

## Chapter 6

### UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Our vacation time on the Jos Plateau was drastically shortened. The political situation had deteriorated. Paul had to call all translation teams out of their villages; being foreigners they were asked to leave the area. As a group we traveled south to Lagos, some even further to Ghana. That time was a chain of miracles. In innumerable difficulties and dangers God's protecting hand was upon us.

At last the time arrived when we were scheduled to return to Switzerland for furlough. But the soothing effect of distance, rest and time was slow in coming to us. Our hearts were churned up with all that had happened. There was just one letter, dated mid-July, that came through the war front. It was written by Sunday. He bemoaned that he had now lost his job and had nothing to eat. His iron bed, bicycle and watch, all things for which he had been able to save while with us, he had sold to keep from starving. He continued:

"I can't remember how often I sat with Samuel in our hut, reading the Bible and talking about it. I even prayed every night before sleeping that God would help us finish the translation fast so that our people might understand more easily and more quickly the things about Jesus. And now... I pray every day that God may help to end the war between Biafra and Nigeria. Many who do not know Jesus die just like that." He ended his letter with: "Do not leave me, please use me, for God led me to you. Others say to me that you have cheated me and returned to your own land without telling me. But I told them that a white man would never do that, how much less Paul and Inge.."

Would his faith waver when he would hear that we had all the same left him and Samuel alone? Why did he not write anything about Samuel? Where was Samuel? Would we ever see him again? Would the Izi people ever receive their New Testament translation?



In view of our uncertain future our leaders asked us to undertake French language studies. With the prospect of new branches opening in francophone Africa, personnel who knew French were eagerly sought. The Bible School of Emmaüs, in a glorious setting above Lake Geneva, provided us with the necessary French-speaking environment. We were able to spend six months there interrupted by three months

deputation in our home area, enjoying the love and encouragement of many friends. However, as beautiful spring erupted all around us at Lake Geneva, the Lord led us through a profound crisis as we thought so much about our past four years in Africa. Thoughts of failure, doubts about the quality of our relationship to our African brothers, the probing of our innermost motives, uncertainties about our future service, all this had been building up over the past months and was pressing us down. We told the Lord that we could not possibly return to Africa unless He did a completely new thing for us, unless He would renew our spiritual life and equip us in a new way with His Spirit. Paul became critically ill with a digestive problem which had increasingly plagued him over the past years in Nigeria. I myself was pregnant and needed physical strength and emotional encouragement. We did not know where to turn.

At the time of our deepest need, Paul remembered some friends in a house-church near my hometown. We asked them for help, and on his first visit there, Paul was instantly healed! Afterwards we spent several weekends there together and our friends ministered to us in brotherly love and spiritual power. By the time we had to leave Switzerland for teaching at the German linguistics course, in July 1968, the Lord had done what we had asked Him to do, He had also renewed our vision and during the linguistics course, we ourselves were able to minister to those in similar need.



One day we visited a cousin whose name was Samuel. Bernhard, now four years old, pulled at Daddy's sleeve:

"Our Samuel has now become white, hasn't he, Daddy?"

We were surprised that he still remembered him, but of course we were constantly speaking about him and praying for him. And more than ever at the present time as we were getting ready to go back to Nigeria, in January 1969, God willing. The Lord had removed all our doubts, we were sure of His leading and ready to follow Him, whether that would mean staying in Nigeria or going to a francophone country. The Biafran war was still far from being ended. This became evident when we heard Dr. Francis Ibiem speak to the Swiss churches pleading for help for Biafra. We knew that our Izi area had been "liberated" by the federal Nigerian troops who were still occupying the villages. We had received a letter telling us that at the beginning of the war, Samuel had fled and retreated with the Biafran army, that two of the chief's sons were in a refugee camp, but that the chief himself was still living in his compound. Enugu town, where our headquarters had been, had fallen, had been deserted and utterly looted. How we longed to get back!

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Our desire to fly back to Nigeria was granted on January 8, 1969. In the meantime, baby Claudia had joined our family and had made our joy full.

Back in Jos, we had planned that I would stay at the SIM mission guesthouse while Paul - together with another translator and a representative of our Swiss home division - would drive down South and find out for themselves how the situation actually was. After their trip, the biennial branch conference would be held in Jos where we could discuss our plans with the director.

