

# Today's Martyrs – Frederick Gitonga



Open Doors International

Frederick Gitonga was the 21 year old chairman of the Christian Union at the Garissa State University in Garissa, Kenya. He had stayed up late on the night of Holy Wednesday deep in prayer with a friend to help him forgive a transgression against him. He was then supposed to attend a 5 AM ecumenical prayer service at the university chapel, but the late evening prayer session made him decide to sleep in.

That morning prayer meeting would be the first target of the April 2, 2015 - Holy Thursday - al-Shabab terror attack.

A fellow student, Duncan Obwamu, later described the beginning of the attack. He was one of about two dozen students in the chapel. The young woman leading the prayers was shot dead, then bullets were sprayed into the group. Duncan fell wounded in the arm and shoulder, and pretended to be dead but not before observing the shooter. "He didn't say anything, but you could see from the look on his face he was very happy. I heard him laugh as he communicated with the others outside. He was very happy about what he'd done". Twenty two students died, including the young man who had joined Frederick in prayer only hours before; they were Anglicans, Catholics, Evangelicals, and Pentecostals. Reportedly only Duncan and a woman survived.

The terrorists then moved on to the dormitories, where they separated the Muslim students from the others. One was heard to say to students "We are not bad guys, we are just here to make your Easter Holiday better", and as they used up their ammunition they were seen to retrieve more from dorm rooms. Here is Frederick's description of what happened:

"My roommates ran out, leaving the door wide open. I felt a strong urge not to run, but to stay put. As I hid under the bed, I could hear the gunshots and screams of fellow students. I could [hear] them lying to women that they should come out since their religion does not allow them to kill women. When they did, they were all killed. I know of no single Muslim [student] who lost their life...After some time things went quiet, but I did not move."

People off campus reported that they knew immediately about the attack. Catholic Bishop Joseph Alessandro, who lived about a mile from the campus, later said "We woke up with the noise of helicopters flying low over the town and ambulance and police sirens blaring". Yet the authorities did not begin an immediate and determined assault to regain the campus. Back in his room Frederick heard two of the attackers enter:

“They sat on the beds, changed their rifle magazines and then shot at the walls to test them before going out to resume the killings. I stayed there for long – I do not know how long – but was eventually rescued by a Kenya Defence Force officer.”

The police and Defence Forces came under much criticism later. Despite their nearby barracks it took them 12 hours to wrest control of the campus from the four terrorists, and in that interval 148 students were killed and 104 wounded, some crippled for life. All of Frederick’s roommates died; he later spoke on the outcome:

“Please pray for us...Many saw sights too horrible to describe...I praise God that some survived, many in truly miraculous ways. However, we are deeply traumatized, broken and in need of much prayer. At the same time we are trying to help fellow students who seek comfort and support from us... Pray for me too. I need peace of mind, strength and wisdom. I am struggling with dreams that cause me to snap awake, then cannot get back to sleep. I find myself remembering the horror of that day. The sounds and smells come back clearly...I have not been to my home area since the incident because I felt I could not rest until my friends are laid to rest. This weekend I and two other Fellowship of Christian University Students’ officials will travel to Bungoma, Western Kenya, to lay our friends Edward, Evans, Emily and Tobias to rest. Then I will attend Sammy and Philomena’s burials in Kitui, before I finally go home to rest. It is much, but these were not just fellow students and fellow CU officials, they were also my close friends and prayer partners. I have to say goodbye.”

Those last sentences are a litany of remembrance that beautifully recall Jesus’s comments on leaving one’s family for the sake of the kingdom. It would seem that Frederick will make a fine and compassionate Christian minister regardless of what worldly path he takes in life.

Frederick Gitonga later spoke at an April 9, 2015 memorial service at the Christ is the Answer Church in Nairobi and there asked the question that needs to be asked of us all:

“It’s so painful to see people you know butchered like cows. They died for confessing Christ, but I put it to you... Who will stand up and say enough is enough?”

**Today’s Martyrs**  
**2490 Black Rock Turnpike #455**  
**Fairfield CT 06825-2400**  
<http://todaysmartyrs.org/index.php/people/>

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