



Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust

Immaculée Ilibagiza , Steve Erwin (Contributor)

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Immaculee Ilibagiza grew up in a country she loved, surrounded by a family she cherished. But in 1994 her idyllic world was ripped apart as Rwanda descended into a bloody genocide. Immaculee's family was brutally murdered during a killing spree that lasted three months and claimed the lives of nearly a million Rwandans.

Incredibly, Immaculee survived the slaughter. For 91 days, she and seven other women huddled silently together in the cramped bathroom of a local pastor while hundreds of machete-wielding killers hunted for them.

It was during those endless hours of unspeakable terror that Immaculee discovered the power of prayer, eventually shedding her fear of death and forging a profound and lasting relationship with God. She emerged from her bathroom hideout having discovered the meaning of truly unconditional love—a love so strong she was able seek out and forgive her family's killers.

The triumphant story of this remarkable young woman's journey through the darkness of genocide will inspire anyone whose life has been touched by fear, suffering, and loss.

Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust Details

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Christy says

From the first page, there's something phony about this book, but it's hard to pin down. I have no doubt that Immaculee lost her entire family, and I'm very sorry for what happened to her and her people. I believe the basic facts of the story, because I remember news accounts of the time, but some of Immaculee's details sound fake. Eight women hiding in a bathroom three feet by four feet, (with a toilet taking up some of the room,) and the minister throws in a mattress for them? At one point in the story, she says there were 40 to 50 killers in the room next to her. How could she possibly have known how many there were? She's a tall woman weighing 115 pounds at the beginning of the story, (hard enough to believe in itself,) then she loses 50 pounds over the next three months, getting down to 65 pounds, and the night they are let out of the bathroom, she runs to safety? How could she even walk? By the way, how could she know she weighed 65 pounds, when she lived in very primitive conditions for the next several weeks. But it's not just the strange and contradictory details, but the whole tone of the book that seems fake. I notice on her web site that she has a full speaking schedule, she makes numerous media appearances, and that she recently signed a movie contract. Since the book was written twelve years after the war, maybe she had gotten into the habit of making a good story even better. Too bad. The simple truth would have had a deeper impact.

Audrey says

4+ stars

This is a personal account of a survivor of the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, not so much a history of the entire genocide. It's deeply personal and uplifting despite all the atrocities. It's very much a companion to *The Hiding Place*.

Immaculee grew up in a wonderful family and excelled in STEM subjects in school despite encountering extreme racism. She went home from college for Easter when the genocide started in earnest. She survived by hiding in a pastor's house in a tiny bathroom for three months. There were six women and then eight. Being unable to move or make any noise for that whole time, Immaculee immersed herself in meditation and prayer, using the time to strengthen her faith and character.

Immaculee's efforts to forgive and stop the cycle of hatred and violence is really inspiring; her determination and hard work are great examples; all can learn from it. People of all faiths will be inspired by all the miracles she witnessed, but I think Catholics especially will be moved by this account. (Atheists will be just be amazed at all the lucky coincidences.)

It was a case of the oppressed becoming the oppressors, part of a never-ending cycle. This book makes racism and blind hatred seem really stupid. The U.S. at the time refused to acknowledge the genocide: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/200...> It's frustrating because the only lesson we could glean from the WWII Jewish Holocaust was "never again," yet it still happens.

Just to nitpick about the Bible, Immaculee refers to a psalm that she felt was an answer to a prayer. She wasn't reading in English, but the book cited the Contemporary English Version. Compare that to the King

James Version—isn't KJV so much more poetical and powerful?

PSALM 91

Contemporary English Version

2 Then you will say to the Lord, "You are my fortress, my place of safety; you are my God, and I trust you."
3 The Lord will keep you safe from secret traps and deadly diseases.
4 He will spread his wings over you and keep you secure. His faithfulness is like a shield or a city wall.
5 You won't need to worry about dangers at night or arrows during the day.
6 And you won't fear diseases that strike in the dark or sudden disaster at noon.
7 You will not be harmed, though thousands fall all around you.

