

# TO CALL A NATION

by Robert Nosker and Donna Poole

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## FOREWORD

Would you have enjoyed receiving the monthly prayer letters of Hudson Taylor, or Amy Carmichael, or Adoniram Judson? The daily lives of those great soldiers of the Cross were spectacular lessons in faith and perseverance. Those testimonies, however, were for a

past generation.

The experiences of Bob and Patty Nosker in present day Venezuela are equally exciting and enlightening. The Noskers live on the "cutting-edge" of the Great Commission. They are heroes of the faith whose story will encourage and challenge every dedicated Christian in this generation.

My wife and I first "met" the Noskers at Center Lake Bible Camp in northern Michigan during the summer of 1977. The camp nurse had collected all three years' supply of the Gospel Wings prayer letters and was anxious for every visiting pastor to become aware of this unique mission work.

We read each letter with fascination from the first to the last and were frustrated that we could not read on to find out what God would do next! These missionary letters were like none that we had ever seen. They read like a novel!

We have through the ensuing years continued to read and have come to know and love Bob and Patty as close personal friends. We and others have often encouraged them to set forth their experiences in book form. It is with great satisfaction that I recommend to the readers this yet unfinished chronicle of faith and courage.

Sincerely in Christ,  
Joseph D. Fortna  
Chairman of the Bible Dept.  
Midwestern Baptist College

### **DEDICATION**

No work of God is ever done by one individual (excluding Christ's redemptive work of course), and the work among the Pemon is no exception. This work is dedicated to all the people who prayed and gave to make it possible, to the mission board of the Hiawatha Beach Church of Hamburg, Michigan, and to the Faith Baptist Church of Amarillo, Texas, who had faith in two men who had a vision from God. It is also dedicated to the children of Jim's family and mine, who sacrificed much to allow their parents to follow the calling of God, and to two of the greatest women in the world who faithfully and sacrificially followed their husbands' vision without murmur or complaint: Jeanne Berryhill and Patty Nosker.

Lastly, this book is dedicated to my best friend and partner, Jim Berryhill, who first caught the vision to call the Pemon Nation to Christ.

Bob Nosker

### **TO CALL A NATION**

(Isaiah 55:5)

by Robert Nosker and Donna Poole

## PROLOGUE

Robert Burton: "No cord or cable can draw so forcibly, or bind so fast, as love can do with a single thread" (Wallis, ed., The Treasure Chest, Harper and Row, p. 168).

Through our tears we looked down into the crying faces of our Pemon Indian friends. In any language, love finds it difficult to say good bye. What words express that tearing emotion when you leave those you have lived and learned with, laughed and cried with, and ministered to for over seven years? Tears and mutual concern for each others' future wove tenderness into that farewell.

We lifted off the jungle airstrip in San Miguel, Venezuela, and Pemon hands rose in a final, loving gesture. The dear Indian faces blurred; we made one last pass over our village home, and seven years became memories. It was July 23, 1982.

The Catholic church had won this battle. They had pressured the Venezuelan government into forcing us far from the village where so many had trusted Christ as Saviour. We left behind in San Miguel 150 new converts, a growing church, and a steadfast native pastor. We had been torn from our ministry and the friends we loved by a weak government too timid to say "no" to the Catholic church. Or ... was it Someone Else Who allowed this seeming tragedy? "Jesus has two nail-pierced hands. He lays one upon each and parts us, so--HE does the parting" (Houghton, Amy Carmichael of Dohnavur, S.P.C.K., p. 56).

There are "no second causes." God was to use our parting to make His mysterious promise of Romans 8:28 very real in this Indian village that Satan desired to sift as wheat. Our Pemon converts were out from our wings, but forever protected by the wings of our God. Could we not trust them to His care?

It began many years earlier, this love story between us and the Pemon. Even earlier began the love story between God and the Pemon, and between God and myself. What strength there is in God's love and what persistence! God will go to any length to call a people to Himself--To Call a Nation!

## CHAPTER ONE

### TO CALL JUST ONE

"How many hearts Thou mightst have had  
More innocent than mine!  
How many souls more worthy far

Of that sweet touch of Thine!"  
(F.W. Faber, Baptist Hymnal, 1849, p. 179).

God never makes a choice based on man's merit, and I, for one, am glad of that! I was not exactly what you might call missionary material, but that persistent love of God that will go to any length to call a nation (cf. Ezek. 22:30) reaches out to just one man as well. It is never what man does, only what God does through a man. Man available: God at work--that's my story. Put your feet up for awhile and live my story with me.

"Just another kid" the newspaper could have read on May 23, 1944. I was born your ordinary, red, squalling baby. Not a single born-again Christian in my family welcomed my arrival. Not an aunt, uncle, cousin of mine knew Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Not only that, but as far as I know, none of my relatives even attended a church.

As I grew up, I seldom attended church either. Why should I bother when the rest of my family didn't? It still amazes me that God stepped into a family of people pitifully ignorant of Him, laid His loving hand on my shoulder and called, "Robert!" Until I was about fourteen I had no contact with the Gospel, but then....

It was one of those spring evenings when you can see every star that hangs in the sky (or think you can when you are a cocky, fourteen-year-old who doesn't guess that the world is larger than his immediate conception of it). I could think of better things to do than homework. I was an average student, caught up with rock and roll, not overly enthusiastic about studying. I had finally waded through my heap of homework that evening.

Somehow, that spring evening, I felt more than a little frustrated, not just with homework, but with life in general. I bombed out of the house and walked up and down my road. I stopped and looked up at the stars, and suddenly my problems seemed microscopic. I felt as awe-struck as the writer of Psalm 19, though at that time I had never read that Psalm (or any other!). I remember the words I spoke. I said, "God? God, if you are up there, I want to know You."

I walked home, feeling not so very different. I still felt frustrated, and yet there was something unusual, a feeling of expectancy. I began that night to come to Christ the same way any heathen or Indian begins to come to Him. God's witness to Himself, written in the stars, still shouts as loudly as ever (cf. Psalm 19; Rom. 1). If anyone hungers to know God, and by His grace cries out to Him, God makes Himself responsible to reveal to that one the plan of salvation.

God called me, the one, in a special way, that He might use me to call the many (cf. Acts 11:21). In all the Bibleless tribes around the world, it takes but one sinner to cry to the living God, and that cry will enter into His very ears. God was more anxious than I was for me to know Him, but I did not guess that then.

Then I met a girl. We had ridden the same school bus for many years, but neither of us had noticed the other. Suddenly we saw each other, the way boy sees girl. We began dating. Patty was fifteen; I was sixteen. I began attending Patty's church in Hamburg, Michigan, mostly so I could sit with her. Patty was a Christian. She had asked Jesus to save her from her sin when she was just a child, but she was not a committed, obedient

Christian, or she would not have dated me!

I heard the Gospel often at Patty's church. The preacher explained that sin entered the human race when Adam sinned. He said that no one could ever be good enough to get to heaven, because God demands absolute perfection. That locked heaven's gate for me, and I knew it.

Patty's pastor also said that God, out of love as full as His holiness, sent His Son, Jesus, to take the punishment for the sin of every person ever born. He took the sin right into His heart and did away with it, making it possible for Him to forgive us and treat us as though we had never sinned.

All I heard was new to me. I had been punished enough, but no one had ever offered to take it for me. I learned that Jesus, God's Son, died on a cross, rose again, and went back to Heaven--securing eternal life for each one who asks Him for it! The preacher said that eternal life cannot be earned, just given. God gives it to everyone who repents of sin and trusts Jesus Christ as Saviour. What he said made sense to me, so I kept going to church. Besides, I liked sitting with Patty! (I still like sitting with Patty! She is my favorite person.)

I never rejected the Gospel, but for a long time I did nothing about what I had heard. Knowledge and agreement are far from salvation. In 1961, Jonathen, a board member at Patty's church, came to visit me at home. He took time to share Christ with me individually. I easily agreed with his words and prayed to receive Christ. Was that the point of my salvation? I am still not sure--a missionary who doesn't know when he was saved? That's right--but I do know that I am saved now!

I think many of us will be surprised in heaven when we see the date recorded for our conversion. The heart doesn't always melt at the exact moment the tongue mouths the "right" words, and it is with the heart that man believes and is saved (Rom. 10:9-10). My outward life showed no change after I professed conversion. I wanted to be different, but somehow desire never became deed. I still acted like the same old Bob Nosker.

Outward circumstances changed more quickly in my life. I didn't shed many big tears when I left the four walls of the school room on graduation day in May of 1962. I quickly joined the Air Force and went to boot camp at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. Little did I know as I sweated through boot camp that my future missionary experiences were to make Air Force training look as easy as downing a root beer float on a hot August afternoon!

Overseas orders arrived in January of 1964, but who could complain about being sent to Hawaii? I could! I didn't want to go without Patty. I had to leave for Hawaii by April, so that left precious little time to win my girl. When I decide on an action I am not easily deterred. I woke up on the morning of April 11, 1964 a happy man. I was headed for Hawaii; I was almost 20, and it was my wedding day!

After our honeymoon Patty returned to her job in Chicago. I left to go overseas six weeks before she did. Even Hawaii isn't a very exciting place for a new husband whose wife is in Chicago. Finally she arrived!

Patty and I enjoyed attending church together in Hawaii. I remember especially one service on the third Sunday in June. We heard a wonderful salvation message, but instead of shouting, "Glory!" I felt a yearning emptiness. I returned with Patty to our tiny studio apartment. I looked down into her eyes.

"Patty," I said earnestly to my young wife, "I do not even know if I am saved!"

Patty looked just as earnestly up at me. "If you aren't sure, Bob, you can take care of it right now." Together we knelt beside the bed in our first home. We prayed. What was it, Salvation or just re-commitment? I gladly leave that knowledge with God. All I know is, from that point on, my outward life began changing. Gradually more of Jesus became visible in me. Now it was not just the same old Bob Nosker!

I was so hungry for God's Word. I attended an evening Bible institute. There I learned, in the words of J.A. Bengel, to "Apply thyself wholly to the text; apply the text wholly to thyself" (Custer, Tools for Preaching and Teaching the Bible, Bob Jones University Press, p. 21).

We participated in street meetings that our church held, and I learned the methods of street evangelism on the infamous Hotel Street. Sailors come there to visit bars and other places of sin when they return from their six-month cruises. A group from our church witnessed on Hotel Street every Friday night. We sang, preached fervently, and dispersed into the crowd to talk about our Lord. How I enjoyed that work!

I still didn't feel satisfied, though I was infinitely so with Jesus. This feeling of expectancy hovered over me, a nameless longing, a waiting for something unknown. I knew God wanted to do something special through me.

Others of God's workers have felt this sense of anticipation. Oswald Chambers wrote, "From my very childhood the persuasion has been that of a work, strange and great, an experience deep and peculiar-it has haunted me ever and ever" (Chambers, Oswald Chambers: His Life and Work, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, pp. 29-30).

God used friends to stir the flicker of expectancy into fireworks. Dawn and Lawrence, a missionary couple on furlough in Hawaii, quickly laid claim to our hearts. Often they spoke of their work with the Buntoc people in the Philippines. They challenged us with stories about missions, tribal peoples, and Bibleless tribes. I felt astonished and sad to learn that many tribes of people live and die without the Bible, with no way to read, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

What better gift can friends give than a truer vision of God and His love for a perishing world? Dawn and Lawrence didn't guess then that God was using them to give me a vision that would burn so deeply into my heart it would become life to me. By God's grace I pray that the vision of a people without Christ will never cease to burden me.

That feeling of expectancy that had hovered over me for months sharpened into one clear thought: God was going to use me to reach a Bibleless tribe for Himself. How? Where? When? I didn't know the answers. All I knew was that I was to be God's own missionary, in fellowship with Him, utterly available to Him.

I began thinking, praying, talking to Patty. I did all but the one thing needful. I held back from giving God a clear yes. To think with excitement about being used of God is one thing; to actually turn your life over to be nothing but a tool in His hand is another, especially if you are an independent, strong-willed man. I had yet to learn that in God's will I would find my highest joy.

God has His ways of getting my attention. When I refuse to respond to His tender, loving whispers, He shouts. Excruciating pain began striking my body like lightning and leaving as mysteriously as it came. The doctors looked in vain for a cause. They couldn't identify my pain, but I felt it and was desperate for release. One day at church I tried to bargain with God during the altar call. "God," I pleaded, "if you will just take this pain away, I promise I will preach your Word."

I rose from my knees, contented, full of peace--and in just as much pain as ever. I knew that God wanted me to preach, and I knew I would do so. The pain continued for two more years, and now I only say of it, "Oh, blessed pain that drives a man home to God." I learned to say this little by little; it didn't come all at once!

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **TRAINING IN SCHOOL**

"A readiness to believe every promise implicitly, to obey every command unhesitatingly, to 'stand perfect and complete in all the will of God,' is the only true spirit of Bible study" (Murray, The Best of Andrew Murray, Baker, p. 200).

Uncle Sam handed my life back to me when I finished my Air Force days. I meant to hold to the promise I had made to God--even if it did mean facing the school room's four walls again! I registered at the Grand Rapids School of Bible and Music in Grand Rapids, Michigan, with just a smudge of trepidation. It's not that I don't enjoy learning--it's just that I don't enjoy sitting still long enough to learn!

Contrary to my expectations, I spent three wonderful years at Bible college. It was a banquet for a man as hungry for God as I was. Picture a turkey meal with all the fixings: hot stuffing, candied, gooey sweet potatoes, white mountains of steaming mashed potatoes with hot gravy skiing down their sides, pumpkin pie cooled by huge scoops of vanilla ice cream. A banquet--right? Have I made you hungry? Oh, that God might make you hungry for His Word, that you might say, "How sweet are thy words unto my taste! Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth" (Psalm 119:103).

"If any Christians are not well fed," wrote J.R. Miller, "it is because they will not feed" (Bryant, ed., Climbing the Heights, Zondervan, p. 160).

Those three years of Bible study were scrumptious meals of God's Word. I ate and I grew. You can't help growing when you eat. Why are we so slow to realize we can't grow without food? Who willingly goes from Sunday to Sunday without eating a single meal? Some of us think little about starving our spirits for that long. God's Word is the only food that grows a spirit!

Bible college was wonderful, yes. But easy? No! I worked a job from 4 P.M. until 2 A.M. and then I squeezed in a few hours of sleep before my 8 A.M. class. (Sleep is a poor noun choice. Something that deep is called oblivion!) Classes continued until noon, so that left me very little time to study and travel to work. I learned to use every minute and even took verses to work to study them there.

I was older than some of the students, but in my heart there still lived the boy who stood in the softness of a spring evening and cried, "God, if you are there, I want to know You!" My Bible school years were just one more word in God's sentence of reply to me, a reply that will continue through eternity, as I go on into ever deeper knowledge of Him.

During those fast-paced study years a tender joy entered our home. What is more wonderful than a first child? On December 12, 1967, Kelly Ann joined us. Her time-table totally devastated both sleep and study hours, but how we loved and enjoyed her!

During my second year of college I began to preach, often at a Grand Rapids city rescue mission. I'll never forget the first time I preached in a church, and I doubt that the people at Comstock Bible Church will either! They combined Sunday school and church and handed me two whole hours to fill. A man can sing only so long without losing his voice (not to mention the interest and patience of the congregation) but I pushed the song service as long as I dared. Singing, singing, more singing, announcements, offering and preaching everything I knew to preach filled only 45 minutes. What could I do with the rest of the two hours? I sent the people home!

I remember well a sign on the back wall of the Comstock Bible Church. It faced the pulpit I so nervously occupied, and it read, "Sir, we would see Jesus." That sign still hangs in my heart. Oh, if in my life people would see, not Robert Nosker, but Jesus Christ (John 3:30). I long to see more of Christ in myself and to reveal Him to seeking hearts. If anyone reading this book will pray for me, let him pray that.

John Skinner wrote, "The man who has truly seen God necessarily has a message to men" (Nicoll, ed., The Expositor's Bible, Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, p. 229). To see God and to reveal Him to others--there is no higher or holier joy than this!

I finally earned the rank of senior at Grand Rapids Bible. Strange how God works in the seemingly haphazard events of our lives. During my senior year a pastor spoke to our church extension class. His church was in Butternut, Michigan, near Carson City, and was about 20 miles north, 30 miles east of the college. The pastor said, "I need an assistant. If any of you men are interested, please stay and speak with me after class."

I sure was interested! I even felt that gentle prod from the Lord that I was beginning to recognize, but I was utterly exhausted from work and school. I had only a short time to spend with my family that day and didn't feel right about cutting into that time. As the pastor closed in prayer, I dropped my very weary head on my desk and silently prayed, "Lord, if you want me to speak with this man, let him contact me at my house."

Was my prayer presumptuous? I was just trying to learn to discern God's promptings from my own. I went home to my family and ate lunch. Before I left for work the phone

rang. You guessed it--it was the pastor from Butternut Bible Church. I always stand amazed at Almighty God's working, at the lengths to which He will go to get a willing man exactly where He wants him to be!

### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **TRAINING IN A CHURCH**

"It's never 'do, do, and you'll be' with the Lord, but Be, be, and I will do through you.' It's a case of 'hands up' and letting go, and then entire reliance on Him" (Chambers, Oswald Chambers His Life and Work, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, pp. 122-123).

When I was that teen-age boy, gazing at the stars and asking to know God, I little guessed I would ever become a pastor! The Butternut Bible Church called me in January of 1969 to be their assistant pastor. During my last six months of college I commuted from Butternut to Grand Rapids, and when I graduated in May I went full time with the church.

When the Butternut Bible Church asked me to come, Patty and I asked God for a verse, something we still do to discern His will. He spoke to us with Matthew 6:33, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." On the force of that verse, when the church board asked us how much money we needed to live on, we replied with Matthew 6:33 and the words, "We will take whatever you offer." We bravely left our finances with God.

We then went home--and not so bravely calculated how much money we did need to survive! Patty and I kept little jars to put money in: one for rent, one for the phone bill, one for lights. We decided we could live on \$75.00 a week--and that is exactly what the church offered us!

After I was with Butternut Bible Church for a time the pastor left. I offered the men of the church a few suggestions on what to look for in a new pastor. "Try to find an experienced, middle-aged man with children," I urged. During the next six months the church invited several men to preach. When we had no speaker, I did the preaching.

One day the church board approached me with a request that shocked me. "Oh, no," I protested to them. "I am not pastor material. You don't want me. I am not skilled at work like this!" They had more confidence in God's ability to work through a man than I had at that young age, so they said "no" to my no!

The men smiled at me. "We don't want another man," they said. "We like the man we have."

"I want you to know one thing," I told the men. "God has called me to be a missionary. When He leads me I'll have to leave here and go to the field. If you feel content to have me on those terms, I'll be your pastor."

The Lord left me at Butternut Bible Church until May of 1971. How I loved those dear

people! Whenever a missionary spoke at church my heart ached. I never lost the vision of a Bibleless tribe somewhere, waiting for God to send me to them. After each missionary spoke I said to our people, "Folks, remember, one day I'll be gone. I will be a missionary too."

I determined to expose the young people at Butternut Bible to missions work. In the summers of 1969 and 1970 we took a group of young people into Mexico to conduct Vacation Bible Schools with Rev. Zeral Brown from the Eleventh Hour Missionary Crusade. I learned much from that man of God. After the trips I longed to return to Mexico as a missionary.

At first Patty didn't share my enthusiasm to go to Mexico. Patty sometimes hesitates a little in new ventures. Some of us men who are "go-getters" need a little pulling back on the reins. The Lord sure uses my Patty to give me balance and stability. Whenever Patty is convinced that an action is God's will and not just mine, she proves an exuberant, excited companion in any work.

Patty and I prayed fervently together about missions and Mexico. I felt even more strongly during the months of united prayer that it was time to resign the pastorate and seek God's place in missions. God spoke to us through Romans 10:14-15.

I resigned from Butternut Bible Church in April of 1971. We felt deep sadness when we parted from our people. The people there did more for me than I ever did for them. They helped me, encouraged me, prayed for me, offered constructive criticism. Some churches break a young pastor so that he leaves the ministry. Churches like that will answer to God, but thank Him, Butternut Bible was not of that variety. To this day they remain faithful to us and support us in our ministry.

The same month that we severed ties with our beloved people, God brought a new love to our hearts. Kenny, our first son, was born on May 20th, 1971.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **TRAINING IN MEXICO**

"We would all be better Christians and wiser students if we would remember this--God rarely uses periods. There is rarely a full stop in His dealing with us-- it is more likely to be with the effect of a colon or a semi-colon. In most instances, what God does becomes a means toward something else that He is planning to do" (Tozer, *I Call It Heresy!* Christian Publications, p. 73).

Define deputation with two little ones in tow as: a venture in faith. The Lord enabled us to raise our support in six weeks, something so rare as to be unheard of. If you ask how we did it we reply, "We didn't do it! God did!" Reader, do you know what you and I can do for God? Nothing! Do you know what God can do through us? He can do the unlimited everything!

Because of deputation meetings June and July flew by like they had never been on the calendar. In September, 1971, Nosker feet touched Mexican soil and called it home. Our

Lord is good beyond imagination, powerful beyond belief. When He wants to move quickly, no obstacle stands in His way.

We spent three intense months in language school in Guadalajara, once again submitting to the mental discipline of those four walls! We had been in Mexico only two weeks when I began to long to tell people about our wonderful Lord. I couldn't say much yet, but I did know how to pass out tracts.

We chose a little town outside the city, Los Pozos (the wells) as a mission venture. There we passed out tracts and invited people to a Bible study. Two weeks later we returned to Los Pozos with a young Mexican Christian who agreed to teach the Bible study. How God worked through that earnest, but fumbling, attempt of His novice missionaries!

We started a church in Los Pozos while still in language school. Today that church has its own building and remains a clear, steady light. A friend and fellow student, Weldon (and Elaine) Jones took over the work and really built it up. They are still there.

To our knowledge God didn't use our next venture in Mexico the way He did our simple effort in Los Pozos. From Guadalajara the mission asked us to move into Mexico City to gain some supervised training before we chose a place to work alone.

God never called me to city work, and God never uses a man where He has not called him to be. I think the work in Mexico City was more in me than through me. In six months we saw very little fruit. Do you remember reading how people tried unsuccessfully to squeeze Hudson Taylor, that great missionary to China, into a mold of conformity? It worked no better for me than it did for him. It is not egotism, but fact, that God does call some men to plow their own furrow.

We shouted "Glory!" in August of 1972 when the board gave us permission to strike out on our own. Patty and I took our little ones and some gear and stuffed the whole collection into a pick-up with a home-built camper. We traveled for a week, looking for a small village in a rural area. I asked God, "Give me a hard area, where few if any missionaries have ever been."

We bumped and bounced our way to the state of Chiapas, bordering Guatemala. It was not exactly an easy week of travel. Crowded, primitive conditions, combined with weariness and a one and a five-year-old tested every smile we had!

We jostled over the rutted road until it ended, and still we had not found our village. Now what? It would not be the last time the question teased my mind, "Robert, what in the world are you doing here?"

We had heard about an isolated missionary who lived beyond the end of the road, so we chartered a civilian plane to find him. What a breath-taking ride that was through the fog and mountains of Chiapas State to Tumbala. The plane left us literally in the middle of nowhere. We began questioning people about the location of the MAF base where, we had been told, the missionary lived. No one knew anything about the base. We later learned that our informant had been confused; the base we were looking for was 100 miles away.

Does a miracle ever look like anything but confusion to the one standing in the center of it as it happens? We found that we were in a Chol Indian town. Some Indians took us to a white missionary couple, part of the team of God's lovely unknowns, who had been in the village for 31 years doing Bible translation work. Staying with the couple was Lydia, a young lady from a town 50 miles back on the trail.

We told the missionaries that we were seeking God's place for us, and Lydia listened intently. She looked into my eyes and said, "You know, our village has no pastor. Years ago there was a church, but it collapsed. We have some believers in our village of Ocosingo, but we have no one to teach us. Will you come to our village?"

Was Lydia's plea also God's? We needed to find out. "We will stop in your village on our way out," I assured Lydia, "and I will speak to your parents about this."

Lydia begged, "Let me fly out with you and ride back in your truck to my village so I can show you where it is."

We said good bye to the missionaries, flew back to our rutted dirt road, and found it in no better condition than we had left it. We jolted over the now familiar ruts back 50 miles to Ocosingo, a tiny town nestled in the mountains. Less than 1,000 people lived in the village, but the Tzeltal Indians, a tribe numbering 60,000, surrounded the village in the valleys and mountains.

Pouring, torrential rain greeted us when we arrived at Lydia's home. Patty was weary, the children fretful. "You go in, Bob, and I will wait here," Patty said. I knew she wanted nothing to do with that place in the middle of nowhere, especially when she was so tired. Lydia's parents seemed thrilled at the idea of a work beginning.

I asked Lydia's parents, "If my wife and I get a trailer, may we park it here on your property?" They happily agreed.

On our way back to the Mexican border I said to Patty, "Honey, I believe this to be God's will. I think we should consider going to Ocosingo." Patty wasn't overly excited at first; what woman would be? Still, I have never said, "Patty, I am committed to this action as God's will," and had her say, "Forget it!" Patty follows, not because she has a weak will or is easily led, but simply because she wants God's way more than she wants her own.

Men have said to me, "I am called to do a work for God, but I cannot, because my wife will not go." Sometimes that is the truth; sometimes it's an excuse! Some men are by nature so indefinite that they don't express a strong commitment to an action as God's will. Who could blame a woman for feeling hesitant about following an indecisive man, who seems himself quite unsure of God's will?

Patty fears beginnings, but there is right fear and wrong fear. The right kind of fear honestly says, "Yes, I am afraid, but I still ask God to do in and through me whatever He wants to do." The wrong kind of fear says, "Because I'm afraid, I won't go!"

God doesn't look for men and women who are strong and brave; He looks for ones weak and fearful enough to look to Him to do all in and through them. When God finds people that available, step back and watch Him work!

After we arrived back at the Mexican border, Patty and I had to trust God for money for a new trailer before we could travel the 1,400 miles back to Ocosingo. God did provide. What wonderful training our time in Mexico was for the future work we would do in Venezuela.

We began the work in Ocosingo by holding services in Lydia's home. We preached, prayed, witnessed, passed out tracts--and God worked. Soon we erected a portable building, supplied by the 11th Hour Missionary Crusade.

It is people that make up any work, and certain names forever link themselves in memory to certain places. I never recall Ocosingo without thinking of Manuel Culebra. Culebra means "snake," and that man was a snake if I ever saw one!

Manuel held the dubious honor of being the town drunk. Sometimes he stayed drunk for 30 days. What tremendous problems that man caused his wife. One night Manuel ducked into a service to find shelter from a pouring rain storm. The weather served as an excellent backdrop for the film on Noah I was showing that evening, an evening to remember. Manuel responded that night to the invitation.

When a baby is born into a family it naturally shows a family likeness, but never did I see a life change like Manuel's did. I often wonder: Did God send us to Ocosingo just to serve as His channel to bring Manuel to Himself?

I baptized Manuel on Easter Sunday, just a few weeks after his conversion. He said fervently to me, "I have waited all my life to hear that Christ loves me and to believe in Him with all my heart. I know God sent you here just for me."

I began teaching Manuel the Scriptures. He took his faith home and began witnessing to friends and relatives. George MacDonald wrote, "When God comes to a man, man looks round for his neighbor" (Miller, The Every-Day of Life, Hodder and Stoughton, p. 264).

God only knows how many people Manuel has led to the Lord. It is a thrill to know Manuel and to know that one day he will shine as the stars for brightness (cf. Dan. 12:13).