The reception Paul and his companions received in chief Echiegu's compound surpassed anything he had experienced before. Dozens of men, women and children cried their welcome, shouted with joy, laughed and rejoiced. How surprised they were that Paul hadn't forgotten their language! The doors of our house were wide open - the chief was living in it now. On the floor lay bundles of stockfish, along the walls stood several sacks of milk powder, signs that the Red Cross had penetrated even to this remote area.

But Paul's one burning question, nobody could answer: "Where is Samuel?" How frustrating that he and Sunday had been among the extremely few who had fled south. All the others had just retreated for a few days into their fields or into the woods and had let the Nigerian army pass along the main roads. They had just changed the Biafran flag for the Nigerian one again, without fighting.

Nothing seemed to hinder our return to Izi as a family. Paul promised the chief that we would be back when the rainy season would start, in just two months.

Had we given this promise too lightly? We ourselves who had been so sure that we would do whatever the Lord would ask of us, were plunged into another disappointment during our Branch Conference. Paul was elected by the membership as Associate Director, which meant that we could not go back to Izi, but would have to live in Zaria for the following two years. Our only consolation was that I would be free to continue with Izi studies if we could find some Izi person willing to join us in Zaria. In order to find someone and to bring some of our belongings up to Zaria, we planned another visit to Izi in March.

We left our three children in the guesthouse in Zaria, where a Swiss member (our kids didn't speak any English yet!) took good care of them. The 500-mile journey took us two days, but we were more than rewarded: we found Simon, an Izi teenager, in the same Bible School that Samuel had once attended. He even was from the same village as Samuel and knew him!

For three full days we were able to stay in our old home. We resurrected our bed frames from under 2 years of dust and dirt, hung our mosquito nets and washed two chairs and a table. If our children had been with us, we would have had to clean first for two days! But alone, we had time to listen and to talk. Besides, we gathered some language data for an article Paul had to present at a Linguistic

Congress and were able to check some Bible passages we had translated earlier. The chief and his family were very sad to see us pack up most of our things - would we ever return?

On our way home, we visited the highest official in Abakaliki - no longer a white man, but a Nigerian. Amazing, to find a man that was so much concerned about the spiritual darkness in which the Izi lived. He said:

"There is nothing that would hinder you from coming back. We need you. These people here live in darkness and need the light of the gospel. We welcome everyone who helps us to make life here a bit more pleasant." He also told us that he had made chief Echiegu the highest of all the 10 Izi chiefs as he had found in him the best qualities of them all.

Back in Zaria, our most urgent need was to find a house for our family. Yet for six months we had to live in temporary accommodation, in two rooms in the SIL guesthouse, with part of the kitchen in the small hallway, part in the bathroom.

Paul's new task absorbed all of his time and energy. The director, Dr. John Bendor-Samuel, would not be able to spend more than a third of his time in Nigeria, so many of his duties fell on Paul as Associate Director. In April 1969, he wrote to our friends in Switzerland:

"We are all asking the question: why is it that there is such a discrepancy between the need for workers and real calls, or at least the modern type of short term help (which does not exclude a call!)? Do we not pray seriously enough? Is our life not convincing enough? Are we disobedient? Now, as I carry part of the responsibility for the work, this question never leaves me. What obedience means is a question that has to be answered afresh daily, for obedience is always relative, always to be measured by that which we have come to realize. In this sense the borderline between obedience and disobedience is always moving. Now, as I have above all to deal with co-workers, we become very conscious of our own inadequacy on the one hand and our responsibility on the other. For this reason, obedience is all the more necessary."

It was July when we found the house, and a steward, and could get ready to receive Simon for his 3 months' Bible School vacation. He was a lovable chap, always full of joy, contented and happy. He hadn't been a Christian for too long, he told us.

"My parents were too poor to send me to secondary school, so I left the Izi area in order to earn some money. In one of the big cities, I found an Ibo family where I worked as a houseboy, helping the lady to cook and clean. They were very good to me, but I had to work hard.

He hesitated and then continued:

"Every Sunday, they would go to church and would invite me to come along. I always refused, for I had no interest in religion. But you know, I wasn't free on Sundays. Even when they went to church, the lady gave me work to do. That annoyed me. I thought: These people just sit in church doing nothing and I have to work so hard at home!