King James Version

2 I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust.
3 Surely he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler, and from the noisome pestilence.
4 He shall cover thee with his feathers, and under his wings shalt thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler.
5 Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
6 Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness; nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
7 A thousand shall fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee.

Negin says

When I first came across this book, I couldn't make up my mind as to whether I would be able to handle all the pain. I kept picking it up and putting it back on the shelf. After all, it is about the Rwandan genocide and I'm not particularly strong when it comes to these things. I still haven't been able to watch "Hotel Rwanda" and am not sure if I ever will. The pain and trauma hit a bit too close to home for me. No, I haven't experienced anything like what this book describes, but I have experienced other events that I would really rather not think about anymore: political instability to the point of great fear in two countries that I've lived in, as well as a major hurricane.

This is one of those books that really got me thinking. Immaculee suffered immensely and her story is truly riveting. Painful, horrific, and still so amazing – this book reminded me of the incredible power of prayer and trusting in God. Although her faith in God is beyond measure, there are a few points that come to my mind that I disagree with.

First, she equates prayer with positive thinking. I do not believe that they are one and the same.

Second, although her ability to forgive is incredible, it's also a bit difficult for me to comprehend. When it comes to unlimited forgiveness, for sure she is in a different place than me. I take issue with automatically forgiving murderers and believe that true forgiveness, especially when it comes to such atrocities, can only come from God. I feel quite certain that the publisher of this book has a definite bias in favor of automatic forgiveness.

Finally, in one part of the book, I recall her describing the monsters that were murdering everyone left, right, and center, and saying that they weren't bad people. Here, I will quote from one of my all-time favorite authors, Dennis Prager. This is from a book that I need to read again and again, "Think a Second Time". This is from the first chapter in his book. I would quote the entire chapter if I could!

“The belief that people are basically good is one of the most widely held beliefs in contemporary society ... To believe that human nature is basically good – after Auschwitz, the Gulag, Rwanda, Armenia, and Tibet, just to mention some of the horrors of the twentieth century alone – is a statement of faith, as nonempirical as the most wishful religious belief. Whenever I meet people who persist in believing in the essential goodness of human nature, I know that I have met people for whom evidence is irrelevant.”

Regardless, I am so happy that I read this. It is filled with love, compassion, and resilience. Reading it has inspired me to improve my own relationship with God and to learn to trust in Him more.

Some of my favorite quotes:

“The love of a single heart can make a world of difference.”

“I knew that my heart and mind would always be tempted to feel anger--to find blame and hate. But I resolved that when the negative feelings came upon me, I wouldn't wait for them to grow or fester. I would always turn immediately to the Source of all true power: I would turn to God and let His love and forgiveness protect and save me.”

“But I came to learn that God never shows us something we aren't ready to understand. Instead, He lets us see what we need to see, when we need to see it. He'll wait until our eyes and hearts are open to Him, and then when we're ready, He will plant our feet on the path that's best for us...but it's up to us to do the walking.”

“Whenever I prayed, I immediately felt His love around me, and the anxiety eased.”

Juliana says

To give this book fewer than five stars would be a statement that it was somehow incomplete or flawed. How could I find fault with something so heartfelt and genuine? This is a book I will not read again. This is a book I did not ENJOY reading, but it is a book that is worth reading. It is a book that uplifts, even while it subdues.

Would I recommend this book to my friends? Only certain of them. If you like to read books that entertain and put your brain on cruise control, this isn't the book for you. If you like books that feed you and make you grateful for the gifts God has given you, this is a book you won't want to miss.

Gilbert says

"What was that all about, Immaculée? That was the man who murdered your family. I brought him to you to question...to spit on if you wanted to. But you forgave him! How could you do that? Why did you forgive him?"

I answered him with the truth: "Forgiveness is all I have to offer."

THAT line is the goal....but how the heck did this woman get to that point is why you NEED TO READ THIS BOOK!!