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **TRAINING IN ROUGH RAPIDS**

"An eminent difference is discernible between biographic studies in the Bible and outside the Bible. When men write studies of the servants of God, they are apt to drop out the uncouth and the unlovely, and out of their devotion state only the elements that idealize the servant. But the Bible reveals the blunderings and the sins and the uncouthness of the servants of God, and leaves only one idea dominant--that these men were for the glory of God" (Chambers, Oswald Chambers: His Life and Work, Marshall Morgan and Scott, p.10).

Personal problems clouded our joy over God's working in Ocosingo. Are missionaries

super human? Does God use only ivory saints to build His church? Dr. Tozer said that if God could use Balaam's donkey, He can speak through other imperfect servants.

Imperfect we were. What I tell you now I say in the spirit of Psalm 115:1 so you will know it is God who works through people, not people who work for God. There isn't room for hero-worship in the church of Christ. Only our Lord deserves glory. At best we are chipped vessels, or semi-clogged channels, but we have within the sweet, pure oil of the Holy Spirit.

Patty and I began having serious marital problems. It happens to more missionaries than you might guess. Why? Are missionaries special targets of Satan? Sure they are; who among God's workers isn't? Problems also come from a lack of submission to each other and to the Holy Spirit.

Something else is also involved. God cuts some men and women from velvet, some from cotton, but He cuts His missionaries from the toughest denim. Pioneer missionaries are a different breed, often out-going, headstrong, independent--adjectives that describe both Patty and me. God must melt toughness into weakness and tenderness before He can fully use us. Patty and I, who thought we could handle so much, learned we couldn't handle even our own marriage. The clashes were frequent; they were painful.

Patty and I might laugh now at the old quip, "When a man and woman marry they become one. The trouble starts when they try to decide which one." Back then, we weren't laughing. I didn't spend the time with Patty that I should have. I fell far short of being the husband God wanted me to be. I take total blame for our marriage problems of those days.

In spite of our personal difficulties God worked in the church at Ocosingo until it became self-supporting and able to call its own pastor: the goal every church planting missionary seeks.

In Ocosingo we worked with Mexicans, but I still longed to work with Indians. Often I said to Patty, "Perhaps the Lord will soon thrust us out into a tribe somewhere." I longed to work with a Bibleless tribe. When Indians came into Ocosingo I bought eggs from them and learned from them all the Indian words I could. Still, I was not yet ready for tribal work. The Lord had more dealing to do in me before He could reach a Bibleless tribe through me.

Tribal work, because of its extreme isolation, forces a husband and wife into the closest imaginable fellowship, and our marriage wasn't ready for that.

Peter Bertocci wrote, "Two married Christians do not make a Christian marriage. Their marriage is Christian only if the relationships and problems that their marriage creates are approached in the norms of Christian love" (Gangel, The Family First, His International Service, p. 29).

It wasn't easy, but Patty and I returned home in September of 1973 to work on our marriage. As soon as we arrived home we asked our supporters to stop sending us funds. Integrity demanded that action. We didn't know what field we might go to next, or even if we could ever return to the mission field as a couple.

We set ourselves to prayer. Patty and I spent a lot of time together, both knowing we had many adjustments to make. We remained committed to marriage and dependent on our Lord. God used some special meetings we attended to begin the healing process.

God also gave us shock-jolt therapy. We learned that the missionary friends we had met in Hawaii, the ones used by God to turn our heart to missions, were now divorced. They were no longer missionaries. Patty and I looked at each other with tears when we heard that news. We were too close to that ourselves, and we didn't want it to happen to us.

God taught me to be more gentle, a real man. He taught Patty a thing or two, also! Our love grew. Honesty compels the admission that human love is unstable at best. Simple things--a rainy day, a bad time at work--affect human emotions. God's love, though, is never variable, always tender, always self-giving. God's love always asks, not what can I take, but what can I give. Marriage partners need more than human love. They need God's love for each other.

If any reader feels he is losing his love for his mate, he need only ask for God's love to shine through him. Remember too that a marriage vow is based upon the will, not the emotions. With God's love as the source, marriage is a growing joy. "...Marriage is one of life's ... greatest adventures. I would keep it an adventure--an adventure in happiness" (Wallis, ed., Words of Life, Harper and Row, p. 159).

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **TRAINING IN WAITING**

"Let God fling you out, and do not go until He does. If you select your own spot, you will prove an empty pod. If God sows you, you will bring forth fruit" (Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest, Dodd, Mead and Co., p. 71).

With our hearts joyfully re-knit by God's own hand, Patty and I continued our venture in prayer. More strongly than ever we felt called to a Bibleless tribe. Our first request was for a verse so we would know that God wanted us to minister to a tribal people. Feelings and circumstances are the great deceivers. We knew better than to build our lives, and the lives of our children, on fickle feelings--our marriage problems taught us that! Little did we know, as we prayed so earnestly for a verse, that the God-given text would more than once be the only--I mean the only--thing to keep us in Venezuela during trying years of sickness, pain and problems.

How many Christians have lost the sense of God's call? Men go to a field or a church on a circumstance and leave on a circumstance. The return rate for missionaries and the quick turnover of pastors proves this point. Go only where God impels you to go, and then stay there until He, not a circumstance, says "Go." Is God's voice so unfamiliar to His own?

Some flee a place of service too soon, never to see the victory God had prepared for the one willing to pray and patiently wait. Heed the words of H.A. Ironside, "The greatest mistake any Christian can make is to substitute his own will for the will of God" (Ironside, Ephesians, Loizeaux, p. 38).

Patty and I prayed from September to December for our verse. I worked with Roger Vandenberg, a carpenter and friend, who is also on the board of our mission. I worked with Roger in a small, barn shaped building behind his home. There among the sawdust and the clean, pungent smell of new wood, I shared my heart with Roger. I told him that I longed for God to use me to reach a Bibleless tribe. Time and again Roger and I prayed together.

Our prayers resulted in a shared thought. Why not go out as a missionary under a local church rather than under a large mission board? I am not anti-big mission board, but in some cases such boards circumnavigate the local church, taking the church's people and money, but not their insights or direction.

Why couldn't a mission board be accountable to the local church? Consider these words of A.W. Tozer, "The highest expression of the will of God in this age is the church which He purchased with His own blood. To be Scripturally valid any religious activity must be part of the church. Let it be clearly stated that there can be no service acceptable to God in this age that does not center in and spring out of the church" (Wiersbe, ed., The Best of A.W. Tozer, Baker, p. 64).

This break between church and mission board where God intended unity isn't the exclusive fault of the boards. Some parents send their children off to a Christian school and heave a sigh of relief for transferred authority, and wrongly so, for responsibility still rests with them. Just so some churches turn their men and women over to a mission board's care and abdicate all personal involvement and responsibility. Doesn't Acts 13 teach that the church should be far more directly involved with its missionaries than most are?

Roger and I kept praying. Every work is fashioned in God's heart before it is conceived in man's mind, but on the human side of eternity, my part in the work among the Pemon Indians was born in Roger's little barn. (God was also working with a man named Jim Berryhill along the same lines, but I didn't know that--or Jim--then.)

How often big things come from humble beginnings! Our Lord never despised the day of small things; should we? He takes the lowly things and uses them to call men and women to Himself, uses them to bring glory to Himself. Does your work seem insignificant, mundane, static? Keep on! Who knows what God may yet do through your "small thing?"

Patty and I kept praying for our verse. We also sent out letters to the field representatives in five South American countries. In the letter we asked:

1. Are there Indians in your country?
2. How much work is yet to be done?
3. How many tribes are there?
4. How large are the tribes?

The representatives we contacted lived in Guatemala, Columbia, Brazil, Peru and Ecuador. We should have saved our postage money. God delights in surprising us with His own ways, and so often works in seemingly chance events. God chose none of the five countries we considered.

The leading of God: What is it? Ask ten men; you'll get at least nine different answers. As long as a man's walk is right and he has no unconfessed sin, the Lord will put him back in the right way even if his steps veer away from God's chosen path. I think we fret far too much about knowing God's will. We are responsible to be careful about one thing only: to keep looking by faith to God. We can safely leave the rest to Him. God will certainly reveal His will to the honest seeker, but it will always be in His own time. God is never in as much of a hurry as we are. Sometimes we act like the fate of the universe hangs upon our speedy decisions!

The months of praying dragged on. Perhaps you have already noticed that the Noskers are quite human, so you will not be surprised to hear that during the long wait Patty and I sometimes wondered about the whole venture. Sometimes we asked each other, "Is God really in this? Is this whole idea of working with a Bibleless tribe just our own desire? Where will all this end?"

Roger and I also kept bringing all the unknowns to God. "Open a door, Lord," we prayed. "You show us the right country. You show us how to get there."

The answers to our letters started coming. Most responses were negative. Many said, "If you aren't with a major mission you'll never get into this country." Some said, "Choose another country. This one is closing, and it is already difficult to get missionaries in."

What else could we do but keep praying? Patty and I knelt together at home; Roger and I knelt together in the sawdust in the little red barn, and God smiled in His forever undisturbed peace, knowing all we did not yet know. When God plans an adventure He plans it from both ends of the road. At the time we were praying, sending and receiving letters, strange things were happening with the Pemon Indians in Venezuela, the people we were to work among.

The Pemon are a sub-group of a larger tribe known as the "Carib" Indians. Many tribes in and out of Venezuela belong to the Carib tribe. Each sub-group speaks its own language. An estimated 10,000-13,000 Pemon Indians occupy the south-east corner of Venezuela.

In the southeast Venezuela borders Brazil and Guyana. There in the low land jungles and the forests live the Pemon people. Up and down the Caroni River dwell that part of the Pemon tribe which would eventually compose the village of San Miguel, where we were to minister.

About the time that Patty and I and Roger and I were praying, a Pemon man, Ramon, had a dream that resulted in a pseudo-religious movement among the tribe. In the late 1800's and early 1900's many such religious "revivals" occurred among the Pemon. These "revivals" always resulted from some new religious teaching that infiltrated the tribe.

In the late 1800's the Seventh Day Adventist people went to Guyana, where some of the Pemon people live. The Pemon listened to their teaching, and the result was typically historical. As had happened before with other new teaching, synchronization resulted. No sect or religion actually converted the Pemon, but the Pemon rejected no teaching either. The Indians just obligingly mixed the new with the old, believed the whole confusing mess, and called the resulting religion "Alleluia," or "Chochiman," from English "Church

man." Every fifteen to twenty years a new religious leader took over, accepted whatever new teaching was around at the time, mixed it with the old, and another "revival" happened.

The first Pemon woman to have religious dreams lived and taught in the late 18th, early 19th century. She told the people to incorporate dancing into their worship. When the woman died, many of her teachings died with her, but certain parts of the Pemon worship stayed the same through the years. Services always included the chants and dances, dances to assure the growing of crops, dances to appease spirit beings.

Ramon was just eighteen-years-old when the Pemon accepted him as their new religious leader. This time the Pemon revival of interest in religion was different because no outside influence triggered the new fervor.

Ramon struggled personally with deep religious feelings and a longing to know God. He involved himself in the "Alleluia" teaching and began to revive it with all night dances and chantings. Strange things happened as the people gathered in groups and drank and danced the night away. Yet, in his heart Ramon was honestly seeking God.

Did Ramon do as I had done so many years before when I looked past the stars and cried out, "God, if there is a God, I want to know You?" Ramon later gave me reason to believe this is just what he did. God first drew Ramon's heart to seek Himself, and then God made Himself responsible to send to Ramon and the Pemon people the first true missionaries the tribe had known.

During one of the religious meetings Ramon fell into a trance that lasted two days. He dreamed that a voice said, "Gather your people together to live in a village."

The Pemon of that area rarely lived together in a village. Because they drank, fought, and mistrusted each other, they preferred living in isolated family groups.

"Clean up your lives," the voice in the dream said to Ramon. "You cannot go on living like this."

Their lives needed cleaning up all right! When Patty and I arrived some men had as many as five wives. When they drank, they often beat their women.

The voice in the dream also told Ramon, "Someday a white man with a book will come to you. Believe that man and that book."

I don't claim to understand Ramon's vision, but I do know that God used it to accomplish His own ends. I also know that Ramon had the dream at about the same time that Patty and I were fervently praying for God's leading.

At the very moment we pray, God begins to work, though we may not know it until much later. Pray! Never give up! Remember that Daniel prayed for 21 days while the forces of Satan withstood the angel of God coming with the answer to the prayer. I often wonder, had Patty and I quit praying and walked away from God's blessing, what would have happened?

December 25, 1973, stands vividly in my memory as a day of beginnings. We visited the hospital in Carson City, Michigan, to see our friends' new baby. In the waiting room I noticed a low table with books scattered on it. One book caught my eye. It was buried under some others, so I saw only the bottom half of it. Across the bottom of the book in large letters were the words: Isaiah 55.

I pointed the book out to Patty. "I wonder what Isaiah 55 says?" I asked her. I tried to recall. "Let's read that chapter when we get home, Patty," I suggested.

As I kept looking through the books I found a Gideon Bible. I opened it to Isaiah 55 and began reading. I wasn't even thinking of our prayer for a verse. My mind was full of thoughts of the holidays, of our friends' new baby, and of another Babe born so many years ago, the Saviour of mankind.

I read through Isaiah 55. Verse five grabbed me as clearly as if God had stepped into that little waiting room, laid His hand on my shoulder, and spoke the words aloud in my ear; which in the language of the Spirit is exactly what He did do.

"Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the LORD, thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee" (Isa. 55:5).

To Call a Nation! That was our verse. I showed it to Patty, and she knew it too. With reverent worship we read the rest of the chapter together. Our orderly God, who delights to work in the seemingly haphazard, gave us a wonderful holiday gift there in that little waiting room. Our waiting for a verse ended that day. How our hearts smiled as we read, "For ye shall go out with joy, and be led forth with peace" (Isa. 55:12).

Back at home Patty and I knelt again together to pray about our verse, as we had done countless times before. This time the prayer was thanksgiving, not supplication. I know that God can, and often does, lead His own without a verse. We need to leave room for God to work according to His absolute creativity and not try to box Him up with our own set of rules. He works differently with different people.

Many missionaries go out by God's will and are greatly used of Him without ever having a verse to claim. Patty and I needed a verse, and we set ourselves to ask God for it until He gave it to us. Our tender Lord understood both our longing and our need. Patty and I were embarking on difficult days so severe as to make us forget both circumstantial leading and human desire. We needed a verse we could never forget. Many times we clung to our verse like drowning children, and then our troubles were swallowed up in the joy of knowing, "This is where we belong. This is where God chooses to work through us, and we can't leave until He is finished here with us."

Twice, at least, in Venezuela circumstances were such that without our verse we would have fled the country before we saw the blessing God wanted to bring about through us. Dear reader, are you discouraged in the rocky field where God has planted you? Stay there until He says to go out. Remember that the work is not yours, but His. That makes Him responsible for the results--doesn't it? A tremendous blessing may be under that next stone you call difficulty!

With our verse firmly clasped in our hands and hearts, Patty and I spoke to our pastor at

Hiawatha Beach Church about our longing to minister to a Bibleless tribe. When we asked our pastor about what board he suggested, he too advised us to consider going out under the direction of our own local church.

The pastor shared our desires with the church board, and the board approached the church as a whole. They voted to send us out as their missionaries. This way has its difficulties; we have had our disagreements, but what a blessing it has been all of these years to have our own local church behind us!

Once Patty and I had our verse, the church to serve as our mission board, and a sure call of God, several things needed doing. First, we informed our previous supporters of God's call. Next, we began to raise support. We needed more money than when we went to Mexico. Inflation had taken its usual gulp. We also needed some training.

Patty and I wanted to go to Norman, Oklahoma, in June of 1974 to enter Wycliff's Summer Institute of Linguistics, known as S.I.L. Students at S.I.L. spend nine or ten intense weeks learning how to write an unwritten language and studying grammar discovery procedures. Our "chances" of being accepted at S.I.L. were slim. We still had no idea of the country to which we hoped to go, nor did we qualify academically to be accepted as students. The facts didn't discourage us.

I remember talking to an older missionary pilot. He chuckled as he reminisced, "By the mission board's standards I was too old to be accepted, and my health was too poor, but God had called me, and I knew it. So, what could I do but apply? They accepted me too!"

So, what could Patty and I do but apply? How I hope that our lives will encourage others to launch out on God! When your heart is right and you have God's call on your life, He sometimes makes exceptions to the best of rules. The months to come proved that again and again. If our God is God of the haphazard, He is also the God of the exceptional! What an adventure is the Christian life!

The requirement for acceptance at S.I.L. is a B.A. degree; I had only a graduation certificate from Grand Rapids School of Bible and Music. Patty's transcript looked even worse than mine. She had only a few courses to her credit.

We applied to S.I.L. with mingled doubt, hope and prayer. Our answer from them came quickly, "You do not qualify, but you may come." Praise God! When we walk in His way He straightens the road, makes the low places high, the high places low--He just evens out the whole thing. How I delight to watch our God at work!

## **CHAPTER SEVEN**

### **AND YET MORE TRAINING!**

"Someone once asked an athletic coach the secret of becoming a champion, and he replied, 'The ability to hold on 5 minutes longer'" (Folprecht, Write the Word, Mott Media, p. 38).

Deputation works endurance into a missionary as few other things can do. Deputation

this time around taught us firsthand to understand the Webster definition of discouragement: "disheartening or deterring. Depression, pessimism."

We quickly learned that when a man spits in the face of tradition he better expect tradition to turn her back. Several of our churches did renew support immediately when we notified them of God's call to us, but many of the new churches I visited turned us away

From some of the churches we got only raised eyebrows, a few "ahems," and questions, questions! Question number one, voiced in deep tones, "Where exactly are you going, Robert?" I couldn't answer that, and I was fair enough to understand that most pastors find a shrug an unacceptable response to such an important question!

Question two, voiced in yet deeper pastoral tones: "What mission board are you under, Robert?" My answer to that drove already raised eyebrows even higher! Tradition vetoed the idea of a man going out under the authority of his local church. One man said, "I went to Africa years ago under the local church, but you can't do that today." Paul seemed to find it a suitable operational method, but many pastors responded to the idea with, "Hmmm. Yesss. Wellll. Ahhh. Sorry, Robert, but I don't think we'll be able to help you at this time."

Several of the men who reacted negatively are now good friends of mine. One man (now, with his wife, a dear friend and faithful supporter of the work) said, "I don't understand how you think you can go to the mission field without a big board to back you. I wonder: who do you think you are?"

Who did I think I was? Just a small vessel for our Almighty God to pour His life through in any way He chose. So many tag God's creative dealings as man's cocky ideas. God gave me grace to keep on and a handful of churches to support us. We had enough so we could go out, first to S.I.L., then on the field of His choice.

In May we met for the final time with our church mission board, called, "Gospel Wings Missionary Translation Team." I spoke with the board members after the going-away service the church held for us. "Men," I said, "perhaps this is a real good bye. From S.I.L. I believe that God will take us straight to the mission field. I don't think we'll be back here."

The board graciously declined comment on my cheerful optimism! Not until years later did they tell me how they really felt about my statement! When I called them at the conclusion of S.I.L. to say, "We know where we're going and we're on our way," they were astonished. They had not seen God work like that before, so they didn't expect it. We hadn't seen Him work like that before either!

Packing for S.I.L. took very little time; we didn't own much to pack. We piled ourselves, our suitcases, and our children into the car and left for Norman, Oklahoma in the middle of May, 1974. We camped four nights on the way, and the kids really enjoyed that.

We almost heard the angels sing the first night we camped. During family devotions at the campsite, our Kenny trusted Jesus as his personal Saviour from sin. What a thrill that was! We felt God's smile beaming on us all. Our first convert after going out under

"Gospel Wings" was our own Kenny!

When we arrived in Norman we kept on camping. Tornadoes crossed the city and county on the day we arrived and set up our tent. You might say we had a flashing welcome! For several days we lived in our fragile tent as tornado warnings continued on the radio. We slept in the tent until the dorms opened in early June. Finally we registered, and classes began--solid walls at last! I never thought "those four walls" could look so good to me!

Patty and I weren't novices at language schools. Years before we had attended language school in Guadalajara for five grueling hours a day, five days a week, with a "mere" three hours of homework a night. That was tough. There is nothing like memorizing words and sounds all day and half the night to raise (or lower!) your frustration tolerance level! But that Guadalajara school was cherry pie--with ice cream on it even--compared to what we endured at S.I.L. Perhaps S.I.L. wasn't so tough for those with abundance of brain, which Patty and I never claimed to have. We felt a bit like Winnie-the-Pooh, bear of very little brain!

Patty and I sat in class, knowing full well we weren't the brightest people in the world, as we admit and our friends too readily agree! We had none of the required degrees for S.I.L., but we had B.T.'s (Been There's) in trusting God.

At S.I.L. they tested us to determine our class ratings and put Patty and me, not in the top class, but in one of the top classes. Was it a computer error? We wondered. There we sat, surrounded by people with master's degrees and even Ph. D's, and the teachers expected us to handle the same level of work the others did.

What can I tell you of those nine weeks? Without doubt, I thought then that they were the most difficult weeks I ever endured, as far as the pressure of academic studies. We attended classes morning and afternoon. We had three to four hours of homework every night. Day after day after day.... I never knew nine weeks could have so many days.

Patty and I kept searching the Bible and praying together for God's leading in the choice of a field. We shared an expectant, eager attitude and felt that any day God would reveal to us His will.

School was "two weeks down and seven to go" the day we walked through the parking lot on a 45 minute lunch break. I saw a young man with his head under the hood of a 1963 green Chevy. "Patty," I asked, "shall we go over and meet that fellow?"

We introduced ourselves. I remember his grin, and his hesitancy to offer his greasy hand for a hand-shake. "Real nice to meet you," he said. "My name is Jim Berryhill." Jim was also attending S.I.L.

We never guessed, as we shook that grease-stained hand, that we were beginning a blessed working friendship between our two families that would last many years. As we talked Patty and I told Jim of our longing to reach a Bibleless tribe for Christ. Jim stopped working on the Chevy and gave us a long, serious look.

"There isn't enough time to talk now," he said. "I want you guys to come over to my apartment when we all finish our homework tonight. I have something I want to share

with you."

Patty and I were puzzled and intrigued. What did this stranger want to share with us? Did it have anything to do with God's will for us? We were learning to look for God in seemingly "chance" things, in the apparent haphazard: a half-covered book on a hospital table, a young man with grease-stained hands? Why not? God doesn't always do His work in great cathedrals with solemn organ peals. Look at the seemingly haphazard that surrounded the birth of His Son, and note how each incident wove into God's perfect pattern.

"The most trivial and the most important, the most likely and the most unlikely circumstances are made to minister to the development of God's purposes" (Mackintosh, Notes on Genesis, Loizeaux, p. 321).

Patty and I gulped lunch and returned to a grueling afternoon class. We had supper, played awhile with the kids, and tackled our homework. After bedding the kids down we walked to the Berryhill apartment where we talked with Jim and his lovely wife, Jeanne. There we heard a fascinating tale of God at work in a life--the life of Jim Berryhill. I share the story with you because from here on out Jim's story and mine, and the work among the Pemon, all blend together. Like the old song about love and marriage, "You can't have one without the other."

## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **JIM BERRYHILL**

"Friendship is rare on earth. It means identity in thought and heart and spirit" (Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest, Dodd, Mead and Co., p. 7).

Texas gained itself a new little cowboy when Jim Berryhill entered the world on February 23, 1948, and my good friend was born, although I didn't know it then. Jim was born into a Christian home. He never knew his father, who died when Jim was just six-months-old. Jim's mother remarried when Jim was three, and his step dad loved Jim like his own son. The family attended church together in Dallas.

In his early years Jim enjoyed a stable Christian home life. He trusted Jesus as Saviour at the young age of eight. Jim enjoyed both Sunday school and church, but when he was around 12 years old, his family stopped attending services. Jim stopped going to church when his family did, and he entered his teens a rebellious young man. Of those years Jim confesses, "I had no spiritual desires at all."

Every good Texas cowboy has a horse, and what is a horse without a girl? It was at a riding competition that Jim met his Jeanne, and it didn't take him long to notice her vibrant appearance. When the competition ended the sky looked like it was brewing an ominous storm, so Jim offered to put Jeanne's horse into his trailer and to give her a ride home. She accepted, and they began dating.

Jeanne's home life was very unlike Jim's. The family struggled under financial and emotional stress. Her parents were having problems. Her dad wanted to move to

California. Jeanne's father asked her, "Do you want to live with your mother or with me?"

Jeanne wanted to run. How could she choose between the parents she loved? Escape looked good to her troubled young eyes.

Jim and Jeanne planned their scheme and lied to carry it out. They married secretly in Mexico, but on the way home their car broke down, and they were discovered. Their parents insisted they remarry legally in Texas.

Jeanne soon found herself expecting a baby. As invariably happens when children assume adult responsibilities, the road ahead was long and tough for the two newly-weds. Jim's attitude complicated matters. "I'm a grown-up man now," he thought to himself. "I don't need to obey anyone, not my parents, not my teachers, not even God!"

Problems multiplied. Jeanne was the first to feel spiritual hunger. She found comfort in church, but Jim insulted the visitors from church who came to see her and even refused to let them enter the house. Rebellion ate at Jim's heart, until God began gently calling him back home. Jim says of those days, "Had it not been for God dealing with me, our marriage would have broken up for sure."

One night, when Jim was spending the usual amount of hours drinking well past bedtime, he suddenly realized, "Hey, I am utterly miserable. This is no life for me. I am running away from God and being a rotten testimony. I belong to God! What kind of Christian am I, anyway?" The next morning Jim shook Jeanne awake. "Honey," he said urgently, "get up. I want to go to church."

Jeanne was too surprised to ask questions. She got up and dressed both children. "What church should we go to?" Jim wondered. He felt too ashamed to visit the church where Jeanne had friends. He had insulted those friends and refused to allow them into his home. They visited a church where Jeanne had been saved a few years earlier. Several young couples in the church "adopted" Jim and Jeanne. Jim enjoyed their friendship and returned Sunday after Sunday. Gradually God's tender love healed the open wounds in Jim and Jeanne's marriage. Jim found himself hungering for the Word. He devoured it, was consumed by it. Soon he was not only teaching Sunday school but praying about attending Bible college.

When he began attending Bible school in 1971 Jim felt remorse for all the years he had wasted. "God, will You do something special for me?" he prayed. "Enable me to finish the four year course in three so I can gain back a little of the time I wasted."

Faith was the most important subject Jim learned in college. Each semester God stretched Jim's faith muscles a bit more. No one can take a final at Dallas Bible College unless his bill is paid. The first semester Jim and Jeanne prayed, and God provided funds for Jim's bill a whole month before finals. The next semester money came in at the last minute. The third semester Jim went to the office and sadly told them, "I can't take my exams. I don't have any money to pay my bill."

"Yes, you do!" The office girl smiled. "A gift just came in for you, and it covers the exact amount that you still owe."

The Lord sent more than one missionary to Venezuela into Jim's life while he was in Bible school. Jim felt God nudging him toward missions and decided to go to Venezuela on a summer mission's internship. He needed money for a round-trip ticket. The day he needed the money he was still \$200.00 short. The money came in just in time. Over and over again the Lord built faith into this man He planned to use in a special way.

Working with Indians was the last work that naturally interested Jim. He wears a grin on his face when he remembers why, "I didn't like bugs, snakes, camping or roughing it." That summer in Venezuela Jim exposed himself to areas of mission work that did interest him: working in a Bible book store, institute work, the academy for children. He even considered church planting with one mental stipulation: "Not in the bush!"

