

Chapter One

Hell on Earth

August 2014 - Freetown, Sierra Leone

This is a time without pity,
This time the enemy is silent, invisible, deadlier.
This time there can be no truce, no treaties.
It's a zero-sum situation.
This time the enemy is not a child soldier,
This time the enemy is a virus, a killer virus.
This is a time of constant wailing -
Ambulances shrieking under the hot tropical sun,
Striking macabre fear into the heart.
This time the enemy is called Ebola.

Father Themistocles Adamopoulos

Meliandou is a tiny village in a sparsely populated area of the Gueckedou District of Guinea, Sierra Leone's northern neighbor. In December 2013, an 18-month-old boy living in this village contracted the Ebola virus. Before getting sick, the boy was seen playing near a hollow tree heavily infested with bats. The toddler was probably bitten by an infected bat, most likely part of a migratory flock of bats from the Congo.

In 1976, nearly three hundred people were killed during the outbreak of a deadly virus near the Ebola River in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). It was successfully contained since the virus arose in a relatively remote area.

From 1976 to 2014, there were sporadic Ebola outbreaks elsewhere in Central Africa, especially in Uganda, but they were suppressed before spreading to large

population centers. Health authorities worldwide knew that the Ebola virus was still active in animal hosts, suspected to be fruit bats and primates. These potential animal hosts could not be confined to a specific geographic region.

The youngster developed a sudden illness characterized by high fever, vomiting, and black stools. Since Ebola, also known as Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever, had never been seen in West Africa, the boy's family had no idea their son had contracted one of the world's deadliest diseases.

By early January 2014, several members of the boy's immediate family were displaying similar symptoms and sought the assistance of traditional healers. The staff at the rural clinic in nearby Gueckedou who treated the boy's family and the traditional healers fell ill, as did members of the boy's extended family. Most of these people died.

Sadly, this tragedy was the genesis of a horrific pattern of cross-border Ebola transmission – close contact with the infected corpse at mortuaries and funerals is the ideal method for the virus to move from person to person.

By February 2014, Ebola infections were seen in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, and in several surrounding prefectures. The Guinea Ministry of Health issued its first alert about this unidentified disease on March 13th, but everyone assumed it was cholera or perhaps Lassa Fever.

On March 14th, The World Health Organization's (WHO) Africa Office began an extensive investigation of the disease outbreak. Later that March, WHO confirmed that the causative agent of the epidemic was the Zaire strain of the Ebola virus, the most lethal virus in the Ebola family.

By April 1st, 2014, authorities in Guinea had widely broadcast the warning that the Ebola virus reaches its contagious peak shortly after its human host dies. Despite this well-publicized admonition, people continued to practice their traditional burial customs, which involved washing and dressing the corpse. The result was predictable but also tragic. The Ebola virus spread like an all-consuming fire raging through a dry field.

Father Themis (Themistocles Adamopoulos) came to Sierra Leone in 2007 from Kenya, just a few years after the brutal civil war had ended. His vision was to establish an Orthodox Christian Mission with the facilities and infrastructure required to care for the neediest in the world's poorest nation.

With nothing but his faith in Jesus and the support of his benefactors in America, Greece and Australia, Father Themis immersed himself in the daunting challenge of establishing a Christian philanthropic mission.

First, he built the Waterloo Compound, which cared for many disabled (war and polio victims) and their families.

During the Sierra Leone civil war, the Revolutionary United Front, or RUF, was keen on hacking off the limbs of those who dared oppose their reign of terror. The result is that Sierra Leone now boasts thousands of people missing an arm, a hand, a leg, a foot, or some combination of the above.

In parts of West Africa, children born with or who acquire polio after birth are thought to be cursed and are often abandoned in the streets to protect the rest of the family.

Next, the Mission acquired a large Freetown Council school of over 1,600 primary school pupils in the center of Freetown. The school had struggled to operate under appalling conditions since the end of the civil war.