Guilt and anger are forces destroying our cultures, our churches, and ourselves most of the time, if we don't know any better. Even so, it is extremely hard to look at the ugly face of reality and actually embrace it.

This woman's message of how she came to forgive unspeakable atrocities (but she does write about them so that we can ponder the potential horror in society), and it needs to be heard and understood.

Yes, the book tells of gross details and it isn't some theme you could sip a latte over. BUT THIS MAY SAVE YOU FROM YOURSELF!

and isn't that worth the effort, to read a book that may not be at all lacking challenge, but one that will bring you to ask the question: what angers me or what relationship has been forgotten because of the lack of forgiveness?

God grant us the strength to not die with unresolved issues, or hate in our heart, regardless of circumstance.

Stephen says

Entering this book, I was expecting personal account of the Rwandan holocaust, despite the foreword stating otherwise. In some ways, my expectations were met, in some others, I was surprised. More than just a chronicling of atrocities, Imaculee Ilibagiza's tale is also a testament to inner fortitude, faith, and the power to forgive.

As an agnostic (though my views on spirituality are constantly in flux) I expected that her story would come off as a bit hokey, with too much Jesus-speak for me. Again, I was surprised. While I tend to deny the miraculous slant she puts on many of her experiences in favor of a more worldly one, I find Ilibagiza's descriptions of her own faith nothing short of extraordinary. Her story, even for a nonbeliever, is an inspiring tale and a stunning demonstration of the power of her faith.

Her narrative style is perfectly suited to her content. She writes simply and straightforwardly, giving the impression that she is telling events just as they happened, in all their bone-chilling details. This book can be read in one sitting, though its effects will linger for days afterwards.

Definitely read this.

Jessika says

This is definitely the most powerful book that I have ever read. Reading this book brought me to tears so

many times, and it truly takes a phenomenal woman to go through what she did and then forgive the perpetrators after all was said and done. I believe that this is a book that everyone *needs* to read at some point in his life. Not only will reading this book make you realize how much you may take for granted in your life, but it also shows you that if she can find forgiveness through God, so can you, no matter how big or small the trespass. This woman's relationship with God is remarkable and should be something that everyone should strive for. Be aware that this book will bring you to tears, but it will also open your eyes in the end. I had a feeling when my aunt bought me this book to read that it would change my life forever...and I have to say that it most certainly did.

Kt says

This book broke my heart over and over all the while strengthening my spirit. I learned that no matter what your situation you can put your trust in God's hands. Often times I feel like my own needs are trivial in comparison to what others may be dealing with and that I don't have a right to burden Heavenly Father with my miniscule problems and questions. But we all need direction, no matter what your circumstance and we all need support.

This book was wonderful. I marveled at her amazing faith and her willingness to forgive and love. It inspired me to serve more willingly, to be more informed, and to try to put my life in God's hands.

Glenna says

All those who harassed Eliece about this book, need to buck up and read it. This is a story that everyone should know. This is a story of great faith. Even though it deals with what happened in Rwanda (which we should all understand) it is the story of a young woman who found God in a bathroom and how he rescues her again and again even through some very difficult situations. My favorite quote from the book happens when there are killers outside the place she is hiding, calling her name and she is praying and has a vision of Jesus who says to her "mountains are moved with faith, Immaculee, but if faith were easy, all the mountains would be gone."

Paul says

I'm not giving this five stars because I think it is a great piece of literature or that it in any ways matches up with the great books of the world. The five stars are more for how powerful and raw the book felt and how much it physically effected me. To me this is the job of a really great survivor testimony. They don't have to be perfectly written or come with accompanying historical footnotes, etc. There were times as I was reading this book that I had a physical reaction to her story. She tells it in very simple terms and pulls no punches. I think some people might feel that she talks about her faith too much, and I have issues with that in my own life, but I would never deny that her faith is what got her through this horrific ordeal. Her story is not necessarily unique in the realm of the Rwandan genocide, though as I know from personal experience in working with Holocaust survivors every story is different and unique. Anyone with any interest in the power of human mind to overcome the absolute worst life can throw at you needs to read this book. Actually everyone needs to read this book.

