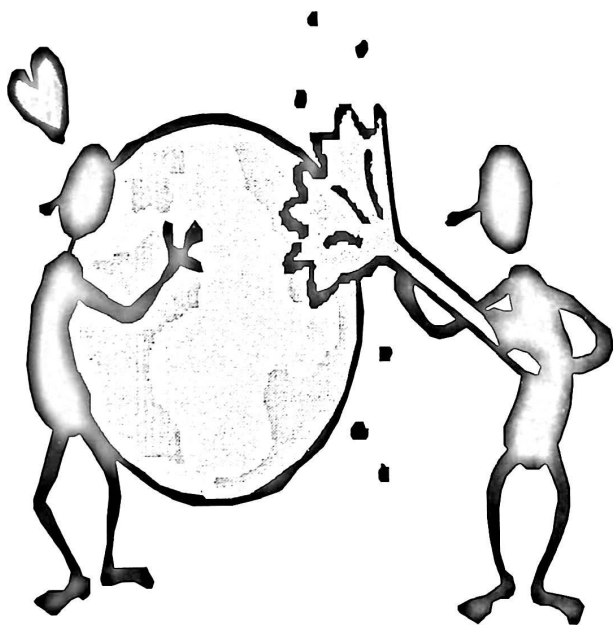




## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express our thanks to each of you who have held us in your prayers, who have supported us, and who have encouraged us. A special thank you to Brothers Jerry Kidd, Jeff Swart, and Don Collins, and the rest of the Missions Department Staff of the Baptist Missionary Association of America for your wisdom, your patience, and your assistance. And thank you, Lord, for allowing us to serve you.

*Tom Jopling*



# One

## How We Got Here Or “*You’re Crazy!*”

Those two words have been used to describe me more often than any other words. When I was in high school, they flowed from the lips of several young ladies whose company I sought for a Friday night. I have also heard them from my fellow firefighters and paramedics just before or after I committed some action that I thought was necessary at that moment. I have heard them from close friends and from total strangers. Perhaps, they are all correct.

I truly believe that God can and will use the *crazies* of this world to accomplish His will. Most of the missionaries that I know have been called crazy. After all, the words of Christ tell us that just being a Christian will make us appear strange to the rest of the world. I believe being a missionary requires a little daring, a little stubbornness, and a little craziness. Even if it isn’t necessary, being a little crazy is a good way to get things done. People just sort of get out of your way, look at you a little strange, then you can pretty much do what you need to without people telling you that you

can't do it that way. Being a little crazy does have its advantages.

The date was August 8, 1990. I was a firefighter/paramedic with the Springdale, Arkansas, Fire Department and very happy. I was progressing up the structured rank and about ready to test for Lieutenant. I was happy, or so I thought; however, every time I heard a sermon I started preaching it in my mind along with the preacher. I started adding things to the sermon. "Why didn't he say this or bring out this point?" I would say to myself and to my wife on the way home. I knew that I could also preach those sermons. I also began to have a burden for lost souls. I wanted to lead people to the Lord. It became almost an obsession.

That Sunday night my daughter, Dalaina, was to be baptized. My wife and I had led her to the Lord the previous week and this was her special night. I knew there was something else in my heart, my soul, and my mind. When my pastor started saying words about serving God and being willing to do whatever He wanted from us, I knew the pastor was preaching to me. I called my wife, Valerie, to go outside with me.

"Val, God wants me to be a preacher. I have to surrender to His call."

She looked me straight in the eye, smiled sweetly, and said, "You're crazy!" She then went back inside, leaving me to wrestle with God on my own. She wasn't being mean. She just trusted me to do the right thing without her blurring the situation and my thoughts with her wishes and ideas.

During the invitation I walked down the aisle with tears flowing down my face. I could hardly speak the words to my pastor and the church. The church immediately licensed me to preach. I later found out from other members, preachers, friends, and even Valerie that they all knew that I had been called to preach before I realized it. Such is the way of God. Sometimes the one called is the last to realize that he is being called. Somehow God knows to prepare those closest to him

I also received that night my first inclination that we would become missionaries some day. As she came to hug my neck, one of Valerie's best friends said to me in a very serious tone, "Don't you go and take Valerie to some jungle as some missionary." Isn't it strange how God will give us hints as He prepares us for His work when we really have no idea what is going on?

A few months later I attended the Baptist Missionary Association of America (BMAA) Mission Symposium in Dallas, Texas. For three days we heard from different missionaries about how God was at work around the world. My heart was touched from the first words of the first speaker through the last words spoken at the symposium. During the last sermon, a challenge was given to those who were listening and felt God was speaking to them. I fell into that category.

The speaker said to surrender to God. He said God can and will take care of the details. During the invitation, I walked the aisle and told God if He wanted me to be a missionary, I would go wherever He wanted me to go and do

whatever He wanted me to do. I then took the hand of Bro. Jerry Kidd, Director of Foreign Missions of the BMAA, and told him that God wanted me to be a missionary some day. Brother Kidd smiled and said a few words like, "Bless you," and, "Allow God to work with you." He was not being rude or disrespectful. Please understand that at least twenty other young men and women had said the same thing to him during the meeting. It had been a great meeting, full of emotion and good reports. All too frequently young people, like myself, can get caught up in the emotion of the moment. Brother Kidd knew this was true. It was also the first time that Brother Kidd had ever seen me. I was just some young man crying his eyes out and saying words that he had heard hundreds of times.