Youth gangs and other criminals roamed within the unfenced schoolyard harassing girls and anyone else who crossed their path. Furniture was smashed, blackboards badly damaged. Teachers were terrified to step outside during school breaks. It was a depressing environment that was not conducive to learning.

Father Themis intervened. He built a wall around the school and a new office for the administration. He supplied educational materials and created a brand new, double-story, sixteen classroom complex. Father constructed an Orthodox Church on the compound where students, faculty, and the public could worship.

Then Father transformed an uninhabited hill in the center of Freetown populated only with bats, rats, and mosquitos into the thriving headquarters of the Orthodox Mission in Sierra Leone.

The hill was sliced into two levels. The Mission's residence house (Paradise4Kids House) occupies the higher level. Adjacent to the Mission residence house Father built a Teacher's College, a post-secondary institution specializing in training young men and women in early childhood education. On this same level, Father also built the Mission's administrative offices. A Byzantine-style church and a guest house were constructed on the lower level (Sts. Constantine and Helen).

After all this hard-won progress, a new enemy threatened to destroy everything Father Themis and his dedicated clergy, staff, and philanthropic volunteers worked diligently to build.

In July of 2014, the first confirmed case of Ebola was reported in Freetown, a city with over 1 million souls. The deadly plague was now entrenched in a perfect viral breeding ground where hundreds of thousands lived in primitive, squalid conditions.

In August, Father wrote to his supporters about his nightmare.

"I find myself situated in a quasi-apocalyptic End Time scenario I would never have imagined possible.

"Freetown, the bustling capital of Sierra Leone and the location of three of our Mission's philanthropic, ecclesiastical, and educational compounds, is starting to look like a page out of the New Testament's End Times prophecies, '...and there shall be pestilences in various places.' (Matthew 24.7).

"The impact and fear of Ebola is starting to make Freetown, a usually vibrant though poor urban center, resemble a ghost town (especially at night) with much of its infrastructure and economy in damage control mode.

"Many nurses and doctors have unfortunately been killed by the virus. Most hospitals, pharmacies, and clinics have shut down and remain empty. Members of the

medical profession are not reporting for duty, preferring to stay home out of fear of being contaminated by the virus.

"People are afraid to receive medical attention if they have a fever or a sore throat out of an irrational though popular fear that doctors will kill them with a 'poisoned big needle.' This is not a time for even a minor symptom of malaria or typhoid due to anxiety that their ailment could be misinterpreted as Ebola.

"Ebola victims run away from clinics or hospitals when diagnosed with Ebola. Some Ebola centers are attacked by violent crowds who want the centers removed from their neighborhood.

"The official statistics of the infection rate appear to be far below the actual number. It seems that international assistance and expertise are slow in coming. Indeed, the international community seems more interested and obsessed with canceling all flights to and from the region and isolating us rather than helping us. In a real sense, this plague is now out of control here.

"Corpses of victims may be burnt, left unburied for a time, or buried in designated Ebola burial sites. Public gatherings of people are now forbidden. Cinemas, bars, nightclubs, and football venues have all shut down. Schools and universities are on vacation and will most likely remain so until the danger has passed. The only places people may now gather in large numbers are churches and mosques.

"The majority of 'ex-pats' and international NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) personnel have flown out already. The popular elite resorts they frequent in Freetown – restaurants, cafes, and Lumley Beach, are now almost deserted.

"Street vendors have to stop selling by six pm. Banks must close by one pm. Motorbikes are not permitted on the streets after seven pm, and cars should not be on the road after ten pm. People are advised to stay indoors at night.

"The sight of people wearing gloves and the placement of buckets containing chlorinated water outside those shops or venues still open is common. A whiff of chlorine is in the air.

"People no longer shake hands or hug for fear of contamination, and there is a suspicion about everyone – because the deadly enemy is invisible, so anyone you meet or talk to – beggar or rich man, street person or professor - could be a carrier.

"Entire regional districts of Sierra Leone are now under quarantine with military checkpoints – you cannot go in or out - and there is talk that this type of lock-down will also happen here in Freetown.