God directed Jim's path to cross Merrill and Louise Seely's. The Seelys worked with a savage tribe of Indians who were, at that time, hostile to outsiders. Merrill asked Jim, "Have you ever considered work with the Indians?"

"Not me!" Jim responded firmly. He gave his logical explanation. "You see, we are afraid, not just of bugs and snakes, but of lots of other things too."

"Oh, that," Louise Seely responded calmly. "I'm afraid of all those things too." Her eyes danced with amusement, and then she laughed out loud. "I have a deathly fear of all crawly things. I even fear ants and spiders! You know, in the jungle I see far fewer creepy things than I do in my house in the city here in Venezuela. The Lord never gives me more than I can handle in His strength."

The Seelys were just too enthusiastic to ignore. They told Jim about the Pemon tribe. They had done a survey trip among them and were impressed with their hunger for spiritual things. The Seelys begged Jim, "Will you at least ask God if He wants you to work with the Pemon? The Pemon people need a missionary, and we can't be in two places at once." The Seelys even gave their own money to send Jim and Jeanne into a village situation so they could see for themselves that jungle life wasn't as awful as they imagined it to be.

How could Jim and Jeanne refuse the offered trip into the village? In the village they found a simple, plain people hungry to know of the true God. They saw pathetic striving to reach God by man-made effort. They noticed some awesome physical needs too. A voice called to Jim and Jeanne to join hearts with the Pemon people, and the voice was not just Mr. Seely's.

Seelys gave Jim and Jeanne wise advice. "If you feel God calling you to work with the Pemon, ask Him to give you another couple to work with you. It's so hard to be alone. You need someone to encourage the two of you when you're down, someone to help with the burden of translation. The work will go faster and smoother that way. In the jungle, two are better than one."

Alexander Maclaren would have agreed. He wrote, "A solitary heart is timid and weak.... Loose grains of sand are light and moved by a breath; compacted they are rock which the Atlantic beats in vain" (Maclaren, Colossians and Philemon, Hodder and Stoughton, p. 158).

Any contemplating isolated missionary work should heed these words said by Hopeful to Christian, "... Had I been here alone, I had, by sleeping, run the danger of death. I see it is true that the wise man saith, 'Two are better than one.' Hitherto hath thy company been my mercy; and thou shalt have a good reward for thy labor" (Bunyan, Pilgrim's Progress, Fleming H. Revell, p. 123).

Jim and Jeanne began earnestly praying for that couple to work with them among the Pemon.

Jim plunged into his last year of school. He would graduate in three years, even though he had to carry over twenty hours a semester to do so.

Jim graduated and went to Norman, Oklahoma, to attend S.I.L. He sat now with Jeanne in his apartment, telling Patty and me some of the story I have just shared with you.

Jim finished the story in his quiet way and then showed us his slides of the Pemon. He spoke with a full heart of the need of this tribe who had no part of the Bible in their own language. I'll never forget Jim's next words, "Bob, the work is too big for us. Will you come with us?"

Jim voiced his question quietly, but it seemed a shout to my ears--the impact was that definite. Impulsively I wanted to say "Yes!", but Patty and I had long before agreed that God's blessing requires prayer.

Patty and I wanted yet another verse. We hadn't even considered the country of Venezuela before Jim spoke to us. We needed confirmation that this country was God's choice for us.

F.B. Meyer wrote, "Do you need guidance as to your path? Do not look to impressions.... Do not seek for guidance from friends, ... but look away to Christ; throw on Him the responsibility of making you know the way you are to take; leave it to Him to make it so abundantly clear that you cannot do other than follow; even tell Him that you will stand still until He puts His arms under you, and carries you where He would have you be" (Bryant, ed., Climbing the Heights, Zondervan, p. 43).

"I can't answer you now, Jim," I told him. "I need to pray and get my answer from God." Patty and I walked home on shouting ground. Excited is an understatement of how we felt.

Our custom is to read the Bible together before sleeping. That night brought us to Psalm 118. Verse 23 startled us. "This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes." We read the Scofield marginal note, "This thing is from the Lord."

Neither Patty nor I retained a doubt in our minds. We fell to our knees and thanked God for His faithful leading. What a wonderful thing to trace God's hand leading us through long years and varied circumstances to bring us to this point. I feel yet that I was brought forth from the womb to be used as God's missionary to the Pemon. That night Patty and I offered ourselves to be used of God in Venezuela, not to work for Him there, but that He might there do His own work through us.

Patty and I lost no time hunting up Jim and Jeanne the next day and sharing our news with them. The four of us began praying together daily, meeting on the lawn during class breaks. We prayed about the many unknowns. Jim and Jeanne had a year of language school ahead of them and support still to raise. We didn't even know if Jim and Jeanne's mission would allow them to work with us.

We prayed fervently for the work and for each other, and God built into our foursome a wonderful friendship. I think He has knit our hearts together, not just for time, but for eternity. "There is no limit to the extent and devotion of true friendship" (Miller, The Beauty of Every Day, Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., p. 163). I think of David and Jonathan, Paul and his co-workers, and I compare our relationship with Berryhills to that. It has been a sweet, close friendship for many years.

The long summer of study felt eternal to the four of us, but it finally ended. Lo and behold, it finished before it finished us, and to our joy, we even passed our exams. Both Patty and I made B's. If you think, Hey, that guy is bragging, you are right, but I brag on God, not on us. We know we don't have what it takes to earn high grades in a place as tough as S.I.L.!

Parting time with Berryhills came all too soon. We entered into a solemn covenant with them. Our family would go, search out the land and begin the work. Berryhills would join us as soon as possible, if God led them on that way. We longed for God to join our lives and theirs in service, but we wanted then, and still do, His glory above our friendship. We prayed; we clasped hands; we parted.

"Many a thought of God has been hindered (to use the speech of earth) because two friends refused to separate. ... So few are prepared to be, like the pine on the hill top, alone in the wind for God" (Carmichael, Gold by Moonlight, S.P.C.K, p. 160).

## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **ANOTHER NEW BEGINNING**

"Though the direction be new and the way seem beset with difficulty, there is never any risk, provided we are only led of God" (Pierson, George Muller of Bristol, Zondervan, p. 149).

School days past, ready at last: Houston here we come! Jim told us that the closest Venezuelan embassy was in Houston. Patty and I had some Houston friends we hadn't seen for a long time. Outside of them, we knew no one else in the city.

A large mission saves the missionary much time and foot work; this we admit. A missionary under a board doesn't have to arrange his own visa or meet with government officials. I want to say, if you don't have to do it the way we did, then don't! We had to go under our local church board. We were obeying God's orders, though the envelope containing them was still partly sealed. Our duty was to walk at His command: His was to open doors. We left the worrying part of the work to Him--well, almost.

I climbed the stairs to the small consulate there in Houston. "May I help you?" asked a voice with a distinctively pleasant Venezuelan accent.

I introduced myself to the lady who owned the lovely voice. "We are missionaries and feel that God wants us to work with the Pemon Indians in your country. So, may I have a visa?"

The nice lady smiled tolerantly at my innocent optimism. "We do not do things quite that quickly in Venezuela," she explained gently, as to a school boy. "You will have to get your mission board to apply for a visa for you. You do not do such things yourself."

"I can't do that," I objected. "We don't have a mission board that does that."

"Well, in that case, you must ask someone down in Venezuela who knows you to apply for the visa for you."

"Ma'am!" I sounded desperate. "I don't know even one person in Venezuela. We just know that God wants us to go there. So, you see, we have to go!"

She hesitated a long moment. "In that case, there is but one thing you can do. Describe as briefly as possible what it is you want, and send a telegram to the address I will give to you. Come back to see me in three to six months, and I will have an answer for you."

Three to six months! I was raised in the land of fast foods, express check-out lanes, and instant coffee! I gulped. "But, Ma'am, we want to go now!"

"I am sorry," she said firmly. "With these--circumstances--of yours, this is the only thing you can do. I can do nothing else for you."

I obeyed her, crossed the street, and sent my telegram. What else could I do? Let me share a secret. I have a handle on this Venezuelan telegraph stuff. I have used the telegraph service in Venezuela. I have never seen a telegram arrive at its destination reading exactly as it did when it started out.

Telegraph service in Venezuela reminds me of the game of "gossip" children play, where the first child whispers a sentence to the child next to him. After the sentence travels from mouth to ear around a circle of children, it has little resemblance to the original. Worse than the distorted telegram is the telegram that never arrives. Of course, I did not know any of that back then, but God did. Looking back I consider it a miracle that my telegram not only arrived in Venezuela worded correctly, but that it reached the proper authorities once there!

Patty and I stood outside the telegraph office in Houston and just looked at each other. Now what? That "beginning to be familiar" thought flashed again in my mind. "Robert, what in the world are you doing here?"

"Now what do we do?" Patty asked.

I thought a minute for a logical answer. "Why not visit the folks in Phoenix, Patty?"

Why didn't we just head home to Michigan if I had to wait three to six months for a visa? Even a missionary struggles with pride and a masculine ego, you know. Do you remember that I told the church board we were on our way and wouldn't be back? I little relished the thought of going back and saying, "Well, hello there, folks!"

Some witty sage once commented that the true test of humility is whether you can say grace before eating crow. Not being in a crow-eating mood, we visited the folks and enjoyed them. But living out of a suitcase in someone else's home wears on your joy after a time. I began to get "antsy." People often use the word "antsy" to describe me, or they did back in those days.

After the twelfth day at my folks, the name "antsy" fit me. When I know what God wants me to do, I want to get on with it. Waiting on God is harder for most of us than working for Him, but only one who learns to wait is ready for God to work through him--a lesson I'm still learning, in case you wondered!

"Patty," I said to my wife, "I think I'll call that embassy."

Patty tried to reason with me. "Bob, they said to call in three to six months. It hasn't even been three to six weeks!"

"I know what the lady said, but I'm calling that embassy tomorrow."

You might know it--when I called the same lady with the distinctive accent answered. "Just a moment," she replied to my slightly sheepish question. I heard papers rustling on her desk.

"I cannot believe my eyes!" she exclaimed. "I have on my desk a one-year visa for you and your family. Come pick it up whenever you are ready."

Joy just about set our hearts to dancing! It was our own private miracle, a little thing to our great God, but a great thing to little us! God gave us a visa, without the backing of a major mission board, without the influence of anyone in the country who knew us. Not only that, but the permission took only thirteen days to travel from Venezuela to the United States! To my knowledge, things like that don't happen. Even the officials of Venezuela who questioned us in after-years couldn't believe it.

That visa was my green "Go!" flag. When you set strawberry shortcake, piled high with whipped cream in front of a hungry man, you don't expect him just to talk about it and admire it, do you? Straightway I offered our car for sale. The duty to get a car into Venezuela is tremendous, and besides, we needed the car money to pay for the plane tickets. The car sold in two days.

We toted our few belongings along with us on a Greyhound bus to Houston where we joyfully claimed our visas. The stamp marked our passports September 3, 1974, and we headed for Miami, once again on a bus. Did any bus ever poke along slower than that one? With two small, weary ones next to us, the ride seemed endless. With tired bodies and expectant hearts we finally checked into a motel in Miami.

We bought tickets to the city of Ciudad Bolivar, henceforth known to you as C.B. C.B.

became our jumping-off point, because it is the last civilized city in Venezuela before the jungle claims back its own land.

We flew out of Miami the next day. We heard the engines roar to vibrant life, and like every missionary who leaves the United States, we thought of precious family and friends and wondered, will we ever return? It's a strange, poignant feeling to leave the shores of this great free land and to make another land "home."

Two hours and forty minutes later brought us to another world, Maiquetia, Venezuela. The date on our calendars read September 6, 1974. We had a short wait before we took the connecting flight to C.B.

At C.B. they unloaded the luggage onto a little push cart, and we watched with amusement as people pushed and shoved, fighting for their baggage right there outside, not far from the plane. We then stood and watched the plane disappear above us, heading back to Maiquetia.

Suddenly everything felt too lonely, too quiet. Again came the thought, "Robert, what in the world are you doing here?" A sudden companion thought, even more fearful, chimed in, "Robert, where in the world are you?"

We hadn't even taken the time to study maps! How patient our Lord is with His slow learners. We didn't know everything, but we did know that God can call a man, and then use that man as His channel to call a nation. By God's grace and power, I meant to be that man.

Patty and I may not have known our exact position on a map, but we knew we were exactly where God wanted us, and that is the one exactness that matters. Most comfortable Christians know exactly where they are, but they lack total assurance that they are where God wants them to be. Oh, the peace and sheer joy that comes from being where God wants and doing what He wants! I believe that men and women can endure anything in the center of God's will. When one is outside of God's will, or doubts that will, every minor frustration can be enough to cause a big headache.

The plane was gone. We were there. A voice in Spanish interrupted our thoughts. "Hi! Need a taxi?"

"We sure do!"

"What motel do you want to go to?"

"Well, now," I responded agreeable, "you tell us. We have very little money, and we know nothing about your town."

He nodded and grinned. "I know just the place for you."

"The place" didn't look like much from the outside. Come to think of it, it didn't look like much from the inside either! The room was so tiny that the four of us had to cram to fit, but it had a battered, dented, working air conditioner! Ahhh! C.B. is the second hottest town in Venezuela.

We looked at each other and matched grins. There we were, real, live missionaries, our first night in Venezuela. We thanked God for bringing us to His land.

Did your body ever feel so tired that you thought it must belong to someone else? We dragged those complaining legs out for a quick supper, hurried back, and slept deeply.

It didn't take long for culture shock to hit. That term may be an over worked cliché, but it is an apt one. When we shopped the next day we found prices a bit different than in the States. Our kids love peanut butter, but they were soon to learn to un-love it at \$3.22 for a medium sized jar! A small can of vegetables cost 75 cents. Remember, this was down many steps on the inflation ladder--way back in 1974. When we bought a very used Fiat we paid \$2,150. A new Ford LTD cost \$13,800. Needless to say, we didn't buy many (make that any) Ford LTD's! Gas was cheap though, costing only 28 cents a gallon.

September and October are extremely hot months in C.B. Daytime temperatures average 95 with 80% humidity. Patty likes hot weather, and it's a good thing, because the day after we arrived we began house hunting in that awful, sizzling heat. The rains were about ready to end, and the dry season was almost on us. The rain seemed to make the heat worse. I felt like I had been in a hot, steamy shower with all my clothes on.

We hoped to find a cheap house fast, set up base, establish a routine, and get on with it. We walked all over town and found nothing. Renting a place in South America isn't like renting a house in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Few people hang out For Rent signs. Fewer list a place to rent in a paper. You have to know someone who knows someone who has heard of someone whose neighbor's mother might have a place to rent. As you can guess, house hunting continued for many days.

In the midst of house hunting Patty got sick, a rare thing for her. Usually I hold the dubious honor of being sick enough for the whole family. My Patty doesn't like to do anything halfway, so when she gets sick she does it up good. Her fever climbed almost immediately to 103. I stayed up all night, wiping her forehead, praying with her. All day I cared for the kids.

Missionaries don't come equipped with steel emotions. I wondered all the same things you might wonder. I had never seen my wife so sick. "What if Patty dies out here?" I asked myself. "Have I been a fool to bring my family to this place?"

As I prayed God strengthened me with His own calm thoughts. Someone has said, "We kneel, how weak; we rise, how full of power." Patty's illness was the first crisis that drove me to cling to the verse God had given us, but it wasn't the last.

Would you like to help missionaries? "Pray for us" is no pat slogan; it is our life's blood and power. You may not be able to bodily join us as a co-worker, but you can, in spirit, be our fellow-helpers of the truth. "Fear not at all," Amy Carmichael wrote. "Where your hands cannot reach and your love cannot help, His hands can reach and His love can help" (Carmichael, Mimosa, Christian Literature Crusade, p. IV). That thought argues a wonderfully strong reason for fervent prayer. Readers, pray for us!

The next morning Patty looked better, even to my tired eyes. In a few days she was fine.

It was just some form of jungle fever. Satan did have his moments of grim satisfaction and unholy glee there in Venezuela, but we remember that he is only a bitter, defeated foe.

We resumed house hunting when Patty recovered. In our search we stumbled into a missionary compound. There we met John Perkins, an outgoing man who shines with love for the Lord.

John demanded, "Who are you, and how did you get in here?"

It was a rather strange welcome, I thought, but I answered his questions. "My name is Bob Nosker. I came in on a plane awhile ago."

"What do you mean you came in on a plane?" John demanded. "I mean, how did you get into the country?"

I shared with John the miracle speed with which we obtained our visas.

"Hey, that story sounds all but impossible," John objected. "This country has been closed to new missionaries for seven months. Our board has missionaries ready and waiting in the States, but they can't get into the country."

We wondered then if it was our lack of a big board's backing that got us into Venezuela. We do know that God alone opened the door. We fundamentalists need to learn not to try to put God into a box and expect Him to always act in certain ways. We should look for His actual intervention in our affairs. God is real, do we really believe that? Too often if we fail to see HOW God can do something, we refuse to believe that He CAN do it. God can open any door, and He can do it without any man's help. I challenge you to launch out and believe God. Coleridge said, "You do not believe. You only believe that you believe" (Caryle, Heroes and Hero Worship, Macmillian, p. 164).

John and his family, and the Eddings, another missionary family, took us to their hearts. The Eddings shared with us many invaluable hints and tips about the country and its people. John drove us in his car to look for an apartment. After nine costly days in a hotel we moved to La Villa Evangelica, Spanish for "a gospel mission compound." A couple of nights we hung out in hammocks with the Indians. Another few nights we spent in a house, and we waited for a home to open for us.

## CHAPTER TEN

### LA PARAGUA

"How much feverish unrest we would be spared if only we would learn ... to repose our confidence in God rather than in circumstances and quietly await His time" (Morgan, An Exposition of the Whole Bible, Fleming H. Revell, p. 31).

In late September of 1974 we made the small Venezuelan village of La Paragua our home. La Paragua edges up to the Paragua River and is the last stop before the jungle; even a car can navigate no further. Just one-half hour to four or five hours away were the

prizes we earnestly coveted--the Pemon Indians.

It was easy enough to hitch a ride in a dugout canoe with one of the German or American miners and make contact with Indians. Considerable mining has gone on in that area ever since men discovered diamonds there in the 1950's. A few years later we were to be accused of being diamond miners!

Do you love adventure? If so, envy me those canoe trips! River travel grows dangerous that time of year because the water level drops with the start of the dry season, resulting in many more rapids to navigate.

On our trips we canoed up-river and stopped at a settlement--usually no more than a house or two. There I met Indians, listened to them talk and learned a few more words each trip. It wasn't exactly conventional class room language study, but it worked. During the six weeks we lived in La Paragua I made many such trips, leaving Patty and the children alone for three to five days each time.

When I left in a canoe Patty had to handle the wondering part of our separation. She never knew where I was or when (or if) I would return. I confronted a different challenge. I slept where I knew no one, well aware of the danger of being robbed at night. Mining areas, where we always camped, are notorious for crudeness. Drunkenness and sudden killings are common.

Before one canoe trip I told Patty to look for my return on Thursday. Patty and the children walked down to the river Thursday morning to watch for me. News drifts along the river almost faster than the rapids run. As Patty waited for me a man approached her. "Did you hear about the foreigner who drowned upriver when his boat tipped over in the rapids?" the man asked. Patty asked the nationality of the foreigner who had drowned, but no one seemed to know.

To add to Patty's anxiety I didn't come home. I was stranded upriver for two days, because all the canoes were down-river looking for the dead man's body. Finally, one-half hour before sunset on Friday, I was able to get a ride in a canoe. Back home, Patty carried on calmly, never letting the children sense her concern for me. She just fervently prayed for my protection and for hers. A successful jungle missionary learns early that "prayer is the secret of continuance" (Meyer, Great Verses through the Bible, Zondervan, p. 334).

It's tricky enough to navigate the river in daylight, and the sun was sinking quickly. (The man who drowned attempted to canoe at night and apparently hit a rock in some rapids. He shot into the water at high speed and gashed his head apart on a rock.) I probably wouldn't have taken that evening canoe ride if I had not already been late in getting home. An Indian sat tall in the prow, guiding the man who drove the boat. I sat quietly in the middle.

The Indian pointed silently to a floating object about 100 yards away. As we drew closer we saw it was the body of the foreigner who drowned. We pulled the body into the canoe with us. The corpse reeked with death's clinging smell, so the Indian and I both sat ahead of it. The other poor man who guided the boat had to sit behind the body. He wrapped a rag around his mouth, and we proceeded down river on our now grim journey.

What a study in contrasts were the faces of Patty and the wife of the dead man when our boat arrived safely at home. I'll never forget the sorrow, the absolute despair on the wife's features when she claimed her husband's body. They had been married only a few months.

Not long after the canoe incident I met a Maquiritari Indian, called a "Mike" Indian by the Americans. I told the Indian that I wanted to go further upriver to see the villages and meet the people. "Oh, I am the one who can take you on a trip like that," he assured me. "I know the river well." The Indian told me what supplies to buy and to order, what type of boat and motor I needed, and he made a date to come back for me on October 30th.

Supply gathering didn't take long; I was so excited that I had everything ready in about two days. I often saw the Maquiritari Indian around town. I kept making short two and three day excursions upriver while I waited for October 30th. I was always trying to add to my limited supply of information like a good linguist does. I viewed each word or phrase learned as a careful treasure to be hoarded. Word gathering helped the waiting time pass a little faster.

On one canoe excursion I met a miner from Guyana, Oswaldo Williams. Oswaldo traveled the river often. Little did I guess when I met Oswaldo what an important part he was to play in my life and in the work among the Pemon Indians. It's so fascinating to watch the powerful hand of God at work in all our "chance" meetings--the God of the haphazard, as Oswald Chambers liked to say.

Oswaldo was an Arowak Indian. Because English is the national language in Guyana, Oswaldo had left his tribe to go out and learn the English language. He became a miner and drifted to Venezuela. Oswaldo was one of the class of miners who always hopes to make big bucks but never does. I liked Oswaldo, and we became good friends. Miners are often inebriated, and when Oswaldo was--and he was often--I never knew whether or not to believe him.

Oswaldo and I made several trips upriver together. On one trip he said, "Robert, I am going to make a trip way east on the Caroni River." The Caroni is the eastern-most river that flows north-south in Venezuela, and is the second largest river in the country. It flows into the Orinoco River, the eighth largest river in the world. Oswaldo hoped to cash in on the news of diamonds being found east on the Caroni.

To reach his destination Oswaldo planned to cross over all the little streams from the Paragua to the Caroni River, an extremely difficult undertaking. To do this one must be out on the river weeks at a time, not seeing anyone but Indians, perhaps seeing no one at all. It's desolate, dangerous land.

Oswaldo promised me, "Robert, I will make you a map on my trip. Then you will know for yourself all the villages where the Pemon live."

"Sounds good, Oswaldo," I told him, but I dismissed his promise from my mind before hope had a chance to latch onto it. Miners usually mean well, but as a rule, reliability isn't one of their strong points. They get too busy, or they drink too much to remember a promise very long.

I witnessed often to Oswaldo about the saving power of Christ. Oswaldo was a hell-bound sinner, and he knew it. He needed to accept Christ's death as payment for his own sin, and he knew it. Oswaldo always said, "Yeah, I know I need to accept Christ, Robert. Not just yet though, O.K.? I just gotta make it big first. Then I will do it."

Oswaldo left on his treacherous journey without asking the Lord to forgive his sin and make him ready for heaven. I hated to see my friend go, but I felt excited about my upcoming October trip into the interior.

As the days dragged on I often eyed the calendar. Finally October 30th arrived--the day for my big trip with the Mike Indian. I sat waiting with my two drums of gasoline, food, and many supplies--all purchased at no little expense. I kept waiting.

The Mike Indian never showed, and I have never seen him again. Is he dead or alive? I felt the sting of disappointment sharply, and it made me do some serious thinking.

I had been in Venezuela since early September; it was now early November. I knew very little language; we weren't settled in a village; I had done little or nothing for the cause of Christ as most people define it. (Though in reality any fruit is just His grown through us.) Satan whispered slyly, "What will the people back home think of you? You've been here all this time." Now I realize that if a missionary can settle in and begin work in six months he does very well, but I didn't know that then.

Where does a man at the jungle's edge turn when he's discouraged? He goes to the Lord, and if he is as blessed as I am, he shares with his wife. "What will we do, Honey?" I asked Patty. "We have no village, no work, no real ministry. Surely our Lord didn't bring us here just to leave us." We needed our Isaiah verse then, and we needed the refreshing reminder that the work isn't ours, but His, and that He takes the essential responsibility for its results.

A day or two later I answered a knock on my door and saw a man on a bike. In a small Venezuelan town that sight means mail, usually a telegram. The man held tightly to the telegram. He asked 10 Bolivares for it (\$2.50)--a lot of money in 1974 for two missionaries who had just spent a lot on supplies for an aborted journey.

The man refused to let us see who the telegram was from, so I wasn't sure if it was worth paying for. What if it was just a hoax, a scrap of paper? As far as I knew no one in the world knew exactly where we were or how to reach us. Even the church board didn't know how to contact us at that point, because we had no mailing address at the edge of the jungle.

Curiosity won. I paid the man.

Inside of the envelope was a wrinkled, old piece of paper, scribbled on both sides. It looked like a map. It was from Oswaldo!

How in the world did Oswaldo get that to me? There were no telegraph stations anywhere in Venezuela out of La Paragua. How did the map travel one hundred miles down the Caroni River to a place where it could be sent like a telegram? Through how many hands had the wrinkled paper passed? Here was another of God's "chance"

miracles. Truly God does use all the hosts of heaven and earth to accomplish His will.

Oswaldo had scribbled a note. "Here is the map I promised you, Robert. I am very tired. Been on the river many weeks. Been through many Pemon villages. Here they are, outlined for you on the map. You can see that I have circled the name of each Pemon village, and the name of the head man in each village." What a treasure I held in my hands--surely the only one like it anywhere!

Oswaldo's note continued, "I was in a village the other night on the Caroni River, way south-east of where you are, Robert. I found a new Pemon village. It is less than one year old, and the Pemon call it 'San Miguel.' I stayed there for a few days. Strange things are going on there, Robert, funny religious activities. I have never seen anything like it. The people spend most of the day singing, most of the night dancing and chanting. They drink, too, Robert, and people come out of the church and are sick to their stomachs from all the bouncing and dancing."

"It is an awful place," Oswaldo continued. "I think it is the place you should go, Robert," he concluded.

An awful place? The place we should go? Didn't the Lord assure us that the work was His and He would lead us step by step? Why did He use an unsaved, drinking miner to lead us? Who can understand the ways of the Lord? His paths are in the sea, and indiscernible to the wisest of men.

## **CHAPTER ELEVEN**

### **CONSIDERING SAN MIGUEL**

"What God has designed men for He will call them to" (Henry, The Matthew Henry Commentary, Zondervan, p. 936).

"Patty," I said, putting Oswaldo's letter aside, "I think I should go investigate this San Miguel place."

Patty drove me the three hours back to C.B. where I caught a plane to take me into the jungle. Patty then drove back to La Paragua to await my return. I jostled around in that old DC-3 mail plane that hopped like a toad through the little mining towns in the jungle. I got off the plane at Uriman, a town occupied by Indians and miners. I could speak Spanish to the Venezuelan miners there.

In Uriman I found a man with a boat and paid him to take me to San Miguel, about a two or three hour trip along a river route, made dangerous by several lethal rapids. I gazed at the white water, and in my mind I saw the gashed head of the man who had perished in similar waters. As I sat gingerly in that small canoe, I thought once again, "Robert, what in the world are you doing here?"