"Then one day I got so angry that I said to myself: Next Sunday you go to church with them! It is much better to go to church than stay at home and work!"

He needed only to go a few Sundays, before the Lord really got through to him and Simon's life was completely changed. His hunger for the Word of God grew, his faith deepened.

"Were you still there when the war broke out?" we asked him.

"Yes, but soon afterwards I had to go back home to Izi. There I met Samuel for the first time as a Christian and we became friends immediately. You had already left by then and he told me everything about his work with you."

"But how come Samuel ran away to Biafra while you stayed?"

"Well, you see, one day my father sent me with a message to a person living far inside the bush. The place was so remote, I couldn't even return the same day. When I came back, the Nigerian army had already passed and Samuel had run away ahead of them. You see, the Biafrans had spread the rumor that the Nigerian federal army would kill all the educated people and therefore they should retreat with them. Many other boys who had been to school fled, too. You know yourself how the Nigerian army massacred people east of Abakaliki. Indeed, in Izi, too, they plundered and robbed our people."

"And you have never heard from Samuel since then?"

"No, never. It is just over a year now."

Simon would often become sad, thinking about these things. What always cheered him up was playing with our children. I loved to work with him and the Izi grammar got more and more flesh to its bones. But I especially missed Paul's input. His time was completely taken up with his administrative duties. Very often he was away on trips inside and outside Nigeria, sometimes in modern planes, sometimes in cars nearly falling apart. We always parted thinking that maybe we were seeing each other for the last time, and rejoiced at his return: life together was again a new gift.

Paul wrote to our friends:

"Bernhard, now 5 years old, sits at the table beside me. He has three batteries in front of him, a wire and a flashlight bulb. He has suddenly discovered that electricity is interesting. As intensely as we had prayed for this house, so intensely

has he prayed since for electricity. Today, a month after moving in, the electricity company brought the counter meter which was the only thing missing. Now we have light. What an experience! Little Claudia, moving around in a baby walker on four wheels, is blinking in wonder at the ceiling - something new has happened! So, for the first time Bernhard consciously realizes what current is like. He hold the two wire ends to the poles of a battery. The bulb gives its feeble light. I add a second battery - he is amazed - the light is brighter! Then the third battery and the light is quite bright! This is so wonderful that daddy has to nail the bulb onto his little table so that he can gaze at it while falling asleep!

"Where electricity flows, through three at once, there it will become brighter. In the same way, where we gather in a community and the Spirit flows through several of us, there something will happen. Our light will shine brighter..."

"Here we do live in a community, our houses are not far apart, windows and doors of our eight offices are always open, facing the same narrow courtyard. The Lord has given me one great desire: That our community may be changed, that His light may shine, that the truth about ourselves and His love for the light in which we can no longer hide ourselves from each other, may break through.

"Those who have to live and work for years (not just for the duration of a summer camp) in a team like ours (where the membership doesn't change), cannot hide their true self behind a smiling mask. But the one who wants things changed, first has to be changed himself, at all costs. And the Lord put His finger on areas where we didn't see the finger before."

Later he writes:

"Through personal experiences, I am alarmed to realize that the enemy obviously attacks all those who are in some way leaders. There are three main areas where prayer is especially needed:

1) the temptation of wanting to please, of being influenced by natural affinities, of just striving to be liked by everybody and to build up one's public image and be led by it...

2) The temptation to gain personal advantages from one's position, to take liberties, to lose one's sense of proportions and have a higher opinion of oneself...

3) the temptation to misuse authority, to change from the attitude of a servant to the one of a despot, or to just not care about the opinions and feelings of others or minorities...

Only intercession, submission inside a team, and a brotherhood in which the truth functions impartially, can keep one from falling. I have much to learn yet. But there is rejoicing over each victory over temptation and sin. So, when you read 'administration of the Nigeria-Cameroon Branch', think of these things!

"Greet all those whom I saw in your fellowship. Tell them that what irritates me most in my colleagues is lack of self-discipline. This shows itself in the way someone works, the care or lack of care with which he performs his duties, the responsibility or lack of responsibility with which he carries out his tasks or doesn't - in short, in his

whole attitude. The spirit which God has given us is a spirit of self-control. This spirit is in stark contrast to the spirit of undisciplined use of our time, trying to live without the laws of God. Let us help each other and pray for one another so that none of us will be corroded by this spirit."

