

LIVING WITH
HOPE

*A true story
of faith, purpose
and mobility*

MICHAEL PANTHER

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FOREWORD

My first encounter with Michael Panther was at Joni and Friends while wheeling the hallways of our International Disability Center. Any time I see a wheelchair user at our Center, I like to stop and learn their story. I wasn't prepared to hear the pain yet power behind Michael's.

This winsome young man with a winning smile had come to serve in our internship program. When I asked why he wanted to be an intern, Michael was quick to share his heart for his fellow Africans who, like him, had suffered great disappointment and affliction.

That meeting when we parked our wheelchairs beside each other was years ago. Since then, Michael Panther has forged an incredible ministry far beyond what he dreamed of as an intern with Joni and Friends. For all his many challenges; for all the years he suffered through the South Sudan war; for all his incalculable losses, Michael still keeps his winning smile.

It's what makes me love Jesus more when I am around him.

And I'm happy to tell you that the book you hold in your hands will do the same. In the pages of *Living with Hope*, you'll get to know a fellow sufferer who has held fast to God and his Word through unthinkable afflictions. Here is a Christian leader whose wisdom has been honed through constant hardships. Michael writes with authority when he echoes his Lord, saying, "Do not be surprised at fiery ordeals... in this world you will have trouble... we must enter the kingdom through many tribulations." Yes, the author of this book understands suffering.

Yet Michael has cultivated a sweet humility and submission to Christ that makes God look astonishing. Through his tireless labors and constant trials, my friend has come to view challenges as his allies. In short, hardship has made Michael Panther a man of solid character.

If like me you wrestle with affliction, you will be strengthened by the insights in *Living with Hope*. You will learn that God is more interested in what you become than in what you get out of life. He is more interested in what you need than in what you want. It is a lesson God has taught me in my wheelchair, and like my friend from Africa, my disability is the bruising-of-a-blessing that has drawn me nearer to my precious Savior.

I encourage you to read the book you hold in your hands slowly and carefully. The pages are filled with winsome stories, rich insights, and practical guidance for those who are thirsty for more than this world can give. In *Living with Hope*, you will discover that your

disappointments are your passport to a livelier and more earnest walk with Jesus Christ.

So, grab a cup of coffee and flip the page – by the last chapter, you’ll be thanking God for *your* bruised blessings, whether they be failures, botched surgeries, the aches of aging, long-standing losses, or perhaps like me, even a fateful dive into water.

Bless you for allowing Michael Panther to be your guide as you step beyond the shallows of your faith and into deeper water. And don’t be frightened if you get in above your neck... for it is in deep waters where God *always* reveals more of himself.

Joni Eareckson Tada

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PROLOGUE

Shhhsp. Shhhsp. Shhhsp.

“Michael, come quickly! You have to see this.”

I turn in my wheelchair and head toward the speaker, who is now pointing. I cannot believe my eyes. Before me is a woman on her hands and knees, gripping the thongs of a pair of worn-out flip-flops. Every time the flip-flops slide forward, they make the *shhhsp* sound as they scrape against the floor. She has taped a pair of worn-out kneepads to her knees, their outer shells long ago peeled away from traversing the rocky roads. Beside her walks a young girl, probably no more than three years old, who hangs on to her for dear life.

I can't help but gasp at the determination and trust of this woman in crawling her way to our clinic. Until this morning, we'd thought we had seen it all. Every sort of mobility need we could imagine had passed through our clinic doors. But when Chama crawls in on all fours, the room goes silent as all eyes turn toward her.

Chama's clothing and the blanket tied around her waist are tattered and dirty from being dragged through

the grime of the city streets. Her two withered lower limbs, with feet pointing upward, hang in the air in old compression socks. She is a tall woman who has no doubt spent her life in this bowed posture, unable to look into the eyes of others. Later, we learn Chama has come from the neighboring town of Shauri Moyo, some twenty kilometers away, and where, except for her small daughter, she has been alone and unassisted.

But Living with Hope is there to help. As I look back, I realize everything in my life has led to this moment. This is what God intended for my life and began directing me toward many, many years ago.

LITTLE BOY LOST

I woke suddenly, my heart pounding fiercely. I sat up from the grass mat I slept on with my younger brother and sister, next to my parents. Why were people screaming outside our hut?

“Gunfire!” my father shouted when we all startled at the popping sounds.

I could smell smoke, too, but it wasn’t our morning fire. Only three years old, I was terrified. “What’s happening, Baba? Mama?”

My father jumped up and rushed outside. Just as quickly, my mother pushed me and my terrified siblings out of our hut and into the night.

“Hurry!”

Now my heart raced as we all fled through darkness toward the shelter of bushes and the forest beyond. I tripped over something, and in the glow of flickering light, I could see several people lying on the ground. They weren’t moving. Were they dead?

“Hurry!” my mother urged over and over in a loud whisper. I couldn’t resist my curiosity, though, and I

glanced behind me. Men were setting the homes of our village ablaze. Some of our neighbors were still inside them, and I could hear their shrieking. Horrified, I fought back tears as we sped toward relative safety. What would happen to us?