Here's a good recipe for the shakes: take a river boiling with rapids; add a canoe that hangs low in the water, and throw in a driver anything but sane--a half Indian doing some serious drinking. I had the shakes all right. What a mess! Yet I knew that I was

safer on the river and in God's hand than anywhere else out of His hand!

It was November 7th, 3 P.M., when the drunken Indian stopped the canoe and pointed at an open path on the river bank. "Follow that path," he said. "It will take you to the village you look for."

I stood on the bank and watched the canoe glide away. I gathered my courage around myself like a small boy's security blanket and trudged up the hill, perhaps a 500 meter walk up a gentle slope. Then I saw San Miguel, a quiet little village of twenty-five or thirty small huts clustered into a unit against the jungle.

I saw no men, and the few women and children who saw me just as I saw them scattered in every direction. They had seen only a few whites--Venezuelans and Brazilians--and I looked whiter and stranger than any man they had ever seen. Indians have often been abused by miners, and though I wasn't a miner, they didn't know it. To them I looked like a strange color of trouble. No wonder they scattered.

I later learned that all the men of San Miguel were out hunting, fishing, gathering palm leaves for their houses, or collecting fire wood. I sat on a log in the empty looking village and waited. Women and children peeked at me around corners, and as their fear subsided, they began kind of laughing at me. I pulled out a book and read. I guessed that the men would soon return, and just about 6 P.M., an hour before dark, the men began to make their way up the path.

The first group of men spotted me immediately, and their leader came at me like an angry bee. He was very excited, obviously upset and angry. I didn't expect to understand him, but to my surprise, he spoke immaculate Spanish. "What are you doing here in my village?" he demanded roughly.

"Strange," I thought to myself, "that he asks me the very same question I've been asking myself!"

"I am Bob Nosker," I said to him, "and I'm an evangelical missionary." The word "evangelical" sometimes has some bad off-tones or connotations in the States, but in South America at that time it simply meant, "Gospel-preaching."

"God sent me to your village," I continued as bravely as possible, which wasn't all that bravely! "God wants me to learn your language and write the New Testament in the words of your people. I want to live here with your people and help in any way I can."

He looked shocked. "Catholic missionaries came to my country 50 years ago," he responded thoughtfully. "They are not right here in my village, but we have seen them carry a book they call the Bible. They have never written their book in the language of my people so we could read it ourselves. Why is this?"

I wasn't about to give a religious dissertation. I just explained what God had sent me to give them the New Testament, and I meant to do just that. A deep look of longing erased the sternness from his face. "You know," he said, more quietly than before, "it is true that we Indians are very ignorant about the things of God, but this is not our fault. No one ever came to tell us who God is or what He wants of us."

I will never forget those words, "Who God is and what He wants of us." They are imprinted on my heart. "That is what I will do," I promised the Pemon Indian. "I will teach you who God is and what He wants. You will not need to be ignorant about Him anymore."

Abruptly the gentleness left his voice. "We will see about that tomorrow," he said gruffly. "You hang your hammock over there." He stalked away.

Strange man, this Indian leader I was later to know as Pedro, the village captain. He was about thirty-two years old when I met him. When Pedro was six years old, his father sent him away from the tribe to be city-educated. A doctor had offered to raise Pedro, and Pedro lived with him until about the age of sixteen. Pedro later told me, "I learned Spanish so well that I completely forgot my Indian language."

When the doctor moved to Caracas, the capitol of Venezuela, he didn't want to take Pedro along. Pedro returned to his tribe and had to learn all over again how to be an Indian.

I had much to think about as I lay in my hammock that first night. All the Pemon sleep in hammocks, as do missionaries who live in low-land jungles--that is, they do until they get settled!

I spent the next four days in the village. Each morning the men greeted me briefly, and then they were gone. I spent my days alone. The word spread among the Pemon, "He is not a miner, and though he is not to be trusted, he will not likely hurt anyone."

I sat on my log that first morning, and a little girl of about twelve inched her way gingerly to where I sat. She put down a plate as quickly as she could and ran off like a frightened doe. The plate held some kind of a sweet potato, steaming hot. Boy, was that good! Since I left Patty I had been eating from cans--mostly crackers and tuna fish. With a bit of salt and pepper a steaming hot Pemon sweet potato tastes as good as a filet mignon--well, almost as good. It became my favorite Venezuelan vegetable. When I finished cleaning up my plate I put a few crackers and a piece of candy on it. I sat it down near my log.

The same doe-like girl, looking nonchalant, edged slowly closer, trying to reach my plate. She grabbed it, and off she ran. The little girl and I continued our daily exchange until I left the village.

I had fish hooks and machetes with me. These I gave to the leader, Pedro, and asked him to give them to his people. He accepted my gifts, but my talking he ignored. They don't call me "antsy" for nothing. On the fifth day I said, "Look, I have a wife and children. I know you distrust strangers, and I know why. Why not let me bring my family here to your village? You can see then that I have a wife and that I will not steal your wives. You will see that I have my own children and do not wish to rob you of your children. I know too that you have diamonds and gold in your river, but I am not interested in that. I do not care if you never even show me any diamonds."

I did see some diamonds, but only a few, while we lived in San Miguel. We kept

scrupulously away from diamonds because Indians always suspect foreigners. In years to come "diamond mining" was one accusation that the Roman Catholic church would fling at us to force us to leave San Miguel.

"After you see my family," I told Pedro, "you may decide if we may live among you."

Pedro liked that idea. It was now about the 24th of November. "You come back here in two weeks," Pedro told me. I took careful note of the date and determined to return in exactly two weeks, the Lord willing, to show that a Christian is a man of his word.

Would you like to take an imaginary trip to San Miguel with me, the way we did it in those early days, so you can view the place I planned to bring my family when Pedro's two weeks were up? Meet me in Miami, and we will fly first to Caracas, then on to C.B. by jet. That was easy enough so far, wasn't it? It wasn't even a turbulent flight this time.

Now we board an old DC-3 twin engine prop and fly two-hundred miles to Uriman. This takes us one-and-one-half-hours, and we fly over thick jungle and rugged terrain. Are you praying, dear reader, for those old DC-3 engines as we navigate these mountain valleys with their sheer cliffs looming close on both sides of us? At last we bounce to a rough landing on Uriman's dirt air strip.

We will travel the next part of our journey Caroni River style. Step into our "yacht" please--a dug-out canoe (a curiara) with a motor. If the motor runs well we can hope to reach San Miguel in three hours or so. To do this we must navigate two treacherous rapids where even experienced river travelers have lost their lives.

When we reach the village, you will no doubt notice that the Pemon are friendly, though a bit reserved. The standard of living in San Miguel may take you some time to get used to. A Pemon Indian lives in a mud walled home with a leaf roof. They own few belongings--so few possessions give them trouble or demand their care. They hunt and fish for meat, have small gardens, and eat Cassava bread made from yucca root.

Cashiri is the common drink of the Pemon. No doubt you want to know its contents before you sip it? Cashiri is made by grating the bitter yucca root. The Indians mix it with grated sweet potato and then boil it many hours. After some days it ferments and becomes the "home brew" of the Pemon. Often it is the only thing the Pemon have to eat. We drink it with the people before it ferments. Before fermentation it can still be considered food; after it ferments it brews much trouble among the Pemon and breeds much sin. Because it is often their only food we don't deny it to the people, but we do teach strongly that drunkenness is not to be a part of a disciple's life.

When we first lived with the Pemon they were a very religious people. They used candles, an altar and many statues and pictures in their worship. Both Saturday and Sunday were "holy days" (the Seventh Day Adventist and Catholic influence). They held long services that included singing, praying and dancing. Sometimes they chanted non-stop for two or three hours, stomping their feet and clapping their hands the whole time. They spent six or seven hours in church every Saturday and Sunday, and one or two hours there each week day.

Do you wonder what I offered Patty for our first home among the Pemon? Our home was

made with mud walls and a leaf roof, just like the Indians'. Our furniture was made from jungle materials. In the dry season we carried water 500 yards from the river, where we also did our laundry. Unlike the Pemon, we enjoyed a gas stove and refrigerator, and kerosene lamps.

I believe I hear a few questions on this imaginary jungle tour we are taking? Snakes? You better believe it! Insects? Plenty of them. Hot? Very! Wild animals? Oh, we have a few. What is jungle life without them? Mail? Not unless we go out for it, the same way we came in--and you haven't forgotten that trip already, have you? Hamburgers and fries? Ah, now we are really dreaming!

Did I seriously worry about Patty objecting to the primitive conditions and hard work of village life? It wasn't much to offer the wife I so dearly love: hard work, life in a mud hut, sickness, loneliness--and the sweet, wonderful will of God. That "wonderful will" was the clincher. I could offer to my Patty nothing better, and she agrees.

Do you know what love is? "Love is seeking the highest good in the one loved, and the highest good is the glory or manifestation of God" (Ryrie, First and Second Thessalonians, Moody, p. 58).

This I could offer Patty: a rare opportunity to be used of God for His own glory. This I offered, and this she joyfully accepted.

## **CHAPTER TWELVE**

### **HIS TOOL IN SAN MIGUEL**

#### **CULMINATION AND COMMENCEMENT**

"The idea is not that we do work for God, but that we are so loyal to Him that He can do His work through us--'I reckon on you for extreme service, with no complaining on your part and no explanation on Mine.' God wants to use us as He used His own Son" (Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest, Dodd, Mead and Co., p. 353).

On the exact day chosen by Pedro for our return, my family and I arrived back in San Miguel. That may not astonish you, but if in South America you can do what you plan to do, you accomplish a major miracle! I felt it was vital to return when I said I would to show the Indians that I kept my word.

From the first we made it our policy never to promise anything we couldn't fulfill and to never break a promise, regardless of the sacrifice required to keep it (cf. Ps. 15:4). A missionary must never forget that his life is his best sermon--and the one he preaches most often!

Robert T. Ketcham wrote, "We pray for God's blessing on what we do. We must learn that God has not promised power on what we do. He has promised power on us. If this is our blessed experience then what we do will take care of itself" (Ketcham, God's Provision for Normal Christian Living, Moody, p. 44).

We found the Indians waiting down river for us on the day we arrived, and we came up to San Miguel in their canoe, a bigger and safer one than the canoe I first took to San Miguel. Still, the trip was an exciting one!

We felt nervous when we walked into the village. We were goods under inspection, and we knew it. The Pemon gave us a tolerable welcome. They waved no banners, marched in no parades, but their greeting was much friendlier than it had been on my first meeting with them!

The Indians pointed out a hut and said, "This is the house you will stay in. It is a big one. You hang your hammocks there, and we will talk during the days you spend here with us."

Obediently we hung our hammocks. We then gathered some rocks to form a fire pit. It was time to cook our supper. It had been raining, and all the wood was wet, but, like a good boy scout, I had kerosene along to start the fire. I stacked my wood carefully and doused it good with kerosene. The Indians stood silently, ten to twenty feet away, intently observing my every move. Such close observation quickly stretches the nerves, especially when you aren't used to it. We weren't used to it!

I kept trying to start my fire, each attempt becoming a little more desperate than the one before. The Indians' sober silence began breaking up into small chuckles that grew louder when they saw my increasing frustration.

Finally one of the Pemon stepped from the group. Gently, as you would handle a small child with impaired intelligence, he took the bottle of kerosene from my hands and set it on the ground. Next, he drew a stick from the fire wood and shaved it carefully into tiny, curling pieces. He added some dry grass and the shavings to the wood fire, lit a match, and presto--a lovely cooking fire. He stepped back silently, grinning at me as though to say, "There, you incompetent American, is your fire. Remember, it's our world out here!"

Like I told you, I arrived in San Miguel on the exact day I had promised, because I am a firm believer in the importance of a good first impression....

We cooked our food, settled into our hammocks, and spent a quiet but restless night, listening to the strangely beautiful music of jungle sounds.

Jungle days began at six A.M. for us, at 4 A.M. for most Indians. The next day was but two hours old when two distraught parents brought us their crying, kicking, ten-month-old baby. Fluid ooze from sacks on her leg where the skin was peeled back. She was the daughter of Ramon, who was the religious leader of the Pemon people in San Miguel. The infant had fallen into the fire and badly burned her upper right leg. Her parents were desperate for help. Ramon thrust his badly burned baby at us. The poor thing kicked and screamed even louder, terrified to be in a white man's arms.

Patty and I had no medical training. We quickly found our medical book (compiled by a mission board). We turned to the burn section in the book and read that there are two ways of treating burns: you may cover a burn or you may leave it uncovered. A covered burn may become a breeding place for germs. We decided to leave it uncovered and watch it as though our lives depended on it, well aware that if the baby died, the Indians

would send us packing.

We had bags of black beans in our supplies, and we fed them to the baby three or four times a day to pump protein into her. Together Patty and I watched, prayed, cut off dead skin, and gave the baby antibiotics. At last the burn healed without any infection. That was our first plus mark in the eyes of the Pemon, and we knew our Lord had arranged it so.

The burn incident quickly faded, but another demanded just as much prayer. On our third day in the village an Indian woman approached us with a critically ill three month old baby in her arms. We thought the baby had pneumonia, or a heavy bronchial infection. The woman poured out a torrent of Indian words and gently placed her infant in our arms.

We couldn't understand the woman. The two men in the village who spoke Spanish (which we could understand) were gone until evening. The mother's plea was unmistakable in any language. She needed help! We had no time to wait and see if the men wanted us to treat the baby; by evening the infant might be dead.

How perplexed we felt. If we treated the baby without the men's permission and it died, it could only mean trouble. If we refused help and the baby died, that too meant trouble, and how could we just watch a baby die? We had three or four vials of powdered penicillin left from our Kenny's illness. We mixed the medicine with sterilized water and checked our medical book to see how much to give an infant of the Indian baby's weight. In twenty-four hours the baby breathed easier. In two more days the baby seemed well. Our Lord used this second crisis in the village to tie our hearts and the hearts of the Pemon yet closer.

After five days in the village we said to the Indians, "You have seen and examined us. We will try to never make trouble in your village. We will always remember that this is your village; we are just visitors. Anytime you decide you no longer want us, we will leave. Now you must decide. May we live here among you?"

The Indians held a long and formal meeting and decided to let us live in San Miguel. Surely our excitement showed in our smiles! To us this was the final sign that we were in the place of God's choosing. It was the culmination of many years of hopes, thoughts, preparation. It was also a commencement.

"Where do you wish to live?" the Pemon asked us.

We showed them a spot that we liked at the edge of the village and asked them to clear the land. We asked, "How long will it take to build?" They replied that it would take about 30 days. We contracted with the Pemon for the work, so many bolts of cloth, so many machetes, axes, and so forth, in return for their labor. Then we went out to gather supplies for jungle life.

The Indians took us down river to catch a little mail plane that was in the area. "Come back in thirty days," the men told us as we left. "Your house will be ready for you."

Patty and I had to collect supplies and prepare for a jungle move. We owned nothing in

those days. We went to Venezuela with our clothes, a little silverware, some tupperware--little else. We weren't at all stocked for jungle life. Where do you begin such a big undertaking as this? We began it on our knees in prayer, seeking God's wisdom.

Mr. Seely, a veteran jungle missionary, was God's answer to our prayers. Mr. Seely wanted to share with us. He gave us half of our provisions and sold us the other half at a very low cost.

When we finally had everything prepared we went to C.B. to begin our move to the jungle. We took our children with us into the jungle that first year. Kenny was a three-year-old pre-schooler, and we decided to teach six-year-old Kelly ourselves. Patty and the children stayed in C.B. to wait for our friend Roger Vandenberg. (Perhaps you remember that I had worked with him in his little red barn, and he had prayed often with me about my hope of working with a Bibleless tribe.) Roger was flying in to help us settle in the jungle. I flew into the jungle to get things set up. The plane landed in the mining town of Uriman, and then I contracted a boat to take me up-river.

The villagers acted glad to see me. Pedro gave the welcoming speech in his lovely Spanish, and it included these words, "Francisco and his wife are going to move out of their house (their "house" was only a roof) and live with relatives so you can use their home, because your house is not yet finished."

Yes, I felt disappointed, but this was an object lesson often to be repeated, that to Indians time is nothing. Why hadn't they finished the house they had agreed to complete? Perhaps they doubted my return; perhaps they simply had better things to do; who knows? They had cleared the lot, and I was glad to see at least that much work done. They had also started work on our house.

Pedro said, "Go sit in your house, Robert. We want to talk with you."

Obediently I went and sat in my borrowed "house"--borrowed roof that is. In time all the men came out of their homes, led by Pedro, village captain, and Ramon, village religious leader. Silently the men filed into my borrowed "house." I sat on the most elegant piece of furniture available, a log. The Indians dropped gracefully to the ground and sat semi-circle around me. For a time they just sat quietly.

Finally Ramon stood and gave a long speech in Pemon. I was utterly lost because he used no Spanish. At one point in his thirty minute monologue he pointed at me. Everyone gazed wide-eyed at me. When Ramon finished, he motioned to Pedro to stand and tell me what had been said.

Pedro unfolded a story that yet remains a mystery to me. I won't understand it until I am at last with our Lord. A year and two months earlier, said Pedro, there had been no San Miguel. Only a single house stood in that location. People gathered from up and down river near that lone house to hold religious feasts and meetings. Drinking and dancing continued all night long, drunkenness in the name of religion, an old practice among the Pemon. They believed that certain dances earned them favor with the gods.

At one such meeting, a year and two months earlier, Ramon had fallen into a trance and slept for two days. During this time he had the dream I told you of earlier. Many have

asked me, "Do you think the dream came from God? Did it come from Satan only to be turned and used by God?" I cannot answer.

Do you recall that the voice Ramon heard in his dream told him to gather his people into a village and to attempt to reform them? As I sat on a log in my borrowed "house" Ramon said, "The voice told me that a man from North America would come with a book in his hand. The voice said, 'When that man comes, believe that man, and believe his book.'" It was at that point in his story that Ramon had pointed at me. He then said, "This is the man who was promised us, and the book must be the Bible that he wants to write in our own language." That sentence caused the wide-eyed stares from the men.

To what lengths will our Lord go to call a nation to Himself? God looks for people to go to the nations at His command, and He pledges that He alone will engineer the circumstances. He will move mountains to get us to a people who want to know Him. Step by incredible step, often in ways that seemed at the time just haphazard chance, God led us to a people whose existence we had never heard of just a few years earlier.

I fell asleep in my hammock that night pondering Ramon's amazing story, and thanking my Lord for His wise and wonderful ways with men and with nations.

Several days later Patty, the children, and my friend, Roger, arrived. We took two or three canoes and went down river to fetch them. It was a rainy day. Gloomy clouds hung low in the sky. We listened to the whine of the engine as the plane circled Uriman, but the cloud barrier prohibited a landing. We heard the plane's roar fade into the distance. My heart sank.

"It's leaving," I thought, "and my wife, children, my friend are all on that plane. What if it crashes?" Imagination vividly recalled the sheer mountain cliffs through which the plane had to navigate in such ominous weather. I shuddered. We sat and we waited, one-and-one-half long hours. We heard it--the plane was returning! Suddenly the scowling clouds split as if by command (surely by command!), and the plane glided through for a safe landing. Joy!

We unloaded what seemed a ton of baggage and spent the next few hours loading canoes. We then took the long canoe ride back up river. Life began in earnest for us in San Miguel. Our geographical home took no time at all to become our heart's home as well.

Roger stayed with us for six weeks. We gathered logs and sticks, and Roger carved them into north-woods style furniture for us. We used that furniture for many years in our jungle home, until termites took one bite too many from it!

The people really enjoyed Roger--once their suspicions eased. At first they wondered about him. They were accustomed to bigamy, but it was always the man who had more than one wife, never the other way around. We hastened to explain!

Once the Pemon accepted Roger as trustworthy they became fascinated with his furniture building. The women watched enviously and then chided their men, "Why cannot you men who live in the jungle make us chairs and tables like this man makes? He is not even a jungle man!"

The men retorted with such remarks as, "Why cannot you women make food and bread like the white woman makes? She is not even a jungle woman!"

The men often went out to cut wood for our house and carried it back on their strong shoulders. While they were cutting our wood an Indian carried his machete carelessly, slipped, and almost severed his right index finger. The knife pushed clear to the bone, peeled back flesh and veins, and left the finger hanging. Blood shot out everywhere. He ran at once to Roger and me.

We applied pressure to stop the bleeding. Old Roger--after the major part of the work on the finger was done--got kind of white and peaked. "I think I better go and sit down somewhere," he said weakly. We put a "butterfly" on the finger and nursed it along for three weeks or so. When Camilo surveyed his healed finger he pledged himself our forever friend.

During Roger's six week stay we framed in our house and thatched the leaves for the roof. The natives taught us how to do this. Roger and I made furniture, cleaned stumps out of the yard, and made an outhouse thirty yards behind the house.

The outhouse caused many comments and drew much attention. First, we dug a big hole, to the curiosity of the people who gathered to see this white man's new invention. We dug the hole thirteen feet deep and three feet wide. Next, we laid sticks over the hole and poured a cement floor. One side of our building held a shower; the other side contained a traditional outhouse seat. For a long time the natives could not understand the outhouse's purpose. Later, for sanitary reasons, we explained the usefulness of the outhouse, trying to impress on them the need to imitate good hygiene. We could convince no one. Much later one other family built an outhouse. The others continued using the woods and couldn't fathom why anyone would be strange enough to build a separate house for such a use.

Even when we weren't building we kept very busy. Merely surviving in a jungle takes up about seventy percent of one's time. Imagine the time involved just in trips to the river for water, for washing clothes, for bathing. We also spent time getting to know the Indians. (They became more and more friendly--especially the men. The ladies were shy. Certain families waited a whole year before they would come near our house.) We also began a dispensary immediately, and this eventually became a large part of our work.

How we appreciated Roger's help, and how we missed him when he left! "The test of Christian love is not in loud professions about loving the whole church, but in quietly helping a brother who is in need" (Wiersbe, Be Real, Victor, p. 127). Roger's actions left no doubts in our minds about his love for the Nosker family.

When we took Roger back out of the jungle we spent a few weeks gathering more supplies. We then returned to the jungle, this time for an uninterrupted three month's stay. While we lived deep in the jungle we had no way to communicate with the outside, and that, coupled with the non-availability of doctors, brewed tension for us at times.

One afternoon our four-year-old Kenny complained of a stomach ache. We laid him in the hammock hung in the middle of the house. Kenny's complaints graduated into cries and

then became nightmare wordless screams. He held his stomach, twisted, cried, screamed in agony. We had no way to get out of the jungle without days of travel and then waiting for the mail plane. In those days we had no radio to signal for help.

How we prayed! Kenny screamed non-stop for three hours. We had a liquid antibiotic, but we had no way of knowing whether or not it would help. We gave Kenny that, and he began to calm down as we kept praying. The emotional stress exhausted us. We learned early on in jungle life to lean hard on God's almighty arm. Such times sure stretch faith muscles, and many more spiritual exercise sessions were to be ours!

The communication's radio Patty's mother brought us when she visited in May and June of 1975 relieved our minds as we recognized the possibility of future times of crisis. It was to be a great help to us in the days ahead.

When Patty's mother came we met her in Caracas, and she invited us to spend three days with her in a hotel on the ocean beach. What fun we had; what rest; what sunburns! Perhaps someday I will learn to do something half-heartedly. Wouldn't you know it--I stayed in the sun too long and burned both legs so badly that I was still hobbling along with great difficulty a whole week later!

That time in Caracas gave us a much needed break. We had been working hard. We planted a garden of corn, beans, pineapple, watermelon and some other things I don't know the English names for. I sure know how to eat them though!

We had also been working at language study. I had acquired over 300 vocabulary words and had begun teaching four boys to read. Picture a boy's excitement when for the first time he realizes that those funny marks on a page mean something. The first word the boys comprehended was "stone". They read "stone" several times. Their faces looked puzzled. Suddenly the meaning broke through, and they got all excited and pointed at every stone in sight!

What else does a new missionary do with his time? He writes letters. Letter writing consumes a portion of every missionary's time, but it is time well spent, especially if he can convey an image of the field in the minds of those who will pray. In August of 1975 I wrote home, "We've been here for almost a year; it will be a year next month. It's raining so hard you can hardly hear, but still the sun shines, and it is hot! That is Venezuela! This past year we located a tribe, built our home, settled in and began language work. We have reduced the language to an alphabet and are just beginning a primer. This next year we would like to build a runway near the village. Now we face a minimum of three-and-one-half hour hazardous trip on the river each time we go in or out."

## **CHAPTER THIRTEEN**

### **PLANTING TIME**

"I feel a quiet but strong confidence that the work is the Lord's and that, if I may say it, the responsibility of it is His" (Choy, Andrew Murray, Christian Literature Crusade, p. 190).

We planted spiritual seeds whenever and wherever we could. At the same time, the Pemon people taught us many things. By October we had learned many new skills. I helped make dug-out canoes and thatch roofs. Was I wasting my time? The only way to learn the language or earn the trust and friendship of the Indian men is to work with them. Patty did the same by working with the women.

Do you wonder how a missionary wife spends her time in the jungle? In addition to spending time with the Lord (the primary duty of all who would be His tools), Patty cared for me--which is no easy job. She trained and taught our children, fixed meals, made all our bread, washed diapers with water from the river. She pulled weeds, taught village children to read and write, helped administer medicine to the sick. She copied over my grammar notes and handled much of the correspondence. Patty once answered twenty-one letters in one day!

Our runway dream became a reality but not without its own share of an incredible amount of work. We began by felling all the trees and cutting them up by hand with an ax or saw. We then hauled the trees away and burned them. That left hundreds of stumps to pull out and the holes to fill.

I also spent time studying my Bible and convinced Pedro, my Spanish speaking language helper, to study it with me. We finished John and started Acts--but still Pedro had not trusted Jesus as Saviour. He was very interested in Bible study, but only as an academic exercise. Pedro spent two hours each evening helping me wrestle with the language. I taught him Scripture at the same time.

Linguistic work devoured my time like a hungry jungle beast. Linguistic work is tedious, difficult even for the slow, patient type, which I am not! God is patient and is teaching me patience, a wonderful fruit of the Spirit. Through elimination I reduced my original alphabet of 36 letters. I knew I didn't need that many letters, but I had a problem determining which letters were needed and which weren't. There are complicated linguistic processes to use to decide this, and we used trial and error too! Later Jim Berryhill again reduced the alphabet to its final form of 18 letters.

What can I say to you about this planting time: life in a mud house, no mail, no phone, no English, no other white folks? What can I tell you about struggling to learn an unwritten language? Was it the miserable, self-sacrificing existence of stoics resigned to their lot? No, life was wonderful (as I wrote home), thrilling, tremendous, or as the Pemon might say, "Uwaco pe man"--I like it!

Life among the Indians wasn't without its heartaches, some that seared our memories forever. Bolivito was to us both joy and sorrow. I liked Bolivito because with his outgoing, laughing ways, he was a rarity among our introverted Indian friends. Bolivito was a hard worker. He had to be! Providing for a wife and five children isn't easy when you are an Indian, not even when you're a young, strong man of twenty-seven.

In spite of his demanding work and his pressures Bolivito rarely showed anger. He was my helper; he was my friend. I tried to speak to Bolivito about Christ, but he spoke little Spanish. He could say, "I want this," or "I see that," but he couldn't comprehend any thoughts expressed in Spanish. I tried to speak to him about the Lord but he said, "I do not understand. I do not know Spanish. I do not understand about this God."