The months passed by. Simon had learned to type with us and went back for the 3-month fall semester at Bible School. Bernhard started his first grade in a British private school, enjoying every minute of it, while Daniela attended nursery school, crying at first every morning. I was getting heavier - we expected our number four at the end of the year.

During this time, we experienced a period of sickness that revealed us afresh His sovereignty and His compassion. One day when visiting a friend, Daniela fell from her seat and started trembling - a convulsion. I was frightened. The few minutes seemed like hours to me, I cried in my heart to the Lord for His help. We took her to the hospital for diagnosis and they wanted to keep her under observation.

She was brought into a large children's ward. I did not dare leave her. She was only three years old. At last, Paul came. Bernhard and Claudia he had left in the car in the parking lot. Together we prayed over Daniela.

We lived through the next two days in a daze, alternating the watch at her bed every four hours, even during the night. She was given sedatives and heavy treatment for cerebral malaria. In spite of this, two more convulsions occurred.

Paul wrote to a friend:

"I am keeping watch at Daniela's bedside in the hospital. It is 12.30 a.m. At 02.00 a.m., Inge will come and take over from me for the next four hours. Daniela is under observation for cerebral malaria which can be fatal if complications arise. Thus God is speaking to a father at the bedside of his sick daughter. I wish I was like Job whose conscience did not rebuke any of his days (Job 27:6), even if he later realized that he had talked in ignorance. So I worship Him over the sick body of my child... The floor etc. is full of cockroaches... A child just fell out of bed, although his mother was sitting next to him. What yelling! I am glad that Daniela is sleeping under sedation... I greet you with the words of Job:

'How can a man be right before God?

Though one wished to dispute with him, he could not answer him one time out of a thousand.'

"Give time to your wife and your children, for there will be a time where there is no longer time for it..."

By the third morning, I was physically and emotionally exhausted.

"Why don't you heal her, Lord? Are our prayers nothing to you? Don't you see that the doctors are at a loss? Why don't you intervene?"

At Daniela's bedside, with all the noise and crying of an African children's ward going on around me, I took my Bible and started reading. Just to read some stories

from the Old Testament to get my mind thinking of something else, I was too tired to meditate and think deep thoughts.

Somehow I got to chapter 20 of 2 Chronicles. Then I got startled. I was shaken awake. This was my situation! A desperate need, fear and panic, but a call to trust the Lord and a promise of His intervention. And as they started to sing and praise, the Lord started to act.

I got the message. I went out into the garden to be alone. I could not rejoice, but at least - with my conscious will - I could thank and praise the Lord. With wet eyes and quivering lips I walked around and praised the Lord's greatness, love and wisdom, while my mind was bombarded with doubting thoughts. This was ridiculous. If the Lord had not answered all our prayers before, why should He answer those few stammering praises? What did I expect? A miracle of instantaneous healing? I stubbornly continued praising, pushing all other thoughts aside. "I will praise you as long as I live..."

Walking up and down in front of the children's ward, I was suddenly aware of a group of doctors coming. They went into the building and moved directly toward Daniela's cot.

"Mrs Meier, we have the unusual visit of a paediatric specialist today and as your daughter presents an interesting case, we would like him to examine her."

The kind old Englishman looked down at her while the senior doctor explained his diagnosis and treatment to which she had in no way responded. Quietly the specialist asked:

"Have you ever looked into her ears? No? Then bring me an otoscope!"

He looked into both her ears and without a word handed the instrument to the other doctor. After he had a good look too, the embarrassment of the whole group was only too obvious. The specialist ordered an immediate treatment of antibiotics and lingered around discussing with the doctors, until his orders had been carried out.

I was amazed. The Lord really had acted! He had brought this specialist here, long before I began to praise Him but He had wanted to teach me a lesson! This time my praises no longer flowed out of my will power, but right out of my thankful heart!

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In November, Paul was able to make the third trip to the Izi area. Further south the Biafran war was still going on. However, they had lost large parts of their territory to the Federal troops.

"Still no news about Samuel," Paul reported. "The Biafrans must have a really tight grip on their people. They have such a small area left and yet there must be a few million people, most of them refugees. How can they ever feed those masses? With the fall of Umuahia town, they have lost their last airport. That means no more weapons, but also no more famine relief..."