"This is a nation that has fairly recently emerged from a brutal and catastrophic civil war. The people are resilient and stoic. However, besides the Ebola plague, there may be another calamity coming. My concern is that ships may also stop coming to Freetown. In that case, we will be almost completely isolated from the rest of the world. Our food supplies will begin to run dry. Rice, the staple food of Sierra Leone, is imported. So, if the crisis continues and we become a pariah state, an untouchable region, we may face a worse mass killer than Ebola – famine! 'And there shall be famine and plagues ...in various places (Matthew 24.7)."

From July 2014 onwards, Father Themis was urged by his ecclesiastical superiors, friends, and supporters in America, Australia, and Greece to leave Sierra Leone for his own safety. Their argument was simple, "What good are you to anyone if you're dead, Father?" According to the American Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the 2014 West African Ebola outbreak was up to 70% lethal; therefore, an Ebola diagnosis spelled a cruel death sentence for most people.

The world had simply not experienced this before. The only thing akin to the scope of what was happening in West Africa in mid-2014 was what the Europeans experienced in the Middle Ages with the Black Death (1347-1350). The Ebola virus is transmitted only by direct human contact – skin to skin, or through bodily fluids (blood, saliva, vomit, etc.), or by touching infected clothing or other items, such as mattresses or syringes. Touching the wrong person could mean losing your life.

When the Ebola virus first hit Freetown, there was no sizeable international relief presence in Sierra Leone. The international aid group Doctors Without Borders were the only exception – they were in the West Africa Ebola fight in force from the beginning.

From the standpoint of self-protection and self-preservation, it seemed evident to Father Themis that the world had a vested interest in stamping out this plague before it

reached non-African shores. Yet, from April 2014 through September 2014, no large-scale international effort was organized to come to the aid of the West African people.

Due to a lack of international support and intervention, the plague spread exponentially. The CDC first reported Ebola cases in Sierra Leone in late May 2014. Those few cases were all reported near the border with Guinea. By August 1st, Sierra Leone reported 442 cases and over 200 deaths.

Father Themis knew to some degree why the Ebola outbreak was not getting the attention and resources it required from the world community.

The inescapable reality was that if an Ebola outbreak had occurred in the Western world, armed forces and thousands of civilian medical personnel would have been deployed within days to set up treatment centers, enforce quarantines, and handle the immense logistics required to stamp out a virulent pestilence.

The worldwide health community, in particular the pharmaceutical industry, had more than thirty-five years since the initial outbreak in Zaire in 1976 to work on developing a means of attacking the Ebola virus through a vaccine and/or effective treatment. If this initial 1970s outbreak had occurred in London, Paris, or Moscow, Father Themis believed that it was sure that a vaccine and effective treatment would have been developed by 2014.

As July ended, Father Themis was facing a Garden of Gethsemane situation. Should he stay or go? Death was all around him. His personal escape window was rapidly closing. Most air travel in or out of Sierra Leone would be suspended within days. Father had an airline ticket from Sierra Leone to Australia, all he had to do was get on the flight, and he would be safe. A quick decision was required.

After much prayer, Father Themis sent this letter to his supporters in early August:

"Our Lord Jesus has taught that the shepherd of the flock does not run away when danger or an enemy approach but remains to protect the sheep. The hireling runs away. 'But he that is a hireling and not the shepherd ... seeing the wolf coming leaves

the sheep and flees... the hireling flees because he cares not for the sheep.' (John 10 - 12-13). I am not a hireling!

"Consequently, since the next 30 to 60 days are the most crucial in this current Ebola crisis, my natural place for the next few months, or as long as the emergency period remains, is here in Sierra Leone."

Not long after Father decided to stay, one morning, he woke up and noticed that his hands and feet were covered in red spots. Bright red spots, like he had been burned. This was the first time he'd ever seen anything like this. He remembered that one of the symptoms of Ebola was hemorrhagic wounds. He was shocked. He was concerned that he might have become infected with the virus.

He thought, what do I do now? Who do I tell? Do I call a doctor? Do I call the Ebola center? Father Themis pondered all the possibilities but knew he had to take action to prevent others from being contaminated.

