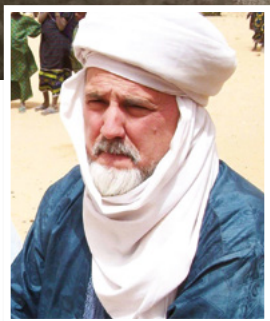


PEOPLE'S PRAYERS SAVED MY LIFE



Q&A with Jeff Woodke from Tearfund partner, Jemed, who was held hostage in West Africa for more than six years.

Interview by Peter Shaw, Tear Times Editor

Jeff Woodke, a US humanitarian worker, was taken captive by terrorists in October 2016 and released in March 2023. Jeff is the former head of Jemed (Youth with a Mission Mutual Aid and Development), a Tearfund partner based in Abalak, northern Niger. At the time of his abduction, Jeff was no longer head of Jemed but had returned to monitor the organisation's work.

Jeff was abducted by gunmen who shot and killed his guards and was taken to northern Mali. Over more than six years of captivity, he was beaten, locked in chains for hours a day and endured self-imposed hunger strikes. The US government negotiated his release. His wife, Els, campaigned tirelessly for his release, for many years not knowing whether he was alive.

At Jemed, Jeff pioneered 'sustainable nomadism', a process

that enables nomadic pastoralists (livestock farmers), their families and animals, to withstand drought while retaining their traditional way of life.

'Forgiveness is something I practised while I was a hostage'

We are very grateful for Jeff agreeing to talk so candidly about his time in captivity, his faith and life back home...



'I couldn't let go of my faith 100 per cent – I just couldn't'

How are you Jeff, how are you doing in yourself?

I'm working on getting better. There's physical issues, there's emotional, there's psychological, there's spiritual issues. Everything has its own pace, rhythm and time.

How have you changed as a result of your experiences?

There are changes in every dimension of my life. The person I was when I was taken into captivity was not the person that came out. I kept my faith. Actually, my faith kept me. That's probably the best way to say it. The big challenge we've been facing, my family and I, is how to get healed from post-traumatic stress disorder, from all the physical things that I have from my captivity. And how to redefine being human, my situation and what it means. So that's the road we're on.

Did your experiences change the way you think about Niger and the people you were there to serve?

Yes and no. I was held, for most of the time, by the Tuareg people in the mountains. It was very difficult for me to be treated the way I was treated by them and by the Fulani people. These are people for whom, for 30 years in Niger, I had poured out my life. It's been very difficult for me to come to grips with the people that took me. But forgiveness is something I practised while I was a hostage. At every opportunity I got, I would forgive my jailers. Because I knew that if I didn't do that, I would break completely. I was already broken by the end. Forgiveness is just something you have to do day by day. ▶

📷 Above left and opposite: Jeff and his family in Niger before his abduction
Photos: Courtesy of Jeff Woodke

Above right: Jeff's wife Els who campaigned tirelessly for his release
Photo: Alamy

How did you manage to get through each day? Did your faith help?

I would pray and fast for two or three days. My captors would get angry at me if I fasted because I would get sick. But I felt prayer and fasting was the way out. When I could walk, I would walk about three miles a day. I would worship and pray, and then I would go back to whatever little shade that I had and I would pray. I had a routine.

But, after a year, two years, three years of fasting and praying... man. It's like prayer isn't working for me. My body started to deteriorate. My leg was already bad. I just couldn't walk.

Hope went real soon. Hope that I was ever going to go home was completely gone by my fifth year. As my hope went out the window, my faith began to drop and my time in prayer ended.

'You have to forgive, you have to love, you have to accept'

In the end, I just couldn't do much anymore. I was hunger-striking. I had terrible malaria that just about killed me. I was physically and emotionally exhausted. I didn't even want to come home. I just wanted it to be over. But, I couldn't let go of my faith 100 per cent – I just couldn't. I would try and then it would just come back to me: 'Got to pray.' I would pray for my family out of love, and I would continue to try not to be angry at God out of love. And, that was it. That was it.



Please continue to pray for Jeff, Els and their children as they continue to recover together, and for Jeff's physical and mental health. See page 18 in the *Prayer Diary* for more.

How has your faith been since you came back?

When I recovered, I quickly found out that there were people all over the world who had been praying for me. I found stacks of letters and cards and things. There are children who have been praying for me since they could speak. People all over the world prayed for me. In my own prayers, I prayed for a lot of specific things. When I came out, I saw my prayers had been answered. I had no way of knowing. But, I saw that these prayers had worked. Things just fell together through prayer.

People's prayers are one of the things that saved my life. And, that's my message to everyone who prayed for me or even sent thoughts. Your thoughts and your prayers. They work. Through prayer, God literally raised someone from the dead. Because I was done. I was a walking cadaver. That's all I was. But, I'm home now. Thank God.

What are your feelings towards the people who took you captive now?

I want to walk free, so I can't hate. And if I feel that anger, I have to learn to let it go through me and out of me. And not to be carried away by it. You have to forgive, you have to love, you have to accept. It's up to people to make their peace with God. You're going to catch a whole lot more flies with honey than with vinegar. That's it.