"So, do people think that there will soon be an end to the war?" I asked.

"It certainly would be good if the Biafran leaders would give up. But you never know what they will do. None of the public services functions, no mail service, telephones, etc. but soldiers are everywhere."

"How is chief Echiegu?"

"Oh, he still expects us back any time. He just does not understand why we cannot come. Inge, I think we should definitely pray for another team to go to the Izi people. Either they could take over from us completely and we would be free to go wherever we are sent, or we could both work among the Izi. After all, they number more than 200,000 people and we have not even been able to visit 95% of the Izi area yet!"

From then on we did pray for another team, but Paul knew that among the new members who would come to Nigeria no one would be available. They all knew their destination already, and most of them were bound for other African countries. But maybe the Lord could raise up someone for the following year? We continued to pray.

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Simon came back to us in December and rejoiced our hearts with his decision to defer his second year of Bible School and stay with us for the whole of 1970. This would help me in my final push to get the Izi Grammar written up and would still leave some time to tackle free renderings of Old Testament stories.

Simon was such a joyful fellow, usually with a song on his lips, that I couldn't help but always remind him of the need for Christian songs in the Izi language. So far, not one existed. Before the war, we had already talked to Samuel about this, but he hadn't seen the need for it ("There are such nice songs in Ibo and English!"). Secondly, who was he, Samuel, to tackle composing songs? Didn't the Izis have a tradition of different styles of songs, and their singers were especially gifted and recognized men. So Samuel had never attempted this subject.

As Simon was now with us, I tried again. I urged him to think of Izi words while singing his tunes.

It happened one morning.

A little bit embarrassed, but beaming with happiness, Simon handed me a slip of paper. There were only four lines written on it.

"Sing it to me!"

It was a simple chorus, translated from English, with its familiar tune. Nothing special or extraordinary. But I was not disappointed. Not at all! Even if it was a small beginning, it was a beginning. Seeing the expression of Simon's joy over these words in his own language was more precious than the actual four lines on paper. The Lord had opened his eyes. He would not let him have any rest. And one day the Izis would have their own book of Christian songs with their own words and their own tunes...

Another Christmas drew near and with it our vacation time. We had booked rooms in the Christian guesthouse in Jos and also in the nearby hospital of the same mission for the birth of the expected brother for Bernhard.

Our little Citroen was fully laden (we also took Simon along) for the 150-mile-long, rough journey. How glad we were to arrive at our destination. But oh, what disappointment! The hospital was under reconstruction and therefore closed for admissions...

What should we do now? There was another mission hospital about 15 miles away. If they could not take me, what then? Return to Zaria?

But they could take me, as we found out when we went there the same afternoon. What relief! We even found room to stay in the nearby missionary vacation center, because at the last minute somebody had canceled their reservation!

There the children enjoyed their very first American Christmas, with colored lights blinking on the Christmas tree, a Father Christmas and stockings hung up for all the children of the guests. And yet, our own family celebration of the birth of Jesus was more precious: I had brought real candles, and for want of some sort of a tree, I took the broomstick, laid it across two chairs and stuck all my candles - about 20 - on it in a row. By the light of these candles - reflected in our children's admiring eyes - we read again the story of the birth of Jesus in our own language, sang and prayed together.

Four days later, the countdown for another birth started. I awoke early, realizing immediately that this was the day. We both got up and when we were ready to leave, Paul went to wake up Simon and give him the last instructions. The children would be alright in his care. The hospital was about 20 miles away, but because of the narrow and rough road we drove slowly. In spite of this a dog ran into our car and died instantly. Otherwise the journey went well - only too well, for the soft springs of the Citroen had rocked the baby back to sleep again. The labor pains had become so weak again that the doctor doubted the baby would be born

the same day. However, I was given a room - what a luxury, a room all to myself! - and we decided that Paul would stay with me until late afternoon. We took a walk around the different hospital buildings, and when the sun became too hot for that, I walked up and down the terrace in front of my room, desperately counting the minutes between spasms. They just wouldn't increase. Siesta-time came, and all the hospital staff disappeared.

"Don't hesitate to call me when the baby comes," the kind Scottish midwife said and showed Paul where her room was.