Business took Bolivito on a journey about a day and a half from home. He had been gone a week when a rumor came back to us with an urgent message. "Come! Bolivito is very ill and dying." Pedro, Bolivito's relative, set out after him and asked me to join the group going with him. We prepared medicine and left immediately, taking Bolivito's mother with us.

We took a five hour canoe trip, dragging the heavy canoe over three large falls. We arrived at the trail by nightfall and rested there. The next morning we hiked a grueling six hours over some of Venezuela's most rugged terrain. I carried a 40 pound pack on my back as I struggled through ankle deep mud, crossed swollen rivers on fallen logs, pulled myself up sheer cliffs, and tumbled down into valleys. We arrived at our destination with trembling legs and barely enough energy left to stand.

Bolivito looked like a living skeleton. His constant diarrhea and vomiting had reduced his flesh to almost nothing. Non-stop hiccups jerked Bolivito's frail body. His eyes were sunken and pain-glazed. He was barely coherent, but he recognized us and smiled a shadow of his former irresistible grin. We stopped the diarrhea and vomiting with antibiotics, but the hiccups were beyond our help. Little by little we fed him some soup, but a doctor and intravenous feedings were Bolivito's only help. I knew it but refused to know it.

We rested a day, knowing we could never endure the trip back without the rest. We then strapped a hammock to a pole and began the tortuous trip out, this time with the added weight of Bolivito. We took turns carrying the poles on our shoulders. Up the long mountain we struggled, panting for breath, sweat dripping off our brows like falling rain in the steaming jungle heat. We slipped; we fell in the mud; we struggled on. We dully placed one foot ahead of the next; again, again. All the while a precious life hung precariously in the balance.

Ten hours later we arrived at the edge of the big river where our boat waited for us. Bolivito had made few sounds on the journey. We had tried to feed him a little on the way. He would take only a mouthful as his eyes rolled back. Now he drifted in and out of consciousness. I listened to his breathing become shorter, more ragged.

Once we were on the river the heavy late afternoon rains came. We had plastic for Bolivito but none for ourselves. It mattered little; we were already soaked with sweat. Up ahead the three big falls awaited us. We knew how hard it would be to pull the boat against the raging currents as we stood waist deep in water boiling white with force. We stopped before the first set of falls and asked for help from an Indian family who lived nearby.

It was dusk when it came, sudden, expected, unexpected: the piercing high wail of a mother bereaved of her son. We sat in the rain, thunder rumbling around us, and we wept with her. The storm's fury seemed a mourning echo to our helpless grief. Death seemed a malicious monster, the enemy laughing at all of our efforts to keep Bolivito with us.

My tears mingled with those of my Indian friends, but I knew another grief the others did not. I knew that Bolivito's sufferings had not ended with his death. My heart literally

broke. Another Pemon, a friend of my own age, had gone into eternity, eternity without Christ. That pain was among the most agonizing I have ever known. I could not yet, because of my own lack of knowledge, communicate Christ's love to the Pemon in their own language. How many Christians never share with Christ the travail over a soul, never witness to one of their own tongue, never feel the birth pangs of longing that Christ be formed in another?

We continued our river travel more slowly; death had robbed us of reason to hurry. Late into the night we struggled our way upriver, portaging falls and dangerous rapids with only an occasional lightening flash to show us the way. Oh, the wailing when we arrived in San Miguel. The Indians lamented their hopelessness, their anger at the fierce enemy, death. Those eerie, awful, heart-rending cries rivaled the storm in fury. I will remember them always.

The next day I helped build Bolivito's casket. I took a stone and carved my friend's name on it. Patty and I walked with the mourners to the burial place. I placed my stone as a head stone, the first that any Indian of that village had ever had. It caught the hearts of the Indians, knowing that I too had loved, and now mourned, Bolivito. Sometimes it's the small, unconscious things that we do as missionaries that mean the most in our work. The honest compassion and sorrow the Indians saw in my eyes defied all language barriers, as love always does.

Many people think, "I can't be a missionary. I'm not smart enough to learn a language well." The truth is, I haven't yet learned Pemon well enough to really preach my heart out, but I did learn to love the people. The Pemon saw our love, and the love of the Berryhills when they arrived, and that love played a great part in what God did through us.

Patty and I made a trip to the city to gather supplies and medicines and arrived back in San Miguel on November 4th--just in time for the holidays! We loved our San Miguel holidays, but the holidays of 1975 was not a resting vacation. The primer was about half done, and work on that kept us busy. I also began teaching an eight-year-old girl who knew nothing of letters or reading. I did this as an experiment to test our alphabet. On the second day of school I had to throw out a letter--humbling!

We also continued work on the runway. After untold hours of labor we had to abandon the spot we had worked on so diligently. It proved to be too sandy. We chose another site up-river. Fifteen men and women put in 700 hours of work on this landing strip.

Our life among the Pemon did not escape notice, even in that isolated place. We had lived in the village only six or seven months when the Catholic church, who on paper at least theoretically controlled the Pemon, sent a priest to visit us. He asked, "What are you doing here in this village? We must know."

We gave an honest answer. "We're here to translate the Bible and to preach the word of God."

Not long after this incident the church sent an Indian priest (the only Pemon to ever become a priest) to investigate us. He requested that we sign a paper explaining what we were doing in San Miguel, and that we state on paper that the Pemon wanted us to

stay in their village. We complied and signed as the Pemon priest looked on. A Pemon who did DDT spraying for malaria, a man who had been out of the jungle for many years and knew Spanish, also signed this paper. The Pemon highly regarded this man because of his education. One or two other Indians who could write signed their names also. We kept one copy of the agreement, and the Pemon priest took the other copy to the authorities in the Catholic church.

Years later, when the church accused us of invading Pemon territory and doing much evil, they refused to admit to the government of Venezuela that they had known all along of our presence and had even watched us sign a paper.

When the Catholic church began its fight to force us out of the jungle we mentioned the paper to the government, but they didn't want to see our copy. It was as though, in their minds, no such paper existed. The Roman Catholic church hates, and according to the Council of Trent, has a right to execute, anyone who doesn't believe her doctrines. Vatican II upheld the Council of Trent, and the present day Pope also vowed to uphold its edicts, one of which is the right to kill a heretic: anyone who is not a Catholic. Until you see Rome give up her doctrines of papal infallibility, Mariolatry, transubstantiation, and salvation by works, don't believe for one minute that she has changed. Only her methods change, never her doctrines.

Time and again evangelicals think they can trust the Catholic church. Some even plead for acceptance of "our Catholic brethren." The Catholic church is making a ploy "to do whatever is necessary to bring back wayward sheep." So we see a seeming tolerance, and apparent relaxation of the sternness of their beliefs. I fear that once they entice all they can into the movement of unity, they will tighten the noose and step right back where they came from. Their dupes will either step back with them or strangle in the attempt to resist. Remember Dr. Tozer's warning, "Unity is no treasure to be purchased at the price of compromise" (Tozer, The Best of A.W. Tozer, Baker, p.72).

Things never remained quiet for long in San Miguel. Around the holidays of 1975 people began stumbling into our home. Their bodies were racked with terrible coughing fits--whooping cough. The epidemic rampaged its way through about 100 people, most of them children. Whooping cough is a medical demon. The cough seizes its victim and makes it impossible for him to breathe. He wheezes, gasps for air, spits, vomits. All night long the sick ones came to us and remained with us, vomiting and spitting all over our floor. This went on for weeks. We could give no medicine, for we had nothing that would help. Would you have sent the people home, had it been your house, to save your family exposure to the germs, to preserve some semblance of cleanliness and sanity?

What would Jesus do? This question served as our guiding star, not that we might imitate Him (impossible to imitate Deity!) but that He might live His own life of selfless love through us.

Jesus and His disciples laughed, cried, and identified with others' lives at the expense of their own selves. Does the Gospel fail to reach others, even in our own nation, because of its content? Or could the failure be from a lack of power caused because so many Christians avoid, at all costs, getting their hands dirty? Patty and I shun, detest the impersonal, unreal, apathetic, materialistic "Christianity" we see far too often in the States. Yes, we in the States may be doctrinally correct, but "doctrinal correctness will

never atone for the lack of brotherly love" (Wiersbe, Giant Steps, Baker, p. 327).

During the whooping cough epidemic Patty often took a baby from his mother's arms, turned him upside down, and with her own fingers pulled the strangling mucous from the infant's constricted throat. Let our lives reflect Christ's life if we would preach what He preached!

After the whooping cough many of the survivors were so weak that they succumbed to a pneumonia-like illness. This we knew how to treat. We gave over 130 penicillin shots in our home during a three week period. When the epidemic finally ended, we felt exhausted. It was time for us to go out of the jungle for supplies, and we anticipated the rest.

The day before we went out, a family from down river arrived in San Miguel. We heard that one of them, a young child, had measles. We anticipated no real danger, but knew the people were weakened from the whooping cough and pneumonia. Before we went down river to take the mail plane we warned Pedro, "Do not let the family with the sick child remain in the village. Make them stay across the river until the child is well. Take food over to them."

Not until too late did we know how grave the danger was. Indians don't survive measles well. While we were out getting supplies we made a survey trip to all the Pemon we could reach. Then someone came out on the mail plane and reached us with horrible news. The Pemon, with their typical warm-hearted hospitality, let the family with the measles remain in their village.

Our village uses a communal cup. They pass it around, and all drink from it. All eat of the same food. It does little good to warn them of this. Because of this unsanitary sharing the measles quickly raged into an epidemic. By the time the young man flew out to tell us, many Indians were already dead.

We tried immediately to get back into our village, but the missionary rental plane was occupied elsewhere. The mail plane will make no unscheduled flights. The government refused to help us get back in. The commercial airline wanted \$500.00 for the flight, which we would have given, but we didn't have the money. We waited, prayed, stocked up on medicine.

What a horrible sight met our eyes when we arrived back in San Miguel. Within a few miles up and down river of our village 40 young people had died. Hardest hit were the little ones, ages eight and younger. The ones still alive were pitiful bundles of skin and bones. Newly dug graves and grief ravaged faces seemed everywhere.

We did what we could to help. Penicillin is useless against measles. To cool the raging fevers they took the babies to the river, and on the heels of the measles came the pneumonia and other respiratory diseases. These killers medicine can fight. With our own food and with the medicine we had purchased we were able to save many and to nourish them back to health.

We praise God for using us as His tools to help in this crisis, but God called us to the Pemon to preach, not to give aid in the medical field about which we know so little. Why

must so many of God's own well-trained doctors and nurses choose the comfort and ease of good paying jobs in the States? Surely God calls--but so few listen.

Many of the children who had played with our Kenny were dead. We learned, as did Kenny, that Indian villages know all too well the face of tragedy. In America we have our choice of doctors; if we dislike this one's beard or that one's bedside manner, we can choose another who suits us better. To us the tragedy seemed needless (though we didn't deny God's providence), and we felt so helpless.

As we do yet today, we shared with our sick people all we had, withholding nothing we owned, and this too knit our hearts closer to the hearts of the Pemon. You cannot help but love those you have suffered with.

August of 1975 was a landmark month! The Berryhills arrived in Venezuela. After Jim finished his year of Spanish instruction and was about to graduate from language school in south Texas, he broke his leg! When Jim finally got to Venezuela he was in for a shock. His whole field council was against his working with the Pemon. Jim said to Jeanne, "What can we do? We'll just ask the Lord to change their hearts."

The field council asked Jim to work with another Indian tribe for a few months, and Jim complied. Then in February, 1976, Jim requested permission to do a survey trip among the Pemon, and to his joy, the mission agreed. They gave Jim a list of thirteen questions to ask, including, "Would you like to have the Bible in the Pemon language?" Without exception every Pemon asked that question was excited about the possibility. That survey brought Jim to San Miguel during the measles epidemic, and to a happy reunion with us.

While he was in San Miguel Jim asked the men of our village, "If I wanted to live here among you, what would you say?" The village captain called a meeting of the men to discuss this.

The village patriarch was first to rise to his feet and voice an opinion. "All of our lives we have walked in darkness," he said. "We know that God is light. God has sent you here to lead us to the light."

The men voted unanimously to invite Jim and his family to live in San Miguel. The Pemon people treated Jim with affection, but also with reserve, as they did us, for many years. The Pemon are like this because they have been tricked so many times. For this reason, coupled with the fact that they couldn't understand us well, the work progressed slowly.

Jim and I did a survey trip to reach more of the Pemon. There are both river and plains Pemon tribes. Jim and I back packed it for six days in February and March of 1976. Our sixty pound packs made army boot camp seem like boy scout camp in comparison! After six days we returned to San Miguel and took our families with us to continue the rest of the survey trip, made by dugout canoe. We had to portage twelve large sets of rapids to do this.

Jim returned to his field council with the Pemon people weighing heavily on his heart. He expressed to his council his burden, and the results of his survey. The same field council, who but a few months earlier refused to let him work with us in San Miguel, now gave whole-hearted permission. Prayer does change hearts. Prayer is no religious cliché; it is

the actual life-changing force in this world; it is the nourishment of our own spiritual lives.

What did it mean to have the Berryhills with us at last? We formed a close friendship whose golden link is God Himself. Even though Jim and I view things differently at times, we began a relationship second to none. Sam Levenson said, "We may not always see eye to eye, but we can try to see heart to heart" (Readers' Digest, July, 1984, p. 16).

It saddened Patty and me when we saw mission works broken when missionaries couldn't get along together. It was surely God who knit our hearts so closely to the Berryhills. When one family took sick, the other helped them out and shouldered the burden of the work. When one was down, the other cheered him up. Two are better than one, and we proved it so. Even our children became close friends. Jim, with his far superior knowledge of linguistics, became a great co-worker in the area of grammar.

We spent April and May helping the Berryhills clear the land and build their house. We sandwiched in language study as well during those months. I had been working hard on deciphering the language.

The first duty of a linguist is to capture sounds. Some sounds are important; others are secondary. A linguist assigns a letter to the key sounds, thus making the alphabet. Our first whole year, before Jim arrived, we tried to capture sounds. We made word lists of verbs and nouns and learned to understand more of the language ourselves. We also tried--not always successfully--to make ourselves understood.

A giant black scorpion came calling during the spring of 1976, making that season a memorable one! We treated him to a fine dip in the alcohol bottle. We had our second primer off the press by June of 1976. Altogether it was an exciting spring season.

Perhaps you wonder what we did on our periodic trips out of the jungle. Well, wonder no longer! Let June of 1976 serve as a model for your examination. Events kept us very busy that time out. We had visitors twice, each group staying for three days. We also picked Kelly up from school. After the first year of jungle teaching we sent Kelly to school in Caripe, where she attended the Orinoco Academy run by the Orinoco River Mission.

I also spent many hours that June fixing our disease afflicted car which we kept for town use. When out of the jungle, we also bought supplies, went for doctor's visits, etc.! The time out of the jungle must be well-planned and well-used. It takes some foresight to buy all the groceries needed in the jungle for a minimum of ten weeks. That June something else special happened. Patty felt the life of our new baby.

The rainy season was in full swing, and that meant time for bugs, dampness and mold on everything. Did Patty hate leaving the city to return to her busy life in the jungle, especially with a new baby on the way? Not a bit! She wrote a letter home saying, "Well, jungle life is comparatively quiet. This city rat race wears me out."

We didn't leave the jungle again until time to come out and await the baby's arrival. October 30th brought us the joy of 8 pound 2 oz. Kieth Robert Nosker. From the first he adapted as well as sister Kelly and brother Kenny had to the jungle.

We gave Kieth no time to develop into a fussy, spoiled baby demanding everything to be just perfect for his comfort. In early December we took him with us for a ten day survey trip along the frontier road where many Pemon live. Kieth didn't seem to mind the 400 mile trip in a Jeep on a mountain dirt road as bumpy as it was dusty!

On that survey trip we obtained a rough draft of some important Bible verses we hoped to use in a gospel tract. We also used the verses to continue to teach children and adults to read when we returned to San Miguel. We taught many of the people to write, to fulfill the promise we made them.

We went home to San Miguel on December 20th, just in time to spend the holidays together as a family. We knew we had to take Kelly back to school on January 20th, so that made our days together short and precious. We spent a lovely holiday with the Berryhills. Oswaldo, my old mining friend who had sent me the map of the Pemon villages, also came to San Miguel to spend that holiday with us.

Best of all, I preached my first sermon in Pemon on the evening on the 24th! It was a stuttering four-and-one-half minute masterpiece. I couldn't even give an invitation--I hadn't yet learned how to do that in Pemon! There were no conversions, but in my heart I felt it to be one of God's blessed beginnings!

To add to our holiday excitement, Camilo pulled a good one. Do you remember Camilo, who became a forever friend when Roger and I repaired his almost severed finger, back when we first made San Miguel our home? Roger remembers him I'm sure; you don't easily forget a fellow who almost makes you faint! This time Camilo cut his leg--bad--lots of blood. I cleaned it up but had to get on the radio to find out what to do next. A big bunch of meat and muscle lay on top of the cut. The leg survived; so did I; Roger--you should have been here!

This time returning to school was more difficult than usual for Kelly. She had to leave the baby who held her heart in his chubby hands. She had prayed that Mom would have another baby.

Two-month-old Kieth had the Indians shaking their heads in amazement. They found it hard to believe his age. At that time he was bigger (at almost three months) than most Indian infants six months or a year.

Our Kenny didn't have to leave the village for school yet. He was by then more than half Indian at heart. He rattled out Pemon words like he had been born in San Miguel. We had to ask him to translate for us. How humbling that was!

We took Kelly out, and soon after, baby Kieth began having problems. What would you do if your infant treasure had no bowel movement for six days? Would you call a doctor? We couldn't do that; someone forgot to install a phone for us in our village, 200 miles from C.B.! Would you take the baby to the hospital? That would require at least a 24 hour wait, and if a plane was available it would cost \$350.00. We tried home remedies, and once again we carried our problem straight to the heart of our loving Lord. He cared for it.

Kenny didn't want to be left out of all the excitement, so he chose that time to develop a

105 degree fever. Both of his eyes grew fiery red and stayed that way for three days. At last his symptoms disappeared, and we relaxed--for a while!

I spent the winter of 1976 studying, memorizing, writing, sleeping and dreaming Pemon. Still, I progressed slowly. Kenny just kept absorbing the language without effort. The Indians brushed by me to talk with my young son. They said to me, "Kenny speaks well, but you do not know anything yet." God keeps His tools in humble, thus usable, condition! That winter did have its compensations: Camilo prayed the sinner's prayer!

Our mining friend, Oswaldo, stayed in touch through the years. He kept telling us of his desire to get rich quick with diamonds. At last his big chance came. Two American diamond hunters hired him as guide and promised him a boat, motor and diamond pump for his services. It was a Sunday in February of 1977 that an excited Oswaldo stopped in our village. He told us he was on his way to take the Americans diamond hunting.

Once again, as so many times before, Oswaldo shook his head when I urged him to trust Christ and make sure of eternity in heaven. He gave me his same old reply, "I know I am a sinner, Robert. I know that Jesus died for me to take my punishment for sin, but I am just not ready to accept Him yet."

Oswaldo shook my hand, and my good friend and I said goodbye. Thirty minutes later time stopped for Oswaldo. His boat tipped in the angry rapids of the Caroni River, and Oswaldo drowned. We didn't hear about the accident until the next day, and we then went to search for his body. We hunted all day. While searching we spotted a large Anaconda swimming in the river. I ran to the edge to get a close look at him but the Indians quickly dragged me away reminding me that even a twenty foot snake is lightening fast. Then they announced that we would soon find Oswaldo, for an Anaconda, they say, always precedes the coming up of a drowned man. To my surprise, it was so.

Near 4 P.M. we sighted Oswaldo's lifeless, floating body. My heart exploded into words, "Oswaldo! My old friend! Why did you not get right with God?"

You, dear reader, is your heart right with God? Oswaldo, and my friend, Bolivito, had expected to live long, full lives. God's Word says, "Behold now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (II Cor. 6:2).

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. 10:9-10).

The moment we take the first breath of life we begin to die. Why live as though earth time lasts forever? Like Oswaldo, time may meet eternity before you are ready. Why not, right now, confess your sin to God and ask Him to forgive you and give you eternal life, based on the merit of Jesus who died in your place?

Death, even of a dear friend, doesn't stop life. The demands of the work called our hearts to it. Not long after Berryhills arrived we decided to build a more permanent runway. Our provisional air strip up river was not workable because of distance, heavy rains, and other problems. We wanted to have Missionary Aviation Service directly to our village so

we wouldn't have to rely on the extremely unreliable government mail plane. Several close calls made us think the runways would be a good investment of our time.

Building a runway in a jungle is an awesome task. Imagine it: no bull dozer, no machines to mow down trees and to clear brush. All the work is done by hand. We explained to the villagers the benefits of an airstrip, to bring in food, to fly out the sick, to get medicines.

We had early resolved not to make the Indians a welfare society. We wanted them to earn what we gave and to work, realizing that nothing comes free, except God's gift of salvation, and think of what that gift cost God! We gave hand-outs only in a tremendous necessity. Medicine, though, was always free, and we did give away our food when it was needed.

We took clothing into the village and sold that for a token amount. We used the money for things the whole village could use: any medicine not given us by the government, tools for shared village use, wheelbarrows--things like that.

We wanted the Pemon to retain their self-respect. Many tribes around the world have lost their independence and become welfare tribes. This isn't always a missionary's fault; many times the government causes it. Regardless of how it happens, the result is the same. Tear down a man's self-esteem, take away his reason to work, and he won't work.

We hired a good group of workers to help with the runway. We determined the length and width needed for a runway and decided to use the spot where the government helicopter often landed.

We began by cutting the underbrush with machetes, clearing the land as you would prepare virgin ground for a garden spot. We then chopped trees into small pieces, let them dry, and burned them. Many of the hardwood trees refused to burn, and we were forced to chop the trunks into even smaller pieces so we could roll them away. We dug out thousands of stumps by hand. We didn't even have a chain saw back in those days. All the work was done with machete, ax and shovel.

While we were working on the airstrip an American family stationed in Venezuela with a steel company made a trip to the village to visit with us. Their sixteen year old son asked if he could stay and help us with the runway, and what a wonderful help he was! Mike worked as hard as any adult man I ever knew.

Mike liked snakes, and one day when one was killed he decided to skin it and take its fangs. The Pemon hate snakes, and with good reason as there are many deadly varieties in the jungle. When they saw Mike skinning that snake, many of them even refused to shake hands with him. Now that is snake hating in the extreme! It didn't bother Mike; he just kept on smiling and working. His family became great friends of ours and supporters of the work.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

### **PROBLEMS, PAIN AND GOD'S POWER**

"If there were no crises and critical emergencies how could there be critical deliverances?" (Pierson, George Muller of Bristol, Zondervan, p. 211).

We disliked asking the Indians to do work we wouldn't do, so I worked seven to nine hours a day on the runway. One morning I swung my ax four or five times and felt too weak even to lift it again. I sat down. "Patty," I said, "I don't know what's wrong with me." I caught my breath and went back to work, but I couldn't keep up my usual pace.

I didn't realize that I was very sick. When I quit work and went in to lie down my fever rose to 104 degrees. I thought I had picked up some jungle fever that would pass in a few days, but soon my symptoms warned of serious trouble. We investigated the medical book and found two possibilities, and hepatitis was one of them.

We used the radio to call the plane, but it couldn't come until the next day. I felt so weak that I seriously wondered if I would make it, and Patty thought she was going to lose me. The next day I had to be carried to the boat. Berryhills, who were in the city at that time, met us at the airport and took me to the doctor. It was after regular hours, but they examined me and did a blood test. The next day they confirmed my suspicion--hepatitis.

Hepatitis alone is bad enough, but when a man has been working strenuously in jungle heat with the disease, as I had been, it can hit hard.

I was young, thirty-two-years old, strong, stubborn, and not about to lie down without an argument. So my lady doctor and I had quite a go-round about my treatment. She won and I went to the hospital. She had to have the last word, and her parting, cheerful shot was, "You are going to get a lot worse before you get better." Worse at what, I wondered, losing arguments with lady doctors?

My liver count kept deteriorating for the next five days. Don't you just love hospital terms? I never even knew my liver could count! The doctor required that I have someone with me around the clock, and South American hospitals don't supply nurses the way our hospitals do in the States. A family or friend stays with the patient, and the hospital provides a couch next to the patient for that purpose.

Patty, Jim, and another missionary took turns staying with me. They had to carry me to the bathroom because I was too weak to walk.

After five days my liver count stopped dropping, and they let me go to a rented house in C.B. I spent the next thirty days flat on my back, barely able to stagger from bed to bathroom.

During the first two weeks I couldn't even read because of the raging fever. When the fever subsided I tried to read, but my temperature rose when I tried. The doctor decided I should leave the country and go home on furlough when my blood count neared normal. We went to the States in May of 1977. Kelly was nine, Kenny almost six, and Kieth six months. And me? I was old!

We said good bye to Venezuela and our friends and flew to Phoenix. After seven-and-one-half hours of flight we arrived there just in time for the first dust storm of the year. That big jet bounced around just like our little M.A.F. plane, so I felt right at home!

We chose Phoenix as a rest base because we understood that there was a house available where I could rest, at a rate we could afford. We found that our information was wrong--the house was occupied. We then decided to drive to Michigan, using for transportation a pick-up truck a man in Phoenix wanted delivered to Ohio. On the drive to Michigan I relapsed back into a more serious stage of hepatitis.

For the next several months the doctor let me get out of bed only for an hour before resting three or four hours. Gradually the doctors increased my time out of bed until I could be up two hours and down three. We were out of Venezuela seven months, recuperating and doing some deputation. During our stay in the States, in August of 1977, Patty had her appendix removed. I was glad Patty "chose" Michigan, instead of the jungle, for the needed surgery!

Satan used other things than my poor health to try to destroy the work among the Pemon. In October of 1977, while we were still in the states, Jim Berryhill and John Perkins (another missionary) were in a terrible accident. It happened in C.B., as the men were riding in a Japanese built Jeep. They crossed an intersection and a fire truck, fully loaded with 750 gallons of water, smashed into them broadside. The driver claimed to have his siren on, but neither Jim nor John heard it.

The impact bent the door of the Jeep almost to the middle of the vehicle, flung the Jeep sideways across the street and into two poles. The Jeep cut one pole off, then hit a brick wall.

People gathered around the wreck crying out in Spanish, "Oh, look at the dead people!"

John and Jim, dripping with blood, in agonizing pain with broken bones and mangled flesh looked at each other when they heard the Spanish words and asked each other at the same time, "Are we dead?" The sound of each other's voices helped convince them they were still alive--that and the fact that they knew such agony isn't felt in heaven!

Bystanders dragged the men out of the twisted metal. Along with his many bruises, John had a dislocated and fractured neck and a broken rib. Nationals threw the two missionaries into the back of a pick-up truck and rushed them to the hospital. More than once John was handled without caution as he was moved.

After a few days a doctor who examined the men exclaimed with alarm, "Do not move this man! He has a broken neck!" The doctor said that if John's head had fallen forward instant death would have resulted.

James also suffered serious injuries. The impact tore loose all the muscles connected to his spinal column. He had many bruises and several broken ribs. He took a long time healing.

John remained in a body cast for two months in that sweltering tropical heat. Both men will always remember that accident. I have seen both take aspirin like candy for pain, and even take Darvon when the hurt became unbearable.

"We are frequently led to judge of the rightness of a path by its exemption from trial and vice versa. This is a great mistake. The path of obedience may

often be found most trying to flesh and blood" (Mackintosh, Notes on Genesis, Loizeaux, pp. 136-137).

