

A man with glasses and a red polo shirt is speaking at a podium. He is gesturing with his right hand. A large white speech bubble with the words 'table talk' in a stylized font is overlaid on the right side of the image. The background is dark and out of focus.

table talk

9/13/26

“My Heart, My Treasure”

As the dawn mist was lifting on Lake Bangweulu, Dr. David Livingstone was found kneeling beside his bed, hands folded in prayer. There was no movement. The great man had died during the night in the village of Chief Chitambo in present-day Zambia on May 1, 1873.

Chuma and Susi were his assistants. He helped free them from slavery years earlier. They knew they must bury Livingstone in the village or send him back to England for burial. But the decision was more layered than you might know. There was an expectation for him to be returned. He was a national hero, and 115 years later he would be selected as one of the 100 most important Englishmen of all time. Even though there was concern that his body would be unrecognizable after a trip across the continent, the British government wanted him home – and they expected it.

Chuma and Susi knew how much he loved the people of Africa. He had spent much of his adult life preaching the Gospel there and was a driving force in the demolition of the slave trade throughout Africa. The people of Africa deeply loved the one they called simply “The Doctor” or “The Healer.” They wanted his body to remain on the continent he loved and with the people he loved in return.

The final solution was a compromise. It sounds grisly to us, but the physical heart and viscera of the great man would be buried under a Myula tree in the village. The reasoning – “The Healer’s Heart belongs to Africa.” His body was packed with salt, wrapped in bark, and covered with a calico cloth. Then his remains would be carried by hand more than 1,500 miles to the closest European colony and then shipped to Westminster Abbey in London for burial.

Moved by love for the great man, many of the tribe volunteered to assist Susi and Chuma in the task. A few days later, nearly 60 followers of Livingstone started the journey from Chief Chitambo’s little village.

It was a dangerous journey for several reasons including African heat, contagions, fevers and vicious animal life as well as hostile villages and tribal wars. The slave traders would be expected to prevent the burial of one of their greatest enemies. At one point sickness and death had claimed almost half of the party. They stopped for three days to discuss options. It had become a suicide mission, but all 37 remaining men vowed to carry on.

When they finally reached Bagoyo on the Indian Ocean coast nine months later, the British officials did not believe it was Livingstone. Because of advanced decay, identification was practically impossible. Only severe scars on his left arm convinced them of Livingstone's identity. They were from a nearly fatal but well-documented lion attack many years earlier.

So on April 18, 1874, the British Empire laid to rest the remains of this great missionary of Jesus Christ. Susi and Chuma were seated as honored guests.

I have visited his grave several times. The stone over him at Westminster reads as follows:

Brought by faithful hands over land and sea, here rests David Livingstone, Missionary, Explorer, Philanthropist.
Born March 19, 1813 at Blantyre, Lanarkshire
Died May 1, 1873 at Chitambo's Village. UNA

For 30 years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize the native races, to explore the undiscovered secrets and to abolish the desolating slave trade of Central Africa, where with his last words he wrote were:

**ALL I CAN ADD IN MY SOLITUDE, IS, MAY HEAVEN'S RICH
BLESSING COME DOWN ON EVERYONE, AMERICAN OR TURK,
WHO WILL HEAL THIS OPEN SORE OF THE WORLD.**

The story is one of great personal devotion, fervent love of the African people and a disregard for personal comfort in the attempt to honor such an extraordinary servant of God.

Either Chuma or Susi, (stories conflict on which) had to be physically restrained by H.M. Stanley. The faithful attendant wanted to throw himself into the grave and be buried as well.

The point of this story? To prompt each one of us to ask the question: "Do I love The Lord and His people with this same fervency?"

"Do I love like Livingstone, Chuma and Susi?"

I love you,
Pastor Stephen