Thinking more on the issue, he recalled that the typical pattern of Ebola symptoms was a combination of fever, vomiting, diarrhea, headache, and hemorrhagic sores. He had none of the other symptoms, so he pondered why he only had odd burn-like marks that could be hemorrhagic sores. He considered the possibility that he might be a medical exception. Then it hit him.

Father had been washing with heavily chlorinated water. It was the chlorine that caused the burns. His relief was as intense as the fear of being tossed into a mass grave. He saw Ebola victims' bodies left in the street to rot or corpses burned around him. He knew that even if help could reach him from nearby Greece, it would probably not arrive in time to save his life. Being unceremoniously dumped into a hastily dug sandy hole in an open field on the outskirts of Freetown was not how he wanted to leave this world.

There is a perception among Sierra Leonians, unfortunately based on experience, that when real trouble comes in Africa, the white men usually run away, even if they belong to a charity organization or a church. By and large, this is what

happened during the Sierra Leone civil war. Father was determined to show his African brothers and sisters that not every white man would run away in their hour of greatest need.

As the spiritual leader and Chancellor of the Holy Orthodox Archdiocesan District of Sierra Leone, Father Themis also felt a profound obligation to minister to the parishioners daily. Now more than ever, the Orthodox community in Freetown needed to draw strength from the Divine Liturgy, sermon, and Eucharist. Father Themis was the embodiment of Christianity to many in Sierra Leone. Jesus Christ does not abandon his faithful; if required, He goes to the cross and sacrifices all for them as their servant.

Due to the outpouring of generosity of the Mission's many supporters in America, Australia, and Greece, Father Themis also knew that if the ships continued to visit Freetown, there would be relief supplies to off-load and manage. His presence in the country could be the difference between those supplies being stolen and sold on the black market or properly handled and distributed to those in need.

Even though they were given ample rice supplies, medical services, accommodations, and a free water supply, many of the disabled at Waterloo were still in their old habit of leaving the compound for several days to go into Freetown to beg. They would return on Sundays to be with their family and friends.

However, begging was a high-risk activity due to the current Ebola outbreak. If just one of the men were infected, that could potentially doom the other residents and all the Mission workers. Strict measures had to be implemented to safeguard the Mission from this potential danger. Father Themis knew it would be a full-time job to keep the men on the compound.

Given that the Orthodox Mission was filled with the poorest of the poor and, therefore, the most vulnerable members of Sierra Leone society, it was indeed an answer to prayer and a miracle that so far, not one of Father's flock had contracted Ebola. Father knew that his constant, personal attention was required to minimize the number of Ebola deaths among those under his care.

By October 2014, credible international health authorities finally woke up to the grim reality. They predicted tens of thousands of people would die from the virus or perhaps hundreds of thousands. Like its neighbors, Guinea and Liberia, Sierra Leone was staring into the abyss.

The entire country was at tremendous risk and not just from Ebola – children were not going to school, crops were not being planted, and the national economy was paralyzed. Vast districts were quarantined. Everyday life had ground to a halt. The entire nation was in shutdown mode.

After the long, hard days in September and October ended, Father retired to his residence at Tower Hill. I called him many of those nights. We talked into the wee hours of the morning about his past.

These conversations reminded Father of who he once was, a person very different than the man he was now. Reanimating his past was bittersweet for Father. In many ways, his pre-Christian past, some four-plus decades behind him, was still a weight that was never entirely off his soul. For him, Christ was the first and the last, the world simply made no sense to him without Jesus in the center of everything.

But for the first twenty-plus years of his life Themistocles Adamopoulos, or Themis Adams as he was then known, wanted nothing to do with Jesus Christ. This valiant Christian priest who was bravely risking his life for his flock was once a long-haired hippie, atheist intellectual who thought the world was all about The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Hendrix, and Neo-Marxism and being a learned, secular academic.

As was true of many of the servants of Christ who came before him, Father Themis had a past that God used to create the new man he eventually became.