Patty and I chose February of 1978 to return to Venezuela. There is no use expecting smooth circumstances will result if you are in God's will. Sometimes the opposite proves true, as it did on this trip.

We rode from Michigan to Miami, Florida, with some good friends. We found a motel room late at night. Early the next morning we spent four hours waiting at the airport. When we arrived in Caracas it was Mardi Gras carnival time, an all-out bash in South America before the beginning of lent season. We hunted all over for an empty hotel room, but the only available one cost \$100.00 a night.

"We'll sleep in the airport before I pay that," I sputtered to Patty, "or we'll hire a taxi to drive us to C.B. tonight!"

We ended up hiring the taxi. What a night; what a driver--both horrible! Patty and I stayed awake all night. It's hard to doze into dream land when you know that a crazy driver holds your life in his hands!

We finally convinced our driver that he felt much too tired to drive. Patty and I took turns driving the rest of the night, and the trip was much safer, though also much slower, because our top driving speed nowhere near matched his lowest! We arrived in C.B. at 6 A.M. A welcoming committee composed of mice and roaches met us at our house. They always move into the house when we leave it.

Soon we were back into jungle life, and in four or five months my body felt back to normal. Then in May of 1978 I had health problems, the cause of which could not be found in Venezuela or the States. We made several trips back and forth because of my symptoms: weak and dizzy spells, heavy pain in my hips, groin and back. We spent much of June through August visiting doctors and going in and out of the jungle.

I was discouraged. I wanted to give myself totally to God's work, to the Pemon people who had captured my mind and heart. Though I was still able to give myself to God, always the foremost purpose in life, I wasn't able to give myself to the work. Waiting on God is so often more difficult than actively working.

"O Lord, by all Thy dealings with us, whether of joy or pain, of light or darkness, let us be brought to Thee. Let us value no treatment of Thy grace simply because it makes us happy or because it makes us sad, because it gives us or denies us what we want; but may all that Thou sendest us bring us to Thee, that knowing Thy perfectness, we may be sure in every disappointment that Thou art still loving us, and in every darkness that Thou art still enlightening us, and in every enforced idleness that Thou art still using us; yea, in every death that Thou art still giving us life, as in His death Thou didst give life to Thy Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ" (Phillips Brooks in A Slow and Certain Light, by Elisabeth Elliot, Word, p. 59).

To this day pain is often my companion, and I spend some days completely devoured by it. The question tempted me, Should I give up and go home? That thought beckoned when pain gripped me like an iron demon. Always I went back to our verse in Isaiah 55. I

knew pain wasn't God's voice calling me home to the States, though it was His voice calling me closer to Himself. The time would come when the Lord would say, "Back to the States, Bob," but He was to say it in a way I never dreamed.

I felt no freedom to use my health as an excuse to go home. I don't condemn missionaries forced home by poor health, but I wonder if some of us don't leave too soon, not trusting in God to work His own power through our weakness. Pray for your missionary's fortitude when he is sick, because every sick missionary faces the temptation to use health as a cover-up for other reasons for leaving the field. May God keep us honest in His own Spirit of integrity!

Even yet my health sometimes offers me good excuse to take a quiet pastorate in the States. I know by experience that pastoring isn't easy work. Loneliness and difficulty, though, are one thing when your own land, culture and food are familiar. On the mission field you don't always have a doctor you can trust. Add to that fact loneliness, difficulty, a language barrier, strange culture, not being wanted. Such difficulties multiply the weight of health problems on the foreign field. Prayer cemented our certainty that God wanted us to endure in Venezuela.

"His own hand planted me here and here I will abide till the Great Master of the vineyard think fit to transplant me" (Samuel Rutherford in Walking with the Giants, by Warren Wiersbe, Baker, p. 19).

I stayed. When I couldn't work; I didn't work. When I could work; I worked hard.

Through all the years of suffering we learned to love the Pemon people more, and what joy it was to discover that they were learning to love us. We worked hand-in-hand with the Berryhills, finished the alphabet and completed five primers, and taught many children to read and write in the Pemon language.

The first verse we translated into Pemon was John 14:6, "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life; no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." In Pemon the verse looks like this:

**Jesusya iipä' : Yuurä e'ma, yairän, ko'wanötän, yuurä räquin mö'rä arätän uyun pia', Epotoröto pia', taure'pä.**

This verse quickly became a favorite of all the Indians who became Christians, both in San Miguel and in the surrounding area.

Is the Pemon language difficult to learn? Consider this. There are six different Pemon words to express the English word "to." In English we say, to the water, to the house, to the garden, to the person--we give the person and the place the same "to." In Pemon each of these prepositional phrases demands a different "to." God is a gracious Teacher; we learned slowly, but we did learn!

We wished to translate the Scriptures more quickly than we did. You remember that it takes perhaps 70% of a missionary's time just to live in the jungle. Because we had no large mission board, there was no one in the city to buy supplies and send them in to us, or to run errands for us. This also limited our time for translation. A big mission board would have been a wonderful help to us, but as we look back, the government of

Venezuela wouldn't have allowed a large mission board into the tribe. It was perhaps our lack of a big board that God used to get us into the country.

We spent the early part of the summer of 1978 together as a family in San Miguel. We began erecting a new house--rain and termites, the gruesome jungle twosome, destroyed our first home. We also continued working steadily on our language skills and continued to teach three or four precious Christians God's Word four nights a week. The highlight of that summer came when we baptized one man, Ventura.

That summer, as always, the calls for help continued to come. "She is cut! She is cut!" Cut she was, with a deep three inch gash in her forehead. "Fix her, please," said her father with trusting simplicity.

"He is cut! He is cut!" Cut he was. What was a rusty tin can doing in the jungle where little boys run barefoot? It didn't come from us! Blood and muscle hung from the foot. "Will you fix, please?" came the tearful plea.

"Patricia, Patricia, come! Help me!" That time the call was for an eight month old baby who had diarrhea with blood, and who was vomiting. We did for that tender little one all we could. Why was there no one with proper training willing to come to the mission field to help us? The baby died.

We returned to the city in July of 1978 to get the children ready for school. It was to be Kenny's first year at missionary children's school. Patty sewed away the days and most of the nights! She sewed all of Kelly's dresses and Kenny and Kelly's pajamas. She also sewed name tags on everything, as required. Imagine sewing a name tag in each sock of 14 pairs of socks! Patty sewed until midnight the night before we left. That's my hard-working Patty!

Now the house echoed with too much quietness; only baby Kieth stayed home with us. Patty wrote home, "The Lord is sufficient and takes care of our fears and feelings as we trust Him." Trust Him we had to, with our two beloved children 900 miles away from us. We saw them every eight weeks or so. It wasn't always convenient to leave the jungle work to go out and see the children, but Patty expressed it for both of us when she wrote to a friend, "The children are our first responsibility from the Lord."

We didn't return to the jungle that first quarter while the children were in school. I worked on our house in C.B. every day, early morning till dark. Patty helped me mix cement and build. During that time we also took a road trip in a Jeep along the penetration road that ran parallel to Guayana. We distributed more literature to the Pemon people.

Kieth kept us busy that summer also! By age one-and-one-half he weighed twenty-four pounds. When we were in the village he was a handful (armful!) to keep track of. The village was his home and he felt not a twinge of fear there. He took off alone the minute we turned our backs. Indians like to take him for walks, too. The sanitary conditions (which are non-existent) gave Patty fits. How do you keep a little baby out of all that filth? Patty and I both had to remember Colossians 1:10-12!

When we returned to the village we continued working with the Berryhills on one of our

major projects, producing a tract in Pemon. We put John 14:6 on the cover. The tract contained about ten verses. Jeanne Berryhill drew the illustrations. We were meticulous in the tract's preparation, checking and re-checking our translation of the verses. All work for God should be done top-notch, that His name might be honored. If it truly is His work through us, it will be top quality all the way. We even took the tract out to other villages to check the meaning of the words. We wrote about man's heart in the tract, how God knows it, and how the human heart is filled with evil.

God says that the heart is "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9). Any honest person, English or Pemon, knows the futility of self-reformation. George Whitefield was unmerciful to himself in an attempt to reform. He scorned every luxury, ate only food he disliked, fasted often, gave to the poor, and sometimes spent a whole night lying on stones or wet grass and praying. "But it was all of no avail. He felt there was something radically wrong in the very heart of him, something that all this penance and self-degradation could not change" (Gunther, ed., A Frank Boreham Treasury, Moody, p. 65).

How glad I am that God, by sending His Son to Calvary's cross, freed me both from the guilt and the power of sin in my life. How could I refrain from sharing with the Pemon that freedom from sin and self comes from Christ? How could I not long to tell them that faith in Jesus Christ as Saviour gives to us the promise of eternal life in heaven? Like the prophet of old, His Word glows in my heart like a burning flame, and preach it I must!

When the tracts were printed we rejoiced to have another way to share the Gospel. We distributed them widely. Patty and I passed out 500-600 of them. We took the road that goes down to Guayana and Brazil. A number of Pemon who could read and speak Spanish lived there. With just a few pointers they were able to read the tract, the first thing they had ever read in their own language!

It wasn't like trying to pass out tracts amidst sneers and indifference in--say, Chicago. Everyone wanted one. The Indians felt thrilled to see something written in Pemon, and we were overjoyed to see their excitement.

The minutes, hours, days, years flew by in the jungle. We tried to do everything for a purpose, that God might call a people to Himself, that we might be used of Him to call a nation. How many Christians let trivia consume their lives?

"Worldliness is life lived in the dust to the forgetfulness of Deity, life... that does not bring the measurements of eternity and lay them on every half-hour" (Morgan, The Westminster Pulpit, Baker, Vol. 3, p. 190).

When we returned to the city in December of 1978 we shuddered to see how prices had once again swollen. A small can of corn or green beans cost over \$1.00. Apples sold for a mere \$1.00 each. Needless to say--we bought no apples! Patty and I did splurge; we bought a jar of applesauce for \$1.50. After we ate it, we agreed that its taste didn't justify its cost.

We love getting mail from home when we go to the city, as do most missionaries. That trip out of the jungle the only mail we received was a package of church bulletins that had been mailed regular mail in October. Well, old, stale, impersonal news is still better

than no news!

The devil pulled a sneak attack while we were in the city in December. A group of Pentecostal Venezuelans went into San Miguel. They preached in the church, made a lot of noise, and carried on in general. They asked permission to build a church in the village. The Pentecostals could speak only Spanish, no Pemon. Pedro considered their request. The Indians looked to him, as village captain, to make the decision.

Should he advise the people to let the Pentecostals build a church? Pedro thought a bit, then brightened. "You say you have the gift of tongues," he said to the Pentecostals. "Why do you not then speak to us in Pemon instead of making all this racket that makes no sense to us?" Needless to say, the Pentecostals built no church in San Miguel.

The devil began working on other fronts. Internal troubles began to affect all Venezuelan missionaries who worked with the Indians. The government began trying to evict the New Tribes Mission from the country. We could see the white water rapids ahead, but we kept on canoeing as we judged their power and danger.

The new year ahead was to hold both blessings and burdens. The McCarthys joined forces with us in March/April of 1979. The burdens came from physical pain.

I hurt my back, and by September of 1979 the pain was so intense that I returned to the States for tests. The doctors decided my appendix needed removing, and I was back in the jungle by September 20th.

It was nice to know how Patty missed me. While I was gone she wrote to a friend, "Sure is lonesome without him, as we're usually together all the time. You know the old joke about the guy taking his bride off to a deserted island to have her all to himself. Well, it is like that for me when we are in the village by ourselves. All he has is me and the Indians, and since I understand his language and they do not, he talks to me about everything, and lots too."

Those days when we left Mexico to go home and work out a troubled marriage seemed far away. Then we communicated as little as possible, but by this time my wife had become my comrade and dearest friend. God can give new life to any marriage if both partners will look to Him and yield to Him. Divorce is no option for the Christian, regardless of what some modern evangelicals teach!

It felt great to be back in the jungle with Patty and the Pemon, but the intense pain continued. In November the doctors ordered me back to the States. The whole family went with me, and we stayed there until June of 1980. Those six months seemed frustrating, wasteful, trying.

I went to the University of Michigan for tests. They handed me a bottle of Valium and said, "Now stop being so nervous and go continue your life." I felt sure that nerves weren't all of my problem.

We were more than a little discouraged. Patty expressed it well when she wrote to a friend regarding the tests, "Sometimes it seems it would be easier to accept bad news than no news. I want to hope for some news, but after months of no news it seems

hopeless to expect any."

God remained our stronghold, our fortress, our high tower. Patty, the kids, the pain and I returned to the field in June. By July our shipment had not yet arrived in Venezuela. Just hope that you never have to make a call to the States from the outpost region of Venezuela. The officials told me to call and put a tracer on our shipment. For five days I spent from two to four hours a day at the phone company as they kept saying, "Sorry, no call can go through." I sure felt glad that the emergency was no bigger than a lost shipment! Perhaps a reader or two wonders how a jungle missionary spends his time. If you picture him in a mosquito netted hammock sipping orange juice, or with hours of leisure to study the Scriptures or his grammar--I beg of you, go visit him. You might find yourself surprised at some of the things that claim his time.

How glad we were to return to San Miguel and to Jim and Jeanne's and the Pemon's warm welcomes. The rats had devoured much of Patty's tupperware while we had been in the States. Jim and Jeanne cleaned up the mess for us before we returned to the jungle. Some friends do stick closer than a brother! Still and all, rats or no rats, Kieth expressed it for all of us. His first night back in San Miguel he curled up in his own bed and sleepily said, "Mom, I am so glad to be back in Venezuela!"

The destruction of tupperware was just a minor irritation. The devil didn't limit his attacks to things minor. The rats weren't the only creatures of darkness that troubled our work! We all suffered accidents, sickness, problems, and even snake bites.

Once when we returned from furlough our bodies rebelled against the jungle heat. It was 115 degrees outside, 94 degrees inside. We spent many days with vomiting and diarrhea. Finally the illness drove us from the jungle to C.B. to seek medical attention. Poor little Kieth--he spent more than three weeks with diarrhea. The doctor blamed it on an amoeba. Often our children suffered from sudden, unexplained fevers. Satan wanted us to desert the work and leave his territory uncontested.

The McCarthy family from Texas, who joined us in the work in 1979, and the Dennis Davis family from Tennessee, who joined us in 1980, did not long remain free from difficulties. Surely Satan saw what a great encouragement and help these families were to our work. In 1981 a deadly snake bit Gary McCarthy. Had it not been for our Lord's touch he surely would have died. Jim and Jeanne quickly administered anti-venom. Gary was sick for many days. Even before the snake bite, hepatitis, one of the many jungle villains, had laid Gary flat on his back for a time.

Jeanne contracted T.B. All of us suffered much physical affliction. Great work always stimulates great opposition. To those who long to quit their particular place because of difficulty, I would say, "Never quit too soon. Give God an opportunity to work. Through weakness, helplessness, difficulty, He makes His mighty power known. In human strength, in self-dependence we are useless to God, but He can do anything through the weakest life made available to Him!"

During a spell of great physical weakness the Lord gave me a poem. I sat at my desk, feeling sorry for myself, giving in to that monster enemy, self-pity. I felt such a burning longing to see many Pemon turn to Christ, yet up to this time we could claim few lasting decisions. Things were slower than slow. I wanted to see God work quickly, to see Him

move like a white water rapids. Instead, it seemed we were plodding in a muddy, stagnant pool. To look away from Christ and to look at circumstances invites defeat every time. I know it; you know it; but do we always practice it? I felt slow inside myself, sluggish, and downhearted. I rolled a piece of paper into my typewriter and wrote this poem.

### **ANOTHER MAN**

Another man God calls me to be,  
and one I'd not choose if I could see,  
the path that I'll trod here physically.  
Testings and trials will abound to me,  
that I might become what I'm not, you see,  
more like the Wounded One of Calvary.

Another man God calls me to be,  
to live for others and not for me,  
to show forth more of His humility,  
to give and give unselfishly,  
that other sinners might be set free,  
by the Wounded One of Calvary.

Another man God calls me to be,  
to die to self continually,  
that the world, me, will cease to see,  
to take up my cross until finally,  
when I am called to eternity,  
I shall be as the Wounded One of Calvary.

Another man God calls you to be,  
for there are so few who really see,  
that the servant cannot live differently,  
than his Master who so humbly,  
gave up all He had for you and me,  
to become the Wounded One of Calvary.

"To be another than I am, I must abandon what I am" (Chrysostom, in God Tells the Man Who Cares, by A.W. Tozer, Christian Publications, p. 156).

I was in the city when I wrote the poem. I put one copy of the poem on my wall to encourage me, to spur me on to trust God to be through me all the things I could never be: unselfish, patient, loving, fruitful. God takes time to grow any of His fruit trees, and I knew I must rest in Him and give Him time with me. If I couldn't yet be in San Miguel, at least I was in the country I loved and in C.B., and if my body couldn't yet rejoice because of the pain, at least my spirit could. At times like these, our Lord Himself encouraged me.

In June of 1980 life became even more exciting than usual, and life for us is never dull! We were just returning from the States, as were the McCarthys. Jim was working in San Miguel when a national guard officer came up river and suggested that he leave the jungle and go down to the border of Brazil. There, 100 miles south of San Miguel, is a commando office. The national guard in Venezuela is like our police force in the States.

The officer told Jim to report to the commanding officer and to give his name, location, and an explanation of his activities in San Miguel. He said that the government wanted a written record of who he was and what he was doing in the country. The officer told Jim that he would be able to be back in San Miguel in two days.

Jim didn't want to cause any unnecessary problems with the government, so he agreed to go, although it meant leaving his wife and children alone in the village. Jim went down river to Uriman, a mining town about 25 kilometers from San Miguel, and he boarded the mail plane there. Jim saw an army man among the few passengers, but thought nothing of it, until the plane stopped for lunch. When Jim tried to leave the plane to go and eat the army man spoke. "Sit down," he said. "You are not going anywhere. You are not on a pleasure trip. You are under arrest!"

We didn't discover until later that the trouble came from our "friends," the Roman Catholic church. The investigation didn't begin with the army. A priest who wished to make trouble for us instigated it.

When Jim arrived at the commando office in St. Ellen (English for Santa Elena) they put him in jail. Jim spent five days at national guard head-quarters with a man standing over him with a machine gun. He was interrogated often. Nights he spent in a jail where there were no sanitary facilities, no food, no bed. Jim was glad for the hammock he had with him. He tied the hammock to the bars and slept in it.

Jim felt very low at first, both emotionally and spiritually, but our God of all comfort, whose words always revive, spoke to his heart with Romans 8:28. Jim later said, "That verse sustained me." Soon Jim began witnessing to the guards, the men who took turns standing over him with machine guns. I wonder if the apostle Paul smiled to hear of it?

After a few days, the head guard told Jim, "We do believe your claim to innocence, but the Catholic priest comes in here every day and makes more and more accusations against you. He insists that we send you to Ciudad Bolivar for a wide-scale investigation by the FBI of Venezuela."

The Catholic-controlled government complied with the priest's demands. Jim arrived in C.B. late on Saturday night. The man in charge of the investigation had held his position in C.B. for just three days, and Jim had been arrested five days earlier. That new FBI officer read the accusations to himself as Jim waited, standing before him. "What do you have to say for yourself about these accusations against you?" he asked Jim.

"What accusations?" Jim replied. "They never would tell me what I am accused of doing."

The new FBI officer, the man in charge of the special police force there in C.B., read the charges aloud to Jim. "The charges include: being a C.I.A. agent, operating a secret runway, selling liquor, selling drugs, taking advantage of the Indians, buying gold and diamonds and re-selling them at a profit, forcing the Indians to work for little or no wages."

Jim's reply to the officer, whom we will call Señor X, was quite brief. "Those accusations are lies, every one of them."

"That cannot be," Señor X protested. "The people who signed these accusations are all reputable people. There are even the names of generals on this paper. These people are all respected and renowned people." He didn't read to Jim the names of the people who accused him. It's illegal for the special police force to let a suspect know who his accusers are.

Señor X asked Jim, "Tell me, please, your side of the story."

The Lord gave Jim clarity and wisdom. Speaking in Spanish, Jim told of his own salvation, of the call of God in his life, of Ramon's vision and of his work among the Pemon people.

"Incredible," Señor X replied to Jim's story, shaking his head. "Of this I have never before heard the like. Will you stay up tonight with me and retell this story? I will type it up as your defense." That is just about where I came storming in.

Before I tell you about storming into the jail to "rescue" Jim, let me tell you about the priest who began all the trouble. He was very influential and claimed to "own" the Great Plains area, which included our village of San Miguel. Just two weeks prior to Jim's arrest the priest made his usual tour of the village. He put his arm around Jim and said, "You know, we will not fight each other. We are not going to act as our forefathers did. We preach the same Gospel, do the same thing. We are not going to fight, are we?" He patted an astonished Jim on the back and walked off--no doubt to begin the arrest arrangements! It was the old knife in the back trick--pretty effective too, Jim thought, as he sat in his cell.

When Jim arrived in C.B. to be interrogated he sent us a note by taxi, explaining his situation and warning us to stay away from the secret police building. No one had informed Jeanne of Jim's whereabouts, and she was frantic with worry. We were in C.B., so we arranged to get Jeanne and the children out of the jungle. I then went at once to the building where Jim was being held.

I remember feeling extremely upset--no doubt it was fleshly and not spiritual anger! I had trouble finding the office. Like our FBI, such places are sometimes hidden. As I walked by a building I heard a voice call, "Hey, Robert! I'm in here!"

I stormed into the building and slapped my I.D. papers on the table. "Now look," I said, "I don't know why you are holding James Berryhill, but I'm the one you ought to arrest. This is my work that he's involved in. I started it!" (Of course the work is as much Jim's as mine, probably more so, but at that point I was upset and felt responsible for Jim.)

The man at the desk took my I.D. and thanked me, implying, "Good. Now I have both of you." Sometimes the flesh gets us into more trouble than we bargain for; have you found it so?

When we talked to Señor X we found him a kind and reasonable man. He was to tell Jim later, "Had you come into this office three days sooner, before my appointment, the other man would have signed the accusations and kicked you out of the country without an investigation, because the charges came from such reputable people."

It was our instrumental God who moved Señor X to the post at just the right time. He

was to become a very close friend. We were able to witness to him and to give him a Bible, and he helped us in many ways. A man who walks in God's ways need not feel surprised when God has a town clerk on the job to help in his defense (cf. Acts 19).

During our talk Señor X said, "We are taught in our profession to identify criminals by their facial expressions. After talking to you two I know you are not common criminals. It is against the law for me to tell you who accuses you. If I tell you who made the charges against you, I will lose my job."

As Señor X said this he casually slid a paper in front of us, allowing us to see the names of the people who had signed the accusation. Along with other high level people were the names of the priest who had patted Jim's back and called him friend, as well as the priest at St. Ellen who was the major instigator of the investigation. After we read the list Señor X pulled back the paper.

"I am of a mind to let you go and keep you under house arrest," Señor X said thoughtfully. "If I keep you in prison over night you may be molested. I do not wish that to happen to you because you are not that type of men. If you will promise to remain in Ciudad Bolivar and check in with me every day, you may stay at your homes."

We agreed to Señor X's request, but we also challenged him, "Let us take you to San Miguel so you can speak first-hand with the Indians who speak Spanish. You can then discover whether the accusations are true, or whether they come from jealousy because of a difference in religions."

Señor X feared flying. He protested, "I have only been at this post a short time. Now you want to take me to the jungle?"

We did convince Señor X to fly out with us. He spent several hours with the village leaders in San Miguel and asked them many questions. After that Señor X told us, "As far as I am concerned, the charges are dropped. You are obviously innocent. I will call in my reports. You come back to see me on Monday, and all will be fine."

Monday's arrival found Señor X puzzled. "I do not understand this," he said. "I called in my reports and told them that you are innocent. They told me, 'Dig deeper and find something dirty on them.' Someone is trying very hard to get you into trouble!"

Señor X began to investigate the Catholic church's part in our arrest. When he did that the government decided to drop the matter. Within seven days the charges against us were dismissed, but what we thought was the end of a problem was just a beginning. The dog had not bitten us yet, just snarled a little and shown his teeth.

Señor X gave us several suggestions on how to continue our work in peace, without government intervention. He told us to write letters to all authorities concerned, informing them of our names and I.D. numbers, of our location in the country, and what work we were doing. We did this, and though no one granted us outright permission to continue our work, no one objected either, which in Venezuela amounts to tacit permission. No one objected, that is, until the Catholic church renewed its accusations with greater venom about two years later.

Our arrest wasn't the only opportunity in the summer of 1980 to put into practice I Peter 5:8. Our children were with us, and that was an unmixed cup of joy, but my physical problems worsened. By November I could no longer endure the pain. I asked permission from our home church to return to the States to try one more time to discover the cause of the pain.

Once again we agonized through the round of doctors, the shaking of heads, the "I don't know's." One doctor said, "Sometimes an illness cannot be diagnosed until it proceeds further. This may be your case. If pain medicine helps, use it. Perhaps someday the cause of your trouble can be determined."

Trouble and joy are both God's attention getters. Was He trying to tell me something? Did He want me to change the direction of my life? I felt I needed to listen. I spent three days alone at a wilderness camp, searching the Word, fasting, praying. I came away from there convinced that God wanted me to continue my work in Venezuela, pain or not.

I spent a lot of time in prayer that winter. I'm the kind of guy who likes to pray while walking in the woods, pouring out my heart to our tender Lord who bends His ear to listen. In prayer I tried to face the bottom line. What if this disease eventually takes my life? What if the pain just endures endlessly?

Through the winter of 1980-1981 I prayed, and praying brought me restful peace. I adjusted to my situation. I concluded, if the Lord wants to deliver me, He can. If He wants to take me home to Heaven, He will. If the pain must continue, it must. I realized with my heart, not just with my head, that I am not just going to die, but someday go to heaven.

I spent a lot of time thinking about heaven. This may sound funny, coming from a preacher, but sometimes Christians (myself included) don't grip by heart the reality we know in our minds. How real is God to you? Is He real enough to make all others seem but shadows in comparison? Even the longest life is short, like a morning fog that will evaporate in the ten o'clock sunshine, yet to many Christians eternity is but a fuzzy shadow. Life after death is real, my friend! Oh that the truth of that would grip us until it becomes to us a very breath of life!

Even our work for God can keep the Lord from becoming more and more real to us. In the desire to minister we can fall in love with the work and forget that a time is coming when we will be unable to labor. It's easy, and dangerous, to love the work more than we love our Lord.

Financial pressures added weight to the burden of illness. Coming to the States so often for health reasons had depleted all of our funds. Still, I wanted to return to the field, and I asked God to give me even just one more year in Venezuela. I felt that the best was yet to be.

As I prayed to be returned to Venezuela an opportunity came to detour from the best to the good, as it does so often in the Christian life. We were living in a cottage near Rainbow Shores Bible Camp in Michigan when I received this phone call. "Hello; you don't know me, but I know you!"

The voice on the line belonged to a Christian layman living near the Maple Rapids area. There was no fundamental church in his community, so he had gone calling and soon had thirty-five people who wanted to worship together. He built a small building to worship in, but then high blood pressure curtailed his work. The doctors told him, "You must either quit working in the shop or stop working with your church. Both are too much for you."

The man was within two-and-one-half years of his pension and didn't feel led of God to work full time with the baby church. Someone gave my name to him, and he asked me to come and take the pastorate of the church.

I had already made my commitment to return to Venezuela, but was God trying to tell me something? "I agree to pray about it," I told the man.

Patty and I sought God's face. The offer was interesting and exciting. I have always wanted to start a church where one was needed or to take a very small one and be used of God to build it up and teach the people.