I must have glanced back one too many times, for—amid the confusion of smoke and chaos—I suddenly realized my family was nowhere to be seen in the dark forest. I couldn't even hear their voices, and I both panicked and froze. Yet I remembered my parents' repeated instructions for such a time as this. Resisting the urge to shout for my mother, I lay low in a patch of earth free of grass as the sounds of anguish and the light of flames filtered through the trees.

Afraid to move, I stayed there for the rest of the night, awake and quiet even as the sun came up, waiting for my family to find me. When no one came, I remembered hearing my parents pray. In my own way, I cried out to their God: *Save me!*

I woke to the early rays of the sun sifting through the tops of the trees, the third dawn since I'd hidden myself. Too afraid to look for food or water, I'd had neither. Even if I wanted to move now, how could I? I could hardly lift my head. Tears threatened once more, and I wanted nothing more than my mother's arms around me.

Sometime later that day, footsteps crunched against the forest floor. They were coming toward me, closer and

closer. As I trembled with fear, I was certain an enemy was about to end my life: *If those people killed the others, they'll kill me too.*

The footsteps stopped close to my ear. "It's all right. I'm here to help."

I looked up to see the kind face of a Dinka Bor soldier. I recognized him by the missing lower teeth and the markings on his forehead. He spoke to me in the Dinka Bor language. After giving me water and a little food, he then carried me to the safety of a makeshift camp. My parents and siblings had been waiting there, praying I'd be found and returned to them.

I'd been saved. But my life would never be the same.

Some people think trauma experienced early in a child's life is soon forgotten. "He's young. He'll get over it. There won't be any lasting impact," they say. But they are wrong. It's not true. I can assure you that trauma sears memories into the minds of young children. The trauma I suffered so early in my life lives with me yet today, and I am conscious that I must fight against the boogeyman of my fears on a daily basis.

When I was born in the early 1990s—around Christmastime, as my mother recalls—Sudan was embroiled in an intense civil war between the government in the North and liberation fighters in the South. The reasons for war are always complex, and they often evolve over time. Today, what began as a battle for a free South

Sudan continues among warring tribal factions, even after achieving Southern independence. At the heart of the conflict has been a struggle for power and economic resources. Innocent civilians like the members of my people group, the Dinka Bor, have been caught in the middle for decades. Mass ethnic slaughter wiped out our clans and villages.

Before decades of conflict drastically altered our way of life, our people had dwelt peacefully in the forests of the savanna lands and along the Nile River. We lived together in a community led by village elders. These chiefs oversaw clan affairs, our spiritual shepherding, and the rituals and rites of passage that preserved our culture. We were pastoralists, with our lives centering on the raising and grazing of cattle. To the Dinka, a large herd of cattle was a man's wealth, a precious possession. So valuable were our livestock that our children were named after the most prized among the herd. We were a people known for our exceptional stature and smooth, dark skin. We took great pride in our appearance, the marking on our forehead of manhood, our courage, and our tribal identity.

By the turn of the millennium, war had left us with few animals. Either they had been stolen by attacking militia or we had been forced to abandon them, leaving them to die, when the conflict required that we moved suddenly for safety. We had long set aside our rhythms of seasonal migration with our herds for mere survival farming and grazing.

After the attack on our village when I was three, my family lived on the run. We often went days without food and clean water. We grew what sorghum and millet we could, but producing crops from seed took time, and time was never guaranteed. A poor harvest during the growing season meant hunger and suffering when the dry season arrived. We foraged for roots in the forest to survive.

The rainy season brought its own despair. The land flooded, and with it came mosquitoes and the threat of malaria. We had no access to medical care or humanitarian aid. We became a people skeleton-thin with sunken eyes.

Many children died of starvation, and those who lived carried the swollen bellies of malnutrition. Few made it to their third birthdays. In those years, my mother gave birth to several more children, and we watched helplessly as two of my younger brothers died of starvation. We were devastated. Consuming my parents' thoughts was the fear that their remaining children would also succumb. They were always worried about this. When my newest sister was born, they named her *Adier*, the word for "weariness" in the Dinka language. Conflict and suffering exacted a high psychological toll. We struggled to understand the cruel effects of war that we experienced daily, and the price that it exacted from the most innocent among us.

We were frequently on the move away from conflict and toward safer ground. Many of our people began a thousand-mile journey toward refuge in neighboring Ethiopia. But for others like my clan, we became a people internally displaced, roving across Southern Sudan. At

times we would shelter under trees for a few days. Then once we felt safe, we would set up camp, rebuild huts of mud and thatch, and restore some sort of normal community life. If conditions allowed it, we would stay in that location for a year or more before attempting to return to a previous village site. But eventually, the war would find us again.

We were not alone in our flight to safety. More than two million people from South Sudan have become refugees or asylum seekers. The country remains one of the poorest and most underdeveloped in the world, and severe food insecurity and conflict continue to affect vulnerable people. Hunger is everywhere, and persistent conflict, desert locust swarms, economic crisis, and flooding all increase the risk of disease and famine. Many children still die of starvation before their third birthdays, and those who remain still carry the swollen bellies of malnutrition.

Somehow, miraculously, I survived . . . for the time being. Somehow, in the midst of all this turmoil, God saw me and protected my life. He had a plan for me that would one day be revealed—but not before I would pass through many deep and dark waters.