Karen says

Eye-opening. I didn't want to put it down. Most of all, humbling. I am ashamed at what horrendous things we, as human beings do to each other and also, what we ALLOW to happen. It broke my heart to read of all those refugees hoping and praying for help from someone--anyone, and no one stepped up to help. They were left to fend for themselves. I am ashamed at my own whining and complaining about nothing. I have everything! I am so very blessed.

I was inspired by Immaculee's ability to visualize what she wanted...and she always got exactly what she visualized! One of my favorite lines in the book was this: "I was living proof of the power of prayer and positive thinking, which really are almost the same thing. God is the source of all positive energy, and prayer is the best way to tap in to His power."

I also loved the part where she asked the pastor who was hiding her for a Bible. (I had a similar experience recently with opening my own scriptures to a passage that I knew was meant especially for me.) Immaculee had just prayed for another woman (the pastor had turned the woman away) and she had also pled for a sign that God was watching over her and the women in the bathroom with her. At that moment the pastor opened the door and gave her the requested Bible. She opened it immediately and looked down to read Psalm 91 which reads:

"This I declare, that He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; He is my God, and I am trusting him. For He rescues you from every trap and protects you from the fatal plague. He will shield you with His wings! They will shelter you. His faithful promises are your armor. Now you don't need to be afraid of the dark any more, nor fear the dangers of the day; nor dread the plagues of darkness, nor disasters in the morning. Though a thousand fall at my side, though ten thousand are dying around me, the evil will not touch me."

She was spared and lived to tell her story. It is worth reading.

booklady says

"I am human, and I think nothing of which is human is alien to me." -Terence, Roman 2nd century playwright

The first time I read *Left to Tell* I was so overwhelmed by the horror of the Rwandan genocide I could barely take in all that is commendable in Immaculee's writing. This is a book which merits a second, even a third read. No, I did not become hardened or closed off to the immensity of the atrocity, but I was able to step back and notice new and different things which deepened my appreciation of this already amazing autobiography.

For example, I was able to savor all the little things with which Immaculee filled her story: descriptions of her family and their compassion for one another; their simple lives and deep faith; their concern and care for their community; her family's lack of prejudice despite their Tutsi minority status; the beauty of the Rwandan countryside; Immaculee's intense desire for an education and determination to get one despite all the obstacles she faced as a Tutsi; her many lovely and encouraging dreams of deceased family; her

developing relationship with God, and SO much more.

And on my first read, I completely missed the unique custom in Rwanda, where every family member has a different last name. *'Parents give each children a unique surname at birth one that reflects the feelings of the mother or father at the moment they first lay eyes on their new baby.'* In her native language, Ilibagiza means, 'shining and beautiful in body and soul.' Her father chose that name for her. What a beautiful legacy!

And sadly, when the genocide was over, the victims—and even their rescuers—exhibited the same angry, vengeful desires toward those who had wronged them, as had been vented on them only months earlier. Of course, this is only 'natural' and yet this is exactly what keeps the cycle of violence going generation after generation after generation.

If you haven't read this book, **do**. If you have, don't just read it once, or at least take your time with it. It is about so much more than death, violence, and hatred; it is about the triumph of love and forgiveness.

I put that quote at the beginning of this review as a reminder to myself—that numerically speaking, assuming I was a survivor—odds were more likely I would have been among those who caused the violence in Rwanda or wanted vengeance against those who did, than for me to have been one able to forgive as Immaculée did. A sobering thought.

28 November 2017: Re-reading... It has been over eight years since I read this. Cannot remember if I loaned or gave away my copy of this book, but it is gone. So acquired a cheap second-hand copy to read before next year when Immaculée comes to OKC to speak. Will share this and her other book with my daughters and friend who are going to hear her.