I decided I couldn't take the church because the price was too high to pay. I want first-best, not second-best when it comes to God and His plans. I called the man back and regretfully, but joyfully, told him no.

Physically I felt no better; at times I wondered if I were dying. Even if I am dying, I thought, I don't want to die in a hospital with clean sheets on my bed. I want to die in a mud hut if I have to die at all. We claimed Acts 20:24 regarding my health and determined to return to Venezuela in spite of illness. We never guessed that we had only nineteen months left to spend among the Pemon people who had become our heart of hearts. Nor could we guess that our leaving would be caused by pressure from the Roman church. God would lead us all the way to Bolivia and then work miracles to call us to the Pemon again--but all that is another story.

## **CHAPTER FIFTEEN**

### **THE BEGINNING OF THE END**

"For this hardest test of all ... God graciously ... tenderly prepares us. He gives the easier tests first, and then like a skillful teacher accommodates the examination to the maturity and advancement of the student. Faith in God is the indispensable prerequisite for passing the tests" (Bryant, ed., Climbing the Heights, Zondervan, p. 220).

When we started back to the jungle our hearts sang a going home song. We left Detroit at 3 A.M. on May 30th and arrived in Ciudad Bolivar at 7:00 P.M. That made a rather long day, but it was nice not to have to spend money for a hotel in Caracas.

In C.B. we once again shuddered at the higher prices. A can of corn or peas that had cost \$1.00 now sold for \$2.00. The canned mushrooms we sometimes put on a pizza or in our spaghetti sauce (since we have no meat) cost much more too. A four ounce can of Green Giant stems and pieces sold for \$2.00--double the price it had been when we left for the States the November before.

"Whew!" Patty wrote home. "We will eat lots of rice, spaghetti and macaroni this summer, and maybe some Cassava bread from the Indians, if they have any."

Perhaps you remember that we said Cassava bread is made from the yucca plant by grating, squeezing, sifting and then baking it.

Patty bought one medium sized head of cabbage to take into the village (\$3.50) and two pounds of carrots (\$3.50). We knew those few vegetables would be all we would have of fresh produce until August. Still, inflation couldn't deflate our joy; we couldn't wait to get back into the village. San Miguel was by now truly home.

We made plans to teach Kieth kindergarten that fall. Kieth said that he never wanted to go away to school and always wanted to stay little. We knew there was no chance of that. Everything grows fast in jungle heat, and Kieth was no exception!

Early June found the average temperature at 85-90 degrees with 100% humidity. If you want to know how that feels, go into your bathroom on a hot day. Shut all the doors and windows. Turn on the shower--all hot water, please. Wait ten minutes, and there you have it--the simulated climate of Venezuela! When the sun did shine our boys tanned up fast. It was pure joy just to look at them!

We were able to get into the village quickly that trip. That was not always possible because of supply buying and flight schedules.

The children spent all summer in San Miguel with us. If that wasn't enough to make a full cup, we were back with our friends, Jim and Jeanne. Our friendship was a taste of heaven's sweetness. They were as delighted to see us as we were to see them. If only everyone could share that kind of friendship at least once in a lifetime! Our love just kept growing.

"Yesterday when we were friends,  
we were scarcely fiends at all!  
Now we have been friends so long,  
Now our love has grown so strong.  
When tomorrow's eve shall fall  
We shall say as night descends,  
Again shall say: Ah yesterday  
Scarcely were we friends at all--  
Now we have been friends so long!  
Our love has grown so deep, so strong"  
(Richard Watson Gilder in The Beauty of  
Every Day, by J.R. Miller, Thomas Y. Crowell,  
p. 238).

After we unloaded and ate, Jim shared some wonderful news. "Not long ago the village people came to me," Jim said. "They asked why you and I don't take our families and attend their religious meetings."

Up until this point, during the six-and-one-half years we had worked among them, the Pemon had conducted their own religious services, often three times a day. Their

meetings were filled with slow, terrible sounding chants. We never attended a service, so the Pemon surmised we didn't approve, and gathered courage to ask Jim why we did not.

Jim shared with the people that we couldn't partake in their idolatry. The temple-church of the Pemon held all the trappings: statues, holy water, the virgin, crosses. Jim read Exodus 20 to the people and told them that God hates idolatry because idols take His rightful place in the hearts of the people.

The three Spanish-speaking men who came as representatives of the tribe listened seriously to Jim's explanation. They took his words back to the rest of the Pemon. Ramon, the spiritual leader of the Pemon, couldn't speak Spanish, so they told him what Jim had read from Exodus 20.

Later, Ramon gave Jim his reply. "You and Robert have lived with us for many years. You came to teach us God's Word. We have watched you carefully. We see that you do not lie to us. You have never hurt us. You have done us only good. We believe you are what you say you are, and we believe you want to do what you say. Now we want you to come into our temple. You do the religious teaching now. To show you that we mean what we say, come and see that the church is clean. There are no idols in it now. We have emptied the church."

"It's true, Bob," Jim said to me that first night that we were back in San Miguel. "Come walk to the church with me. I want you to see this for yourself." When I looked inside, I saw only benches, and a large white spot on the wall where the statues used to hang. How beautiful the emptiness looked to us!

That very night, my first back home in the village, the Pemon asked us to begin preaching. Jim felt called more to the translation aspect of the work, and I more to the evangelization, so I began to preach.

Think of it with me! After six-and-one-half years of work, prayer, suffering, sickness, sorrow, accidents, we were preaching! After six-and-one-half years that many would have scoffed at as wasted time--time spent living in a child's world of simplicity, people began to come to our lovely Lord Jesus Christ. And how they came!

From the first one who repented of sin and asked the Lord to save him, Patty and I knew--This is the answer to what we have prayed for so long. This is why God wouldn't let us take that baby church in Michigan.

God began the outward manifestation of the quiet work He had been doing through us during those years, and it was an awesome manifestation indeed. Do we far too often quit too soon? How grateful we were that God had not let us give up!

My health didn't improve during this time of the early and later showers of blessing, but I was learning that grace is like manna; you need to appropriate it daily. "The best men in the world would faint in their work and under their burdens, if they did not receive mercy from God" (Henry, Matthew Henry Commentary, Zondervan, p. 1830).

We let the Pemon determine the times of the services. They chose to meet at 6 A.M. for prayer and Bible reading, and at 6 P.M. for preaching--7 days a week, 31 days a month!

How hungry they were for the living God! All that summer people came to Christ, sometimes one at a time, sometimes three or four at a time, once as many as eight at a time. It was an individual thing for each, no mass reaction, no group frenzy--just the quiet working of the mighty Holy Spirit. Always we sat down with the people and dealt with each one individually.

The Lord gave us a unique way of dealing with the Pemon. I consider myself a good Baptist, but we didn't feel the raising of hands in a traditional Baptist way a good method to use for decision making among the Pemon (or among Latin Americans in general). Instead, we preached the Gospel, prayed, and dismissed the people.

The Pemon have a beautiful way of shaking hands after a service. First the pastor leaves. The next man goes out, shakes the pastor's hand, and stands next to him. The third person shakes hands with the pastor and the other man, and then gets in line himself. It takes awhile, but eventually the whole church is standing in line.

After all the hand shaking and greeting, those interested in seeking the Lord as Saviour came back into the church to speak individually with us. This eliminated pressure. The Pemon could go outside, shake hands, and go home to bed--which many of them did. If God was really dealing with an Indian we watched him hesitate, and then come back inside.

When an Indian wanted to be saved he said to us in Pemon, "I want to grab hold of Christ with my heart." Actually it was Christ who grabbed him, but we didn't argue theology. We loved the sweet, simple and real expression of a need of a Saviour. Dear reader, have you grabbed hold of Christ with your heart?

Each evening as the Pemon went through the hand shaking ceremony I went back into the church. I sat on a bench, waiting, praying, watching my little Coleman lantern cast tall, flickering shadows on the walls. Ramon always came and sat beside me, quietly waiting with me. As each Pemon came back inside to "grab hold of Christ" I spoke to him with Ramon's help, and with the help of another young man who also spoke Spanish. After our sixth or seventh service Ramon and I sat and waited, but no one came in. I thought sadly that no Pemon wanted to grab hold of Christ with his heart that night.

Suddenly Ramon said, "I have been interested in God and religion for a long time, but I do not have Christ as my Saviour from sin. Now I want to trust Him."

My heart was full that night! You remember Ramon from past chapters in our story. He is the religious leader who dreamed a vision of our coming to San Miguel. That night the religious leader of the Pemon became a true spiritual leader. In days to come he was to become pastor of the church. In the early months of our stay in San Miguel I had never trusted Ramon. I had secretly wondered if he might someday become a bitter enemy when the white man of his dreams taught what he did not wish to hear. Instead, Ramon became, among the Pemon, one of my closest Christian friends.

One night we spoke to Ramon without realizing how soon our words would become reality. "This will not always be our work," we told him. "We will not always be here. This is your work, Ramon. You are a Pemon Indian, and these are your people. You must learn to lead them to Christ. Do you want to do it?"

Ramon thought a moment and agreed to try. God never looks for the wisest man to use. "The humble man of God has a curious sense of powerlessness. I have often thought that God looked all the world over to find a man weak enough to do the work. When he saw me He said, 'That man will do, he is weak enough'" (Bishop Montgomery, Oswald Chambers His Life and Work, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, pp. 276-277).

I helped Ramon lead his first three or four souls to the Lord. He used the "Romans Road" plan of witnessing. He used verses of warning, challenge, and assurance. Each time that I dealt with a Pemon I used the same set of verses in the same order so that Ramon could learn the verses. One night I asked Ramon, "Can you remember the verses well enough to speak alone?" From that point on Ramon led to the Lord all who came to us to seek salvation. I sat quietly with him and helped him only when he stumbled and really needed help.

From the moment of his conversion Ramon displayed an intense desire for the Word of God. He came to my house and asked, "Robert, do you know by heart all the verses you have been translating?" We had perhaps twenty verses translated into Pemon at that time.

"No, I do not know them in Pemon," I had to admit. I could say them in Spanish and English.

"I know every one of them in Pemon, Robert," Ramon exclaimed. "I love the Word of God, Robert!"

We introduced Scripture memory into the church services. By the time we had a verse translated, Ramon had it memorized. He was always first to learn a new verse.

We began letting Ramon preach at some of the services. He did a good job. He was simple in speech and true to the Word of God.

One day Ramon came to our home and said, "I want you to hear something." Victor, the village school teacher, the man who did translation work for us, was with him. They said, "Listen, Robert." Ramon began playing a guitar and Victor played his Quatro, a four stringed instrument. They played a tune I had never heard before, but I knew the words to the song perfectly--they were the words to John 14:6! Ramon and Victor had set those precious words to a lovely Pemon melody. Never have I heard a sweeter sound.

Anxiously they asked, "Did we do right to do this, Robert? Is it alright?"

Was it right? I could hardly speak to tell them how right it was! Years before, in translation class, we had learned that a missionary should encourage the people to have their own Christian music. Western hymns never become the true heart property of an Indian people.

We recognized instantly that this music was of the Lord and asked Ramon to introduce one of his songs in church. How the people loved it! We heard people humming the tune on their way to work in the early mornings; we heard little children in their hammocks at night, singing themselves to sleep with the new song. The Pemon Christians sang only

the Words of God. Victor and Ramon set to music not only John 14:6 but John 8:12, Revelation 3:20--twenty songs in all!

The Pemon abruptly stopped singing their old songs and chose instead to use the new ones in their worship services. We never said to them, "Do not sing your old music; it is bad." The people, taught by the Spirit of God, realized that the new songs were far better. How much the songs added to the true understanding of God and His Word is impossible to calculate. Is not giving a better comprehension of our Lord and His ways one true function of Christian music? How far short of this falls much of our contemporary Christian music in the States.

During that summer a village child became ill. The parents didn't bring the child to us. They decided to get a witch doctor from another village, a day's journey away. When they returned they told us this story. "We made a day's journey down river, over land and over water. We told the witch doctor, 'We have a sick child in San Miguel. We want you to come and witch over him.'"

"'I cannot come,' the witch doctor said to us. 'There is a great light in San Miguel, and I will not come there.'"

The witch doctor continued to refuse to come to San Miguel as long as we remained in the village, but Satan did try to get into San Miguel in other ways. A few men from down river, who held a strange mixture of Catholic and Adventist doctrine, came to a service, presumably to listen. The building was packed with about 150 people that day. When we finished preaching these men stood and began their preaching.

It was out of character for tactful, gentle Jim, but he called the men down, in a manner that showed he was definitely Spirit-led. "Your doctrine is bad doctrine," Jim said. "We will not allow you to teach it here." The men listened to our usually mild-mannered Jim, stopped preaching, and left!

God used that incident as a much needed warning light. Our people began to understand that we cannot believe all we hear. We need a Biblical basis for what we accept as truth.

Jim and I never attacked the Roman church. We simply preached the truth, never evaded an issue, and answered all questions.

"The best way to show that a stick is crooked is not to argue about it or to spend time denouncing it, but to lay a straight stick along side it" (D.L. Moody in Love is the Greatest, George Sweeting, Moody, p. 81).

The first issue confronted was idolatry, and this was settled when the Pemon cleaned out the church building. This opened their eyes to the fact that Catholic teaching was wrong. In so many places people, in total confusion, embrace both Catholic doctrine and fundamental Bible teaching as truth. They blend the two and end up with chaos. We intensely wanted the Pemon to have a Bible basis for all they embraced as truth, to accept the Bible as "sole authority for faith and practice."

Many a true missionary would be horrified to know that the natives under his care see no difference between his teaching and the teaching of the Catholic church. This happens

when the missionary makes friends with those who teach error.

What is the native to think when he sees the missionary and the Catholic priest as good buddies? We give a clarion call for separation! Remember, the natives have no knowledge of Luther or of burnings at the stake. All they know is, "The missionary walks with the priest, eats with the priest, laughs with the priest, jokes with the priest, invites the priest to his home. Their teaching must be the same." We determined to live separated lives for the sake of clarity. This was to bring much wrath upon our heads.

Bible preaching soon resulted in people asking for believer's baptism. We held classes with the Pemon to be sure they understood the reason for baptism. Ten people joined our first class. Victor and Ramon were both actively preaching at that time, so we immediately taught both of them how to baptize.

Late summer gave its signal that the time had come to put the children back in school, which began on August 24th. We drove to Rubio, near the Columbian border, and spent three weeks there. We had precious little time left to preach and teach, although we did not know it then. By now about 40 Pemon had trusted Jesus as Saviour. As we began our journey back from Rubio to our village we felt a little apprehensive. Had the people returned to idolatry? Had the believers kept a good testimony, with Berryhills and us out of the village together? Imagine our delight to find that not only was the church still meeting twice a day, but that ten people had trusted Jesus as Saviour in our absence! God's ripe peaches were beginning to fall into our hands. People just kept coming to Christ.

"... My work will be perpetual when the work of my hands is God's work done through me" (Alexander Maclaren in Giant Steps, by Warren Wiersbe, Baker, p. 152).

What a joy it was to see God Himself producing fruit through us. There is nothing like it; it is the wine of life.

We encouraged the people to memorize the Word and they did so. Several were learning to read and write as well.

We introduced prayer meeting to the Pemon. We wanted to keep the prayer service exclusively for believers. In the States this is no problem; it is hard enough there to get the saved to attend, but not so among the Pemon. They were so accustomed to going to church all the time that they came to prayer meeting as well. We didn't want to discourage or offend the people. We talked to Ramon about the situation and decided to handle it this way. After a service where all were welcome, we closed for the handshaking ceremony. We then asked that only those who had been saved return for prayer time. Those who had not been saved should go home, we announced, unless they wished to speak with someone about salvation. How well I remember that first prayer meeting.

"You have received a memory that strings the events you cherish and love as a jeweler strings pearls into a necklace and keeps them for as long as you live and beyond" (Tozer, Christ the Eternal Son, Christian Publications, p. 24).

At that first prayer meeting we told the folks, "Prayer is talking with God. Share your needs with Him. Tell Him how you feel." David wrote, "Pour out your heart before Him"

(Ps. 62:8).

We decided to have sentence prayers that first time. Jim prayed. I prayed. A long, pregnant silence ensued. We could feel that the people wanted to pray, but fear glued them to the benches. Finally one stood, then another. Ramon uttered a prayer that would melt any missionary's heart. He prayed for our families, for our safety. Tears rolled off my cheeks as I listened to that once pagan Indian, who had lived most of his life in hell's darkness, pray his first public prayer and beseech God for the missionary's needs!

God continued using us in an unusually rapid way to build a strong, vital church in Christ Jesus among the Pemon. All that fall people kept coming to "grab hold of Christ with their hearts" until we had 101 precious ones who repented of sin and asked the Lord to save their souls.

Our second baptismal class held 31 people. In the class we stressed that baptism does not remove original sin, as the Roman Catholic church had taught them. We said, "Baptism shows your identification with Christ. It testifies that in Him you died, were buried, and rose again. Baptism also tells others that you are serious about obeying Christ." We taught carefully and took much time in explaining each step.

To our utter delight our shy, ten-year-old Kenny asked to be baptized. Some of his Indian friends, with whom he had learned to hunt and cook, had been saved, and Kenny wanted to be baptized with them. He asked me, "Dad, would it be O.K. with you if Ramon baptized me?"

O.K.? It was a full cup running over. What fullness of joy we find in His presence, even on this earth!

The river ran quite low that memorable Sunday morning, July 6th, 1982, as we gathered on the sandy beach to see 31 believers, our Kenny among them, be baptized. Jim, Victor, Ramon and I all baptized. The people stood in lines on the beach. We questioned each one. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost we solemnly immersed each candidate in the water. The baptisms took about 45 minutes. We enjoyed a great, joyful time of singing and rejoicing afterward. Surely the angels smiled to hear our Pemon songs rising up before our God.

It was after this large baptism that rumblings began coming from the Roman Catholic church and the priest down river. The volcano was not dead--as we had hoped--just lethally pretending sleep.

In South America when a person accepts believer's baptism, the Roman church knows that one is forever lost to them. Until a man does accept baptism, all know, including the man himself, that he isn't truly committed to Christ. My days among the Pemon gave me a new appreciation of the importance of baptism.

With so many stepping out bravely for Christ the Roman church stepped out as well. The Catholics refused to take meekly the blow to the chin. They began telling the Pemon in Uriman how evil we were, how bad our hearts were. They said that we were telling the Pemon in San Miguel to turn against the Catholic church and that we were dividing Pemon brothers. We heard the rumors as the volcano rumbled its ominous warnings, and

we wondered what might happen next.

I kept teaching openly from the pulpit, as I will by God's grace, until my dying day. Doctrinal error must be jumped on and slain wherever it shows its monster head. "Error is deadly; truth is life giving" (Spurgeon, New Library of Spurgeon's Sermons, Vol. XI, Sect. 2, Zondervan, p. 209).

I didn't look for a fight or set out to cause one. I just kept preaching the Word. I tried not to be personal in my comments, but I did insist on preaching true to the Word. The Pemon began to understand that there is an irreconcilable difference between those who hold God's Word as authority and those who accept the Roman church as authority.

It was a battle. I needed to remember that we stay restful and confident in a battle only if we remember that the final victory is already won. "We are not sent to battle for God, but to be used by God in His battlings" (Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest, Dodd, Mead and Co., p. 18).

Between June 2nd and January 2nd 150 Pemon were saved, 62 baptized. Three-fourths of the new believers were adult men and women. Yes, we had labored, hoped, prayed, suffered, but we claim no credit for this amazing work of God. We were just used of God to call a nation; we felt ourselves mere onlookers of God's awesome grace and power. To HIM be the eternal glory (Ps. 115:1)!

Our children came into the village for their December break. They loved being free in the jungle once again. They swam every day, and Kenny fished often. All too soon it was time for us and the Berryhills to return our children to school.

Our two families numbered ten people by then, too many to go out on the same day because of the plane's weight limits. Our family left on January 7th or 8th; Jim and his family were to fly out the next day. We never dreamed what would happen next.

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

### **THE VOLCANO EXPLODES**

"Persecution is the world's testimony to the Church's purity. A wolf will not worry a painted sheep. A cat will not seize a toy mouse" (Frank W. Boreham, in Giant Steps, by Warren Wiersbe, Baker, p. 306).

When we stepped off the plane in Ciudad Bolivar, the day we left the jungle to take the children out to school, people ran toward us, taking pictures. It seemed so strange; we wondered what was happening. We found out when the evening paper came. The lead article blasted our character, our work, the Gospel, Americans in general. The writer equated us with Jim Jones.

That article was the first of a series against us that were to appear daily in the papers for the next two months. The priest from Uriman had gone out and begun a campaign against us that was to eventually cause us to leave Venezuela.

I radioed back to the village and read the article to Jim. Jim relayed the article to our people, who were heart broken--and furious! They gave Jim a letter to bring out with him the next day. Their letter refuted the charges, but the newspapers steadfastly refused to publish it.

The letter from the Pemon read, "... They have brought us the light of God's Word.... They are putting the Word of God in our language which the others (Catholics) have not wanted to do.... They have brought the Word of God which has lifted our weight of sin.... Those others (Catholics) want us slaves of sin. We want our brothers to stay."

The papers willingly printed all the Catholics had to say but refused to print our words. They even refused to publish statements that Indians came out of the jungle to make. The words of the Pemon themselves were disregarded, forgotten, in the confrontation between a Catholic controlled country and two American missionary families.

Jim and his family came out of the jungle. Their children and ours were upset by the accusations and the threats to throw us out of the country. When we took them back to school they asked us, "How long will we be able to stay here?"

In answer to their fearful question, we could only reply, "Children, we will stay until our Lord says 'go.'" Such uncertainty made parting with the children even more difficult than usual.

The accusations continued for two months. They went from local papers to local radio, to national papers and national radio, to television and to international news magazines. Our names, pictures and passport numbers were given in the articles. The evil accusations against us included: stealing diamonds, mistreating women, growing cocaine, being soldiers of fortune, ruining the culture of the Pemon, and being members of a secret jungle army. One article said darkly, "Planes keep coming from who knows where and going who knows where." Tracing the planes couldn't have been that difficult--had anyone cared to know the truth!

We remained in C.B. on forced call to the local government. Permission to re-enter the jungle was denied. The president of the country himself promised an investigation, and with sinking hearts we began to fear, "This is the end of our work."

On January 12, 1982, a presidential commission was appointed to come and investigate. Christians involved in politics in C.B. told us that the commission was on its way; the government never informed us. Our political friends warned us, "The commission does not even plan to speak with you. They are going straight to the priest and intend to speak only with the priests and nuns."

With no prodding from us our political friends decided to do a little work for us. They met the presidential commission when it arrived in C.B. They also discovered that the commission didn't plan to visit San Miguel and speak with the natives--that is the kind of sham the investigation was to be. Because of the reporters present the commission was obliged to agree to meet with us personally when our political friends requested it.

We were playing volleyball when the messenger came to tell us, "Get your suits on. The commission is waiting to talk with you." Jim and I cleaned up, dressed up, hurried up. We

met with the commission in town for the next two hours. "Haughty and belligerent" are rather kind adjectives to use to describe the commission.

Several of the men on the commission were known to have Communist sympathies. Three represented the Ministry of Justice, two the Ministry of Education. Two of the members were women. One lady was from the Ministry of Interior Relations. Though a reporter was with them the commission raked us over the coals, and the coals were white hot.

The commission demanded to know how we ever got into the country in the first place. They accused us of entering illegally, though our passports proved otherwise. They couldn't believe the story of how Patty and I got into the country. They were flabbergasted, knowing nothing of how our Lord can work to call a man or a nation to Himself. Time and again they tried to catch us like flies in a verbal trap. Someone once said that if you are going to be a liar you better have a good memory. Since we told only the truth, we feared nothing.

During our conversation we challenged the commission, "Look, if you are really going to do your job, you will have to visit San Miguel." Because of the reporter present they agreed to do so. We paid their way into the jungle with our own money, a large expense involving several trips on the plane.

The commission's leader was a man high on the ladder in the Ministry of Justice. He was the man who signed "yes" or "no" to let any missionary into the country. He walked shoulder to shoulder with the Catholic government and was looking for any excuse to close Venezuela to all gospel preaching missionaries. For a whole year he managed to do so, using his problems with us as his reason. The Catholic party, called "Copei," uses green and white as its colors, and this man obviously liked those colors. This belligerent fellow entered the jungle dressed in a white suit, a green shirt, and clutching a big cigar in his teeth. Picture him dressed like that, strutting around San Miguel with an arrogance that seemed to say, "I own these Indians."

When we first arrived in San Miguel with the commission, the leader, Mr. Cigar, said to Jim and me, "You will sit down in the corner. We will handle this discussion. We will call you if we need you."

Mr. Cigar talked to the Spanish speaking natives for 45 minutes. They were very honest with him. Not only did they forcefully support us, but they also told him that the Catholic church had been punishing them by denying them medicine and food which were to be given away free of charge.

No facts made any difference to Mr. Cigar. You know the old joke, "I know there are two sides to every argument, but I don't have time to listen to yours"? In this case, that was too true to be funny! The commission had determined its final action long before it arrived in the village. It's sad when politics determine a man's morality, but it happens all over the world.

One accusation was that we had destroyed the Pemon culture. We challenged that. "We are even putting the Pemon language into writing," we argued, "something that has never been properly done."

Mr. Cigar determined to see for himself if the Pemon culture was still intact, so he asked for a song in Pemon. We wondered if he wanted to be sure that we hadn't robbed the poor Indians of their language, along with their diamonds, wives, and other things we had been accused of stealing!

When Mr. Cigar asked for a song one of the Christian men jumped up and spoke to the people. They began singing the beautiful Pemon rendition of John 14:6. It's a catchy tune, and our people sang it with a heart-feeling that knit our hearts even closer to theirs in that minute. The man with the suit and cigar strutted around directing the music with extravagant motions, a wide grin on his face. He waved his arms; he thought the song was wonderful--until he asked what the words meant.

I'll never forget the look on that man's face when someone translated the song for him. He couldn't have changed facial expressions any faster had someone dropped a boulder on his head. He grew red with anger. "I do not want to hear that," he blustered. "I want to hear a song you used to sing when you sat on your mother's knee as a child."

The Spanish speaking men translated the demand into Pemon. A deep, sad silence settled over the crowd. The only Pemon who still sung that kind of song were the unsaved ones who still dabbled in witchcraft, in white and black magic.

Such a one who had played with witchcraft was Rafaelito, a personal and dear friend of mine, but more important, of our Lord Jesus. He was among the last to be saved while we still lived in San Miguel. Years before Rafaelito had welcomed me home to the village from an extended absence. As we worked together on the runway he had said, "You know, Roberto, when you are here I feel like my own Dad is alive again." I have never heard a sweeter compliment, even though Rafaelito was years my elder.

It's part of a missionary's job to win the confidence of the people. Love is where it all begins. You don't just barge into an Indian village, bang on doors, and hand out tracts. A jungle missionary differs in many ways from a ministry in the States.

"I believe he preaches best who loves best..." (Spurgeon, New Library of Spurgeon's Sermons, Vol. 4, p. 11).

Often a jungle missionary must wait and pray for an opening to speak. Rafaelito's wife and two daughters, and most of his friends had been saved, but up until shortly before we left San Miguel in January Rafaelito still clung to his witchcraft. One day a relative of his came to me and begged, "Please, you go. Talk to Rafaelito. He needs to be saved."