It was as if our baby had just waited for that moment, when everything was quiet, nobody around and Mummy resting as well. Suddenly labor pains rolled like waves over me in increasing numbers. I was embarrassed to call the midwife during her rest hour and tried to wait as long as possible. In vain. So Paul went to call her and I was glad to see her come right behind him. She immediately recognized the urgency and turned to Paul:

"I have nobody around to send for the doctor. Would you mind calling him yourself? He lives in the house just up the road. If you take the car, you'll be back just in time."

He was not back in time. The baby was now in such a great hurry that it was already two minutes old, when Paul and the doctor entered the room.

"It's a girl," I whispered as Paul bent his head anxiously over my face. Would he be disappointed that there was no second son for him? He was so astonished, he couldn't believe that it was all over in such a short time. Only now he noticed the little pink body at the end of the bed. She was perfect, without any wrinkles. No reason for disappointment! The only setback was that we hadn't bothered to decide on a girl's name!

When everything was tidied up the doctor said:

"Let's pray. We want to thank the Lord. We always do this after a baby has been born." They all stood around my bed and the doctor committed this new life to the Lord, from whom it came. Later we expressed our feelings in her second name: Eveline Charissa, from the Greek word for 'grace', for she was indeed a gift of grace, out of His fulness.

As the birth had gone so smoothly, I was allowed to leave the hospital on the fourth day. All the children and Simon came with Paul to collect us. What a 'home'-coming! Yet how glad I was that we still had two weeks of vacation before us to rest and gain new strength.

One evening, we were just ready to go to bed, when someone knocked on our door. It was one of the employees, looking for Paul.

"Your African boy is crying so much we just don't know what to do with him!"

"Where is he?"

"In his room. He won't even say why he is crying," the young man explained, as they were walking across the compound towards Simon's room. There he sat, a picture of misery.

When he recognized Paul through his tears, he tried to stop sobbing. Slowly and haltingly he opened his heart. Paul would be the only one to understand his heartache. The uncertainty about Samuel was just too much for him. It had seemed as if suddenly a cloud of sadness had descended upon him that evening and he hadn't been able to keep back the tears. Where was his friend Samuel? Was he still alive? or had he been killed? Or died of hunger? Or been taken prisoner? When would this useless war ever finish? Others had received messages across the war front; why hadn't God allowed something to come through from Samuel? Why had God allowed him to be left behind when Samuel fled? Shouldn't he go back to the Izi area and wait for the end of the war? It couldn't be long anyway!

Paul didn't know any answers, but the mere bringing it out into the open and talking about it was soothing and comforting. Paul's presence and words reassured him of the Lord's sovereignty and wisdom and love that can be utterly trusted, even if we do not see through the circumstances.

In the end Paul, left him with two things to cling on to which gave him a new trust and a fresh hope: the first was a verse spoken by Job:

"Yet if he slay me, I will still trust him..." Job 13:5

and the second was a promise that any time he felt the Lord wanted to have him go to the Izi area to look for Samuel, we would let him go and help pay for his transport.

Such a time came much sooner than anyone expected. He hadn't been back in Zaria after our vacation for long, when the news of the Biafran general Ojukwu's fleeing to Ivory Coast stunned everybody. However, the way was now open for capitulation talks and the war to end.

"Simon, Simon, where are you?" Paul called one evening, returning from the office. "The Institute has to take a load of books down south and our friend John has never driven such a long stretch. He is looking for a companion and entertainer to keep him awake. Would you like to go along? He is passing through the Izi area!"

And would he! How often had he been on the point of reminding Paul of his promise! And now he could even ride in a private car and be let off at a road junction only a couple of miles from his home! How good was the Lord!

We too were excited and eagerly waited for their return a week later. Would he hear something about Samuel? Would he even bring a letter back from him?

A few days later, during our siesta-time, there was a loud knock at our living room door.

"Simon! Are you back already? You look so happy, do you have a letter from Samuel?"

Simon's face was full of smiles. "Just come out to the car and help me unpack," he said.

Paul left the house and followed him. He saw John - the one who driven the car - holding up a camera which was pointed towards him. At the same moment, someone stepped out of the car - it was Samuel, the long lost one! The camera clicked as Paul rushed forward and embraced Samuel with an exuberant hug...



*Simon Itumo and Samuel Iyoku*