mighty tribute to the grace of God.”<sup>22</sup>

Olive served almost until her death in 1972, fifty-six years after going to the Kafulafuta mission. She had invested her entire life in one place, much of it working alongside of one person, Paul Kasonga. In so doing, she became, and is to this day, the longest-serving Baptist missionary in the history of Zambia. By one testimony, “The spread of the gospel in Lambaland can be attributed mainly to the work of these two.”<sup>23</sup> And elsewhere, “God used these two wonderful servants of Christ greatly in the establishment of the Baptist churches in Zambia. They were both pioneers and pillars of the work there.”<sup>24</sup> Today, the record of their service for Christ reminds us timelessly that God's strength is perfected in our disability, in weakness.

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## Notes

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23. Personal interview of Elena Spider Cosamu with Conrad Mbewe in 2010, cited in Mbewe, *Insights*, 121.
24. Kevin Roy, preface to *Paul the Leper*.

## About the Author

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**Dave Deuel, M.A., Ph.D.** (Cornell University and The University of Liverpool) is Senior Research Fellow Emeritus at the Joni Eareckson Tada Disability Research Center at Joni and Friends as well as Academic Dean Emeritus of The Master's Academy International, and Catalyst for Disability Concern and Young Leaders Generation leadership development for the Lausanne Movement. Dave served as Regional Director for Joni and Friends in the San Fernando Valley, CA and in board positions for The North Los Angeles Regional Center, All Children's Hospital (Los Angeles), Direct Link for the Disabled (Solvang, CA) and the California State Council on Developmental Disabilities (Sacramento). He currently Serves as Chairperson for the New York State Council on Developmental Disabilities and participates in several working groups at the United Nations. Dave focuses his ministry interests on developing young disability leaders and their ministries globally and writing ministry materials and research publications on disability-related topics.