21-22 October 2009: I couldn't put this book down from the moment I started it. Stayed up late at night reading it. I paid for it the next day at work; I was so tired, but it was worth it.

I finished it in two days because the author's story is so compelling. And it's not just what she suffered or lost, because many people endured greater tragedies and were left without anyone. What made Immaculée's story stand out was that she focused on her spiritual development throughout the crisis. We see how she was raised as a devout young girl by loving parents, but how her country's civil war brought out an inner strength and reservoir of faith she didn't know she had. When she was confined with seven other women in a tiny bathroom, she used the time to pray, meditate and develop a rich interior life with God, which not only helped her endure her captivity but also laid a foundation for building a new life after the war ended.

The Rwandan genocide is a difficult subject to read about, but if you read no other book about it, I'd recommend this one. It's really a book about forgiveness and as such reminds me of a Vision Video I previewed recently which we purchased and plan to include as a part of our curriculum for the parent's portion of First Sacraments. I expect it could be used by many other church/fait groups as well. It's wonderful! It's called THE BIG QUESTION and it's the theme of Immaculée's story, the purpose of her life: We all must learn to forgive.

Matt Evans says

Shocking and inspiring. Ms. Ilibagiza tells the story of what happened to her during the Rwandan Holocaust. The narrative's glut of horrific violence made me sick at heart, but Ilibagiza's faith and personal strength pulled me through.

These people are just like you and me: human, educated, desiring of a happy life, and it's stunning to see how quickly so much of this can go down the tubes when mob mentality, based on racial prejudice, sets in. And lest my dear review reader thinks that such things don't happen in America, let's pause for a moment to consider what happened in New Orleans during Katrina. Yes, Katrina, New Orleans, wasn't anything close to a Rwandan Holocaust, but I was shocked how many people, in the aftermath -- good religious, supposedly god-fearing people -- said things to me like, "Those people weren't smart enough to leave when they should have" or "Why should I send money, they're just a bunch of welfare cheats anyway", etc. Barbara Bush spoke for many when she said of the Houston Astrodome Refugess: "They're loving it here."

It's exactly that brand of dismissive rationalization and downgrading of human suffering, based on class- and racial-prejudice, taking place over decades, that set the stage for the Hutu massacre of the Tutsis. The Nazi Holocaust took off from the nearly exact same foundation of social and class prejudice against the Jews.

Anyway, I think that this should be required reading. Ms. Ilibagiza is remarkably brave, and you need to hear her story.

Books Ring Mah Bell says

Faith can be defined as:

1. confidence or trust in a person or thing: faith in another's ability.
2. belief that is not based on proof
3. belief in God or in the doctrines or teachings of religion
4. belief in anything, as a code of ethics, standards of merit, etc.

(courtesy Dictionary.com)

How Immaculee Ilibagiza's faith was not shattered and completely destroyed after her ordeal in the Rwandan holocaust is astonishing. Tribal tensions between the Hutus and the Tutsis escalate and the Hutus set about destroying any Tutsi - from infants to elders, no one is spared, except for those that are hidden away.

Immaculee manages to survive by being secretly stashed in a tiny bathroom for 3 months with several other women. Her family is murdered - her grandparents, parents, brothers, aunts, uncles, and cousins (including an 8 month old baby.) They are only a small portion of the million lives lost in the genocide.

At one point, she hears screaming, then silence, then a baby crying. The baby is left for dead, and Immaculee has to hear the baby cry all night until the crying is replaced by the sound of snarling dogs. She prays for the child's soul and asks God, "How can I forgive people who would do such a thing to an infant?" He responds to her, "You are ALL my children... and the baby is with me now."

This comforts her and she manages to go into "forgive them they know not what they do" mode.

I go into "If we are ALL your children, I think you need to mix in a time-out. And maybe throw in some birth control while you are at it" mode.

I read way too many books like this, *Night*, *The Rape of Nanking*, and I am repeatedly horrified by how these

atrocities can occur. (maybe if I stop reading I can throw away my Paxil!!!)