I spent an hour talking to Rafaelito about Christ. I spoke of God's love, of sin, of Christ's death for us, of His resurrection. I warned of the eternal punishment that waited for all who reject Jesus as Saviour. When I finished he said eagerly, "Keep going. Keep going, Roberto. Tell me more."

I shook my head. "No, Rafaelito, you know all you need to know in order to make a decision."

Not long after our talk Rafaelito attended a church service and grabbed hold of Christ

with his heart. He attended services faithfully and quit drinking his home brew, but we weren't allowed to remain in the village long enough after his conversion to be sure that his decision was sincere.

Now the leader of the commission, Mr. Cigar, singled out Rafaelito. "You!" he ordered. "You are old enough to know the old Pemon songs. Sing me one of them!"

Rafaelito just looked at him, not understanding his Spanish. Someone translated for him. He hung his head.

"I cannot sing those songs," he responded.

This was translated back to Mr. Cigar. He looked at Jim and me and pointed his finger. "It is because you have taken away his culture. Now you make signals with your eyes and tell him not to sing. You will not let him sing!"

Mr. Cigar turned back to Rafaelito. "I say I want you to sing!" he thundered. He spoke in such a terrible tone that the gravity of the situation became apparent even to those who spoke no Spanish.

"Look, Rafaelito," some of the Spanish speaking Pemon urged, "it will not hurt if you sing the song only this one time. God knows you are not going to sing it to the demons as you used to do. Just so this man will not take our missionaries away, you sing the song. We want our brothers to stay." The anguish in their hearts mirrored the sorrow in ours.

Rafaelito tried, bless him, how he tried, but he couldn't get through even the first few words. His voice cracked, and then that strong Indian man broke down and wept. Even to keep the friend he loved as his own father, dear Rafaelito, God's own man, would not dishonor his Lord by singing a demon song.

White suit and cigar wiped his hands together and snapped, "O.K. That is enough. We are done!" He herded everyone back to the plane. It took two or three trips to get us all out of the jungle.

As we waited for the commission's decision--sure already of the verdict, we wondered if God wanted us to look for another village.

We heard that there was a Pemon village outside of the area (including San Miguel) that had supposedly been given to the Roman Catholics so many years before. We were told that the village was on the west side of the Paragua River. It was a three hour river trip up river from our first home in Venezuela, the home where I first met Oswaldo, the miner friend who died without knowing Jesus as Saviour. The village is called El Tigrito, and some people in San Miguel had relatives there.

To visit El Tigrito we made a three hour car trip to the south of C.B., and then traveled three-and-one-half hours by dug-out canoe. The people in El Tigrito were glad to see us and asked us to preach. I preached in Pemon, without an interpreter, and I also preached in Spanish. We spent three days in El Tigrito. The people wanted us to return and live among them. We felt hopeful. "Perhaps," we thought, "if forbidden to return to San Miguel, we will be allowed to go to El Tigrito."

While we awaited the final decision the government refused us permission to even visit San Miguel. God's work, however, never depends on a single worker. During our first three months' absence from San Miguel, 23 Pemon were saved and 19 baptized. We never doubted God's power, but neither did we refuse to face reality. San Miguel was sure to be off limits to us for a long time, perhaps forever, and we knew it. Because of that Jim and I went to Caracas to tell the Vice Minister of Justice that we would be willing to move quietly out of San Miguel without causing any difficulties if they would let us work with the Pemon somewhere else. We hoped that if we expressed willingness to go to another village the government might grant permission. We also hoped that the Catholics might be satisfied with their victory and stop putting pressure on the government. The Vice Minister led us to believe that he would push for permission for us to minister in El Tigrito, the village outside of Roman Catholic territory.

We went back to San Miguel to move out. It was a day both sad and exciting. We had finished a home a year before and roofed it with tin. We had just started to build a house for Jim's family; it had only a roof. I gave my house to Ramon, now the church's pastor, so he wouldn't have to spend so much time building homes. A thatch-roof doesn't last long. I knew a tin-roofed house might last as long as eight or nine years. This would give Ramon's family a secure place to stay while he was gone preaching in other villages, something he does as often as he can. Jim gave his house for a church, as the old church was disintegrating.

How can I convey to you the emotion-packed final service we held with our beloved people? Older ladies grabbed our arms, weeping as they begged, "Do not leave us. Come back; come back!" After we left we received little notes from them entreating us to return. Older men who understood Spanish knew why we must leave San Miguel. They realized it wasn't our choice, but many of the people didn't understand.

As I described to you in the prologue of this book, we said good-bye. We lifted off the jungle airstrip and beloved Pemon hands rose in a final, loving gesture. The dear Indian faces blurred; we made one last pass over our village home. It was July 23, 1982.

"We thank Thee that there is no Good-bye. We ask Thee that Thy crown and seal may be upon us everyone until we meet Thee face to face" (Chambers, Oswald Chambers: His Life and Work, Marshall, Morgan, Scott, p. 153).

After we left the village the Catholics made a trip in and tried to put a statue of the virgin Mary in the church building. The Pemon met the nuns at the port. (People who came out to the city told us the story.) The Pemon politely told the nuns, "You need the Virgin more than we do. We are quite happy with Christ. We want no idols in our church." The enraged nuns took the statue home with them.

We credit the Pemon's firmness to the fact that we took a steadfast, though never belligerent, stand for truth. Other missionaries argued with us about that. "You are too narrow minded," they said. "Soften your stand a little. It won't hurt anything. Dialogue with the Arch Bishop."

There is such a trend on the mission field today to attempt peaceful co-existence with the Catholics. This idea that we must snuggle up to the Roman church to accomplish God's

work for Him is false. This is God's work we are speaking of! Compromise creates confusion. The people see it and don't know what to believe. Compromise has never been God's way to evangelize. Man's method of accommodation produces an educated people as lost in sin as ever. There is a time to separate, and this is the time!

Once again the nuns returned to San Miguel, this time with an armload of catechism books written partly in Pemon, partly in Spanish. Again our people met them at the port and sent them home. The priests and nuns in Uriman took revenge. After we left, relief food, medicine, and dry goods were no longer available in San Miguel. The people had to go to the mining towns and buy these supplies. On several occasions our people were denied "free" government medicine, milk and clothing. We spoke to high government officials about this, but it made no difference. A shrug was their only response.

In our hearts we never lost all hope of returning to San Miguel. We hoped for a change in government officials. Perhaps, we thought, new leaders would be more tolerant of us. In the meantime we longed to go to El Tigrito where we might continue work among the Pemon people. We returned to Caracas for final permission from the Vice Minister. He was friendly and willing, but unable to help us by giving the go-ahead. He was caught in the middle of a political struggle.

We waited on and on in C.B. By now it was April, 1982. We believe in prayer, and we prayed as never before. September would mark our eighth anniversary of being in Venezuela. Jim and his family were finishing seven years. We weren't about to just give up, not after investing all that time. We prayed together and worked in the city. We made many trips to Caracas to sign papers and to draft special petitions. The commission was still deciding, we were told. When the commission made a decision about our future in Venezuela, they would let us know.

We knew something without being told--we were political hot potatoes. They were tossing us from hand to hand as fast as possible to avoid being burned. The president wasn't about to make a decision for or against us yet; elections were too close. The president was in a no win corner with us, because in Venezuela two laws contradict each other. One law grants unqualified religious freedom; the other gives certain territory to the Roman Catholic church.

The articles in the papers continued to rage against us, slinging their well-aimed mud and rotten tomatoes. We were human enough to feel it. Sadly some American missionaries and some Venezuelan Christians thought we were wrong not to plead with the bishop. They wanted us to crawl to him and say, "We are sorry we have caused so much trouble in your diocese. We will feel grateful if you will just give us a little corner somewhere to continue to work. We promise not to bother any of your people."

If that compromising opinion of Christian friends wasn't hard to take--I don't know what was! If our God did not choose to give us back our work we saw no reason to beg the Catholic church for it. Keeping our firm stand cost us some friendships. When some of the Venezuelan Christians started believing the terrible accusations in the paper, we were deeply hurt.

"Ah, but the treason of friends, their shiftiness, their suspicion, their doubt, their withdrawal--therein lies real suffering" (Didon in Gold by Moonlight, by Amy Carmichael,

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, p. 173).

How few hold sacred the gift of friendship. Perhaps every man knows an Ahithophel, a Judas. Well, one way or another, for or against us, there wasn't a corner of the country not talking about our situation.

Communists were very active in Venezuela. They centered much of their major work around universities. The Communists were available for their cause. J. Edgar Hoover quoted a Communist who said, "We study for the sole purpose of putting into practice what we have learned" (Sanders, Spiritual Maturity, Moody, p. 109).

The Communist movement which began in 1917 controls more people than does Christianity. A Communist thinks it an honor to give his time, money, assets. Satan does well with his program and his people, but greater is He Who is in us than the evil one in the world. Are we available to God for His triumphant work in and through us? It's joy to be on the winning side, even when our team looks like it's losing! Any missionary must know that things are not as they seem!

The Communists in Venezuela targeted the college students. In most Latin American countries the head university is located in the capitol city. Each major town has a satellite school, and we had one in C.B.

The Communists conducted a big rally at the university in C.B. At that rally, they directed their attack at missionaries in general. Ecuadorian Communists had published a film with a "patriotic throw the missionaries out" theme. Venezuelan Communists used the film to try to force, not just missionaries, but all whites out of the country. A Communist is a master chameleon. If patriotism serves his purpose, he will be the most flag-waving patriot you ever saw. A Communist does what he has to do to accomplish his goal without considering morality or ethics.

The Communist film depicted a missionary family wanting to go to a tribal village. It showed a missionary visiting the tribe and telling them he wanted to bring a Bible to them. The missionary in the film drove a yellow Japanese Jeep--just what I had driven for the past six years.

The missionary was then shown in the city conversing with a political group. "I will steal the Indians' land," the missionary said to them. "Then you can get the minerals you want, and I will get what I want." Eventually there was a pay off, and the film showed the greedy missionary reaching his hands out for the money. The Indians discovered the plot, killed the missionary, and threw his body into a mud hole. The film ended with the usual Communist sign of the clenched fist and the words, "We will win! We will conquer!"

The film gathered a roar of approval from the university students in C.B. and stirred up the whole town. After the film, the Communists held a dialogue. We were warned not to attend the dialogue if we valued our lives. At that point feelings were running dangerously high against us. Some Christians active in politics aptly defended missionaries and put the Communists to route.

We remained on constant call to the government. They required us to stay in C.B. One day we went into town and visited at the pastor's home. He asked, "Did those people find

you?"

"What people?" we asked.

"A car load of young men stopped here last night looking for you," the pastor said. "They told us that the government had sent them to find you. We gave them directions to your house."

We reported to the government right away, thinking that the men might have been sent by the commission with news about our future. We quickly presented ourselves at the governor's palace.

The governor's personal secretary told us, "No one has been sent to you from the national, federal, or city government in the previous week. If this happens again, report it to us at once, please! Do not go out at night, and keep out of sight as much as possible."

God Himself kept us safe. Had those men found us, what would they have done to us? We will never know. Just thinking about it made our families uneasy, and to compound the concern, a missionary in Columbia was killed.

Throughout June and July we kept praying, waiting. We were anxious to make El Tigrito our new home. Thirty-seven Pemon had been saved there already. We could not locate there without government permission. Feeling hopeful that permission would be granted, we began to sell things and prepare for a jungle move. We no longer planned to keep homes in the city--it was too easy to be pinpointed there. We planned to sell the city homes we had built.

It seemed September would never arrive. When it finally came, we didn't know what to do. Should we put the children back into school? We still had no word from the commission. We decided to enroll the children in school. It was hard leaving the children that time because circumstances were more uncertain than ever. It was Kieth's first year away from us.

Patty expected to be lonely with the children all in school, but our home in the city was always more of a hotel than anything else. That fall it was almost always full of people. One couple stayed two weeks; the day they left another missionary couple came to stay with us. When Jim and I went to the city on a trip Jeanne and her daughter spent the nights with Patty. We felt it was safer for all that way.

Even with all the company Patty did miss the children. She hated to have them away from us in such uncertain, turbulent days. She wrote to a friend, "I do miss my little chickens out from under my wings. I am glad the Lord has bigger wings, and I can trust them to Him."

About the middle of September we tired of waiting for the Ministry of Justice to contact us, so we contacted them. I had already waited remarkably long for one with the nickname of "Antsy." The fruit of the Spirit is patience, and during those hot, trying days the Master Gardener was patiently cultivating that fruit in me.

The curt answer from the commission shocked us deeply. "You are not granted permission to go into the jungle anywhere in Venezuela, and you never will be." The only thing the Presidential Commission had to hold against us was, "You are not properly registered with the government."

They brushed aside our protests that we had written the proper people two years earlier at Señor X's suggestion. We told them, "We are willing to register, to sign any papers you say we must sign."

"No," they said firmly. "It is too late for all of that. Besides, this is Catholic territory, and the Catholics do not want you here."

They did not deny us a visa; they did not throw us out of the country; they simply refused us all contact with our people, the Pemon. We couldn't legally put a foot in Indian territory.

So, our ministry was over. Or, was it? I read again Isaiah 55 and verses 8-11 called out to my heart this assurance, "God will accomplish all He sets out to do."

Back on April 30th of 1979 Patty had written to a friend, "We know we are only here as He allows. Whether we serve Him here or there is for Him to decide."

Jim and Jeanne decided to remain in Venezuela. Though forbidden all access to Indian territory, they planned to continue translation work in the city. My call had always been more to evangelization than to translation. As Patty and I prayed, we felt it best to leave the country and seek another place of service.

We, and Berryhills, clung to one hope. If we all remained low and inconspicuous, perhaps when the government changed hands in 1984, we might be allowed to return to the people of our hearts, the Pemon. Until then we could only seek God's further leading, cry good-bye from our longing hearts to our dear Pemon people, and pray fervently for our brothers left to stand alone. "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth" (III John 4).

What amazing things our Lord will do to call a nation to Himself, or to call just one. Our hearts were crushed in His hand, but we knew that pure love and goodness were behind it. God could continue His work in a wonderful way without us! We looked for Him to do great things in the future among the people He had called to Himself, and that He did.

Dear Reader, have you heard God's call? "Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is no other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

## **EPILOGUE**

"If the work is His work, let Him control it, and whether we expand or contract, let it be at His bidding, and a matter of equal satisfaction to His servant"  
(Pierson, George Muller of Bristol, Zondervan, p. 149).

A true work of God neither stops nor suffers when God removes a few men and women from the scene. We were forced to leave San Miguel, but God continued a mighty work there.

Ramon went into El Tigrito and over 30 Pemon were saved on his first preaching journey. He returned to teach and baptize the converts, and now there is a strong and growing work in that village.

All was not blissful summer sunshine with the baby church in San Miguel. Like any other church, they had their share of growing pains. This was bound to happen when the only Scripture they had in their own tongue when we left them was salvation verses. Think of the problems faced by churches in the States, and they have all of God's Word to guide them. In spite of the troubles, most of the professing Pemon remained true to the Lord.

Ramon preached in other villages besides El Tigrito. In one village a priest met him and called him a demon, a devil and other names. He threatened to excommunicate Ramon and all who dared listen to him. Ramon quietly stood his ground, and then he preached the truth.

Ramon's courage may not seem so awesome to a North American reader, but to a South American Indian a priest represents a high authority. Whether or not you agree with his position, you never go against what a priest says. Under normal conditions, before his conversion, Ramon would have fled in deepest humiliation from the priest's tirade or words. Instead of running, Ramon just stood quietly and took it. The priest finally stomped off when he ran out of words and Ramon still had not replied. Ramon led to Christ many in that village. He remained there several weeks to teach them.

Ramon began receiving messages from many parts of Pemon territory requesting that he visit villages and preach (15,000 Pemon are scattered over 10,000 square miles). Many of the villages that invited him are Catholic villages. Ramon received the messages by way of miners and travelers. Many Indians from Catholic villages traveled to San Miguel to hear Ramon preach the gospel there. When they returned home, they took the salvation message with them.

One family traveled to San Miguel seeking the truth. They trusted Jesus Christ as Saviour and went home preaching that salvation comes only through our Lord's shed blood. The priest forced them to leave their village, so they moved to San Miguel.

So, as we had always hoped and prayed, San Miguel became a center for gospel preaching. How thrilled we are to have been chosen by God for the work in San Miguel. It was there I saw my life's dream realized--to go into an unevangelized tribe and begin from scratch, to give God's Word to people who never had it to read.

Given my choice, I would never have left San Miguel. Are we just chess men, moved about on a board? Regardless of free will, we must realize that when a life is made available to God, God makes the moves. Each move, regardless of pain or personal loss, means nothing less than good for ourselves and for those to whom we minister (Rom. 8:28). Life isn't always easy, but the Judge of all the earth will always do right.

When we left Venezuela in November of 1982 our sorrow cut deeply. We thought we

might never again see the people we loved. We were wrong. The events of the next two years could fill another book, but let me share them briefly with you.

After very tearful visits to all our supporting churches where we told and re-told our story, God called us to Bolivia. When we began to hear God calling us once again to Venezuela, we were ecstatic.

The government of Venezuela changed and the Roman Catholic party was voted out of power. All the former government had as a complaint against us was that we weren't properly registered to do mission work. We prayed, "Lord, if you do indeed want us to go back, we ask that we be allowed to register as a mission in Venezuela."

We knew that the Roman church would never give up the fight to crush us and the Pemon believers, and we needed strong legal ground on which to fight. Through many miraculous events we were permitted to register a new mission in Venezuela. We called it The Baptist Indian Mission of Venezuela.

God has been, and is, doing great things to keep the work alive, but the fight is harder than ever. The Catholics persuaded certain branches of the government to pass a law in April of 1986. The law forbids our mission to enter Pemon territory ever again. A Christian lawyer has taken our case, and the supreme court of Venezuela is deciding if there will be religious freedom in Venezuela.

Clearly our story has not ended. Will we stay in Venezuela? Will we be once again torn from the people we love? Whether we stay or go is for our Lord to decide. If ever again, wherever I am, I hear that little voice say, "Robert Nosker, what in the world are you doing here? I hope to laugh and answer by the grace of God, "I am here (wherever here may be) because this is where God tells me to be." I want my life to be used, to be poured out like beaten oil, that God may call just one, or a whole nation, to Himself. You, dear reader, have you never heard God calling you?

### **AUTHOR'S UPDATE 1993**

Much to their delight, Noskers and Berryhills moved back into San Miguel, the village they thought they could never again call home. They built homes and continued their work, with blessed results, among the Pemon.

Winds of adversity continued to blow. The Catholic church kept on threatening expulsion, arrest, jail. In 1985 Bob was diagnosed with falciprium malaria. The summer of that year Patty had to seek treatment for a pinched nerve in her back. That summer also brought blessings. Luis and Eva Cornieles and their three children joined the Noskers in their work.

Michelle Berryhill, and eighteen year old student at Dallas Bible College, was killed in a horse riding accident on November 30, 1985. Her broken-hearted family, and the Nosker family, could only do what they had always done--trust the good hand of God.

In a January 5th, 1986 prayer letter, Bob quoted an unknown poet, "Often we stand at life's crossroads and view what we think is the end. But God has a much bigger vision,

and He tells us it's only a bend." That has been true, over and over in the Nosker's work in Venezuela.

A December holiday Bible conference became an annual tradition among the Pemon. God especially blessed the conference held over the holidays of 1985, 1986. Bob reported that two hundred attended every day. Thirty-six were saved, and thirty were baptized on January 1, 1986.

In late July 1987 it seemed the supreme court had granted full permission for a return to San Miguel. Bob's ministry was severely restricted however. He was not to preach in public meetings among the Pemon, but could continue his translation work. He was also allowed to teach small groups in his home on an occasional basis. Pastor Ramon continued to preach in San Miguel, and to make John Wesley type tours among his own people, with wonderful results and many saved.

Bob and Patty received shocking news in 1988. Gary McCarthy, who had been their co-worker for a time, had become a policeman in Dallas. In 1988 three criminals shot him in the back and killed him. On a happier note, during the Bible conference of 1988 the San Miguel church chose three elders and two deacons to help Pastor Ramon. The church was filled for each meeting of the conference--standing room only!

During their times in the city Patty began to lead a ladies' Bible study, and Bob began to work with a new church. God's hand was in these opening doors, for He was soon to allow another to once again swing closed. The supreme court, in the spring of 1990, decided against the Nosker's work among the Pemon. They were allowed to return to the village just once in May to retrieve their belongings. Acts 20:31 expressed Bob's heart as he commended his brethren to God.

So what are the Noskers doing now? They continue to witness for Christ in C.B. Bob works on translation whenever he can get any Pemon to come out and help him, since he is not allowed into the villages. He began another church, one in his own subdivision, and the first decision for Christ was made there in the summer of 1991. Bob began writing Bible studies in Spanish and teaching in a Bible institute. Bob and Patty occasionally distribute literature to the Pemon on "tourist trips."

More and more Bob depends on the prayers of Christians to accomplish God's work among the Pemon. In his prayer letter of November 24, 1992, he quoted Gorden, "Prayer is striking the winning blow at the concealed enemy, service is gathering up the results of that blow among the people we see and touch. Prayer is not rear-echelon activity; prayer is front line spiritual warfare!"

"This is no stroll in the park that we are involved in here," Bob wrote in his Spring, 1993 letter. "It is a war and the carnage of battle lies about us. We have seen terrible spiritual tragedies here and many who were involved in the work no longer are.... Satan has deceived and cheated us too long with respect to prayer. Look at our churches in America, look at yours, how's Wednesday night prayer meeting doing? Prayer works and it is work and that's why Satan puts such 'ho, hum' thoughts in our heads when prayer is even mentioned.... Let's turn things back to what made churches strong and missions forces to reckon with, prayer."

Because of prayer and God's work through Pastor Ramon, Pemon Indians continue to trust Christ. God's paths are in the sea, too mysterious to know, but He did do one thing Bob Nosker expected Him to do. He used Bob and Patty To Call a Nation.

### **THE FINAL PHASE: COMING FULL CIRCLE**

As I write these last lines to put an end to this book, it is July 7, 1998. Not to say that the work is over, for it is surely not, but books must end. In these last pages I want to tell you some of the things that we have learned as we have followed God in His pursuit of the Pemon. The Word of God makes it clear that no man comes to God unless the Spirit draws him, and neither does a nation. But God loved the Pemon with an everlasting love, and when the fulness of time had come for God to reveal Himself to them, He revealed His mighty arm of power as we have shared it in this book. God has surprised us many times throughout our almost 25 years of following God as He pursued the Pemon to bring them to Himself. God showed us early on that we were to join Him as He did His work, and not to decide for ourselves how this thing should be done. Too many of God's servants make the mistake of telling God what they want to do and asking Him to come join them when just the opposite has always been God's way. God is always at work in the world and He is always seeking for men to come join Him where He is working. As a matter of fact, many times in the course of a work for God, God Himself will change the strategies and even the locations where the servants are to carry out the ministry, and if we are not careful we will miss what God is doing and become confused. Many times these changes come through difficult and trying times, but often they come in the daily routine of things. If you have been aware you have noticed some of these changes in the Pemon work down through the years. You see, the Bible makes three things very very clear to us: 1.) God does not see like man sees (1 Samuel 16:7) 2.) God does not think like man thinks (Isaiah 55:8) 3.) God's ways are totally different from man's ways (Isaiah 55:8). Wise is the servant who learns these truths early on in his Christian walk. These are the things that God has been teaching us as He has been using us to bring the Pemon Nation to Himself.

A case in point was August 1995 when we returned from furlough to Ciudad Bolivar, Venezuela. Our thought was to just pick up on the translation where we left off and get on with it. But God's thought was very different. The two Pemon families that had been helping us in the translation were unable to come to the city to help us and the work was at a dead standstill. The Ed Tuggy family, who were working with us at that time, were encouraging us to move to La Paragua so as to be closer to the Indian work. This is a small town where we began the ministry to the Pemon in September of 1974. It is neither a clean nor a nice place, being a small village where civilization ends and the jungle begins. It is a town that thrives on the gold and diamond mines which dot the southeastern jungle areas of Venezuela. Being that the mines literally created the village many years ago, it is full of bars, prostitutes, and soldiers. It has no post office, no bank, few phones and lots of problems. Patty and I wanted no part of that place, having lived there years earlier. Besides all that, we knew that it would be a major move that would require us to build new facilities, and we did not want to do that again in the awful heat. We also did not want to spend any more time building as the ministry is so needy nowadays. Not only that, but we were all set in CB, having a house, office, and place for the Indians to come. No, we were not thinking that way, but unfortunately (as we saw it then) God was very much thinking that way, and God was giving the orders and we were

saying "yes sir." Now, I could practically write a book on the move from CB to La Paragua because so many marvelous things took place, but the idea here is to end one and not start another, so let me just recap. After a couple of months of wrestling with God about this move, we were convinced that it not only was a good idea, but it was God changing strategies in the work again as He had done so many times before. As we committed ourselves to it, and even found some property to build on, the Tuggys had to leave Venezuela because of family health problems. Do you think things always go well when you're obeying God? Think again. It was a test from God to see if we really trusted Him, or the arm of man. We never looked back. It was a very difficult two and a half years, but when furlough came in March of 98, God had literally brought to us over \$40,000 for the project without begging or pleading to God's people, plus 4 groups of believers to help us shoulder the gigantic load of building 5 buildings which used 12,500 cement blocks, over 500 bags of cement, hundreds of yards of rerod, 25 yards of crushed stone and over 50 cubic yards of sand of various types, not to mention paint, steel, electrical wire ad infinitum. One of the great things about this project is that we were determined not to stop ministry while it was underway. After having begun the project, some Indian brothers came and built us an Indian hut, and we began to teach the Bible in a systematic manner to 12 elders from 4 of the closer churches. Through the two and a half years we were able to hold six 3 day class periods, and the growth in these men is a sight to behold. It is true that the translation went on hold (except that we did revise Matthew during this time) but God was now focusing on strengthening the churches and the leadership.

Five months before the furlough I ruptured two discs in my lower back, which put me down for those last 5 months before furlough, and which will change the way I live and do things from now on.

Nevertheless, all the work and all the pain was more than worth it, for God is doing a wonderful work in the hearts of the Pemon leadership. Because of being much closer to the Pemon, they can now come to us much more easily. They not only come to the classes, but come often for counsel and prayer. With our new facilities we plan to continue and deepen the training of leadership in all 10 of the Pemon Churches. Even now some of these trained leaders are going out to train others who are too far out in the jungle to be able to come to La Paragua regularly and study. What would have happened had we not listened to God and did our own thing or went our own way? We now have facilities that the Pemon can use for decades to come if Christ tarries. The ministry is going very well, and the Pemon themselves are learning to lead the way as I become more and more of a helper to them. Does this mean that we have beaten the enemy? Hardly. Even as I close this book a communication has reached me from Venezuela that a faction of leftist Senators and congressman are seeking to pass a law that will eventually oust all missionaries from the jungle areas of Venezuela, and seek to return the Indians to their witchcraft and old ways from which most of them desire to escape. Satan never sleeps. As you finish this book please remember to pray for the Pemon, as well as all the tribes in Venezuela who are coming from darkness to light, that darkness will not prevail, and the everlasting light of the glorious Gospel of Jesus will shine more brilliantly than ever. Then do not cease to pray for us as we seek to follow God in His pursuit of the Pemon nation, that we will shrink from nothing that God proposes, no matter what it might cost us. Our goal, as ever, is to please the Lord who called us, and give Him the glory He deserves. He WILL make a name for Himself amongst the Pemon, and it WILL be an everlasting sign that will never be cut off (Isaiah 55:13).

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