How someone is able to get to the point that they think it's okay, necessary even, to chop babies in half or throw hundreds of people into a fire because they are ethnically different is incomprehensible.

What the hell goes wrong in your head that makes murder okay?!?!

I get self-preservation. I get self-defense. I do. If someone comes into my home intending to do my family harm, then it's on. I will put my life on the line to protect, no questions asked.

So is what happens with genocide a preemptive thing? Get them before they get us/taint the gene pool/ whatever??? Or is it driven by pure hatred? Is it the devil? I hate to go there, but I really can't wrap my mind around all these unspeakable evils without thinking there's a huge evil force behind it all. Which then gets me thinking, "where the hell is goodness/love and God" while this is going on?

We don't want to go there, not now. (do we?)

All I know, is that my faith, which most days is weak to non-existent, would certainly be gone after enduring what Immaculee endured.

Clif Hostetler says

It's sadly ironic that some people see proof that there is no God when they consider the evil manifest in the Rwandan holocaust. This author lived through that holocaust, her family were victims, and she says she discovered God amidst it. The style of this book is that of a religious faith journey. Considering the unbelievably horrible things she experienced, I can't suggest a better approach to the subject.

The terrible things that happened are beyond belief! I suppose it makes little sense to compare various historical holocausts in an effort to determine which was worst. But the unique characteristic of the Rwandan holocaust that shocks me is how up close and personal many of the killings were. The majority of the killing was done with machetries and in many cases the killers and victims knew each other, were neighbors, had grown-up together and gone to school together. The predominate religion in the country was Christianity (see footnote), they spoke the same language and they had similar skin color. We're talking about nearly a million people killed (20% of the population) which leads to the probable conclusion that there may have been about the same number of people guilty of murder.

In the case of Immaculée Ilibagiza, the author of this book, the killers called out her name while searching the house where she was hiding. They had reason to believe she was there but were unable to find her. She recognized their voices. One of the voices was of a man who she later learns killed her mother and brother and a man who's children she had been classmates with in grade school.

Most people assume the holocaust was a Hutu versus Tutsi tribal conflict. But many Hutu's were massacred in the holocaust as well. 10% to 20% of those killed may have been Hutu. It was actually a massacre initiated by a politically extreme group that advocated the ideology of "Hutu Power" that called for killing all Tutsis and moderate Hutus. I found it of interest that there was a Hutu soldier among the RPG (Tutsi) armed fighters who rescued Immaculée and her group of Tutsi survivors. It was the Hutu soldier who recognized Immaculée as a former classmate and saved her and her group from being charged as Hutu spies. They were

suspected of being Hutus because the first soldiers they encountered couldn't believe it possible that any real Tutsis could have survived the holocaust in that part of the country.

One story from the book that I think illustrates the predicament of the Hutus is one family that rescued and hid a Tutsi woman who had been left for dead. Even though the family was hiding a Tutsi in their house, their son went out each day during the 90 day killing spree to join with other armed Hutus to look for and kill any Tutsis they could find. He had to participate in these murderous activities to prevent other Hutus from suspecting his family of harboring a Tutsi. So it is very possible that some of the killers were reluctant participants in the killing. Hutu families who were found to be hiding Tutsis were slaughtered along with the Tutsis they were hiding.

Immaculée lost her mother, father and two brothers to the holocaust. One brother survived by being out of the country. After the RPG had occupied the country and brought the killing to an end, Immaculée met and talked to the man who killed her mother and brother. This is the man who called out her name while looking for her to kill her. It is presumed that his interest in making sure all members of the family were killed was because he was interested in claiming their family's property. She was able to look him in the eye and say, "I forgive you." When asked why she said, "Forgiveness is all I have to offer."

Link to Immaculée's webpage:

<http://www.immaculee.com/>

Footnote:

As of 2006, Catholics represented 56.5% of the population of Rwanda, Protestants 37.1% (of whom 11.1% were Seventh Day Adventists) and Muslims 4.6%. 1.7% claimed no religious beliefs.