When I got back home the next day, I told Valerie that we were going to be missionaries. Guess what she said. You're right. She said, "You're crazy!" Though God had been using me every Sunday to preach somewhere, she knew I still lacked a lot of training, and I was not nearly ready to do something like this. She, at that time, had no desire to leave the United States of America, its conveniences, and its Wal-Mart stores.

I prayed and thought about where and how we might serve as missionaries. Valerie prayed that I would listen to God and not to Tom. I began some correspondence Bible courses through Central Baptist College. God continued to allow me to preach every week. During the three years before my ordination and first pastorate, I preached more than most

pastors. I prayed every day that God would give me somewhere to preach and He honored my prayers. I also had the opportunity to lead several people to the Lord Jesus Christ. I was “snake-bit.” I loved seeing lost souls take Jesus Christ as Savior.

Sometime in 1992, *I* (emphasis on *I*) decided that we were supposed to go to New Guinea as missionaries. I went to the library and learned all I could about that country. I also began to teach myself Pidgin English. This went on until a pastor friend of mine arranged for me to meet Charles Spurgeon, who was then serving as a BMAA missionary to Honduras and was on furlough in the United States.

Brother Spurgeon had been on the field for several years. He was a dentist, as well as a church planter. He had a clinic in the mountains of Honduras and wanted to expand to include some general medicine care. He thought my medical background would allow me to assist in the clinic. Plans were made for me accompany him to Honduras in April of 1993 for an eight-day visit.

When April arrived, I made my first trip out of the USA. God opened my eyes to a different kind of world. We landed at three different Central American airports along the way. At each of them I saw anti-aircraft guns, tanks guarding the terminals, and fighter aircraft on the tarmacs. There were soldiers everywhere and they all had machine-guns. I began to wonder if I really wanted to bring my wife and children to that kind of world.

We arrived in Honduras and were met by BMAA

missionary Bobby Bowman. He took us to his home. It took about two hours to drive from the airport to Sula. The drive was along a road that was supposed to be asphalt, but it really wasn't. We had to ford a couple of creeks along the way since the bridges were out. Did I ever experience a culture shock! There were people begging for food along the streets. I saw kids holding up iguanas for sale. Women were breast-feeding their babies in public where everyone could see them. The public rest rooms were wherever you happened to be standing when the urge hit you. The houses were made from adobe and thatch, and sometimes even from cardboard, paper, and plastic. My eyes were opened to a world that had only previously existed on the 'save the children' commercials on television and in National Geographic magazines or special television programs.

After a short visit in Brother Bowman's home, Brother Spurgeon and I took off to the mountain town of Santa Rosa de Copán. It was another two and a half-hour drive. The further we went into the mountains, the worse the road became. We had to dodge rockslides, cattle, chickens, ox-carts, burros, buses, and people. It seemed that the national past time was to congregate on the road, lie down on it, and see just how close the cars would come to you before you rolled out of the way.

When we stopped in a village to buy a coke, God again touched my heart. As I stood at the counter drinking my coke and eating a stale candy bar, a little girl about six years of age, who was dirty, malnourished, and wearing tattered clothing,

stood nearby watching me. I had eaten about half of the candy bar when I gave her the rest. I expected her to just gulp it down; however, she walked over to her mother, who was sitting about ten yards away holding a younger sister. This girl then broke that half of the candy bar into three parts and shared it with her mother and sister. That was an example of how God uses the meek in His world to touch the heart of those He calls. It was that moment when I began to realize that this was the place where God wanted me serve Him.

The next day I was exposed face to face with the people of Honduras and love for them began to grow within my heart. That night I attended a service in a mission in Santa Rosa. Though the only words I knew in Spanish were *sí*, *no*, *comida*, and *servicio*, I truly felt the Holy Spirit was present and He was dealing with me. When they sang *At The Cross* it just broke my heart. By the end of the second day, I was almost positive that this country was going to be my future home.

On the third day in Honduras, we went even deeper into the mountains to a small village named Santa Rosita. It was a two-hour trip along horrible mountain roads. The village is poor, even by Honduran standards. It had no electricity, no running water, and no places of business. Nothing but dust, rocks, farm animals running wild, and people could be seen. We conducted a service in the schoolyard that night by the light of a lantern. Approximately fifty people, two goats, a mule, three hogs, and a burro were present. The songs were upbeat, the conversation lively, and, though I could not

understand the preaching, I heard a lot of “amens” spoken. The children stared at me. All the adults had to shake my hand and talk to me. Once again the Holy Spirit touched me. By the time we headed back to Santa Rosa, there was not a doubt in my mind or heart — Honduras was the place God wanted me to serve as His missionary.

The next five days were filled with new experiences. I took about 200 photographs during those days. I wanted to record every sight and experience to take home and share with my wife and friends. When we left Honduras for the United States, I cried. The love that had grown for the people and the country of Honduras was deep. I realized that love had become a burden from God for these people. I wanted to go back to Honduras and help those people to find Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and learn to serve Him

Valerie met me at the airport when we arrived back home. After we exchanged hugs and kisses, she asked how was my trip. I simply said, “Val, we are going to move to Honduras.”

Once again I heard those words, “You’re crazy!”

Over the next few months, I tried to relate my experiences to her and the older children. I also started checking into some mission organizations and praying that God would open the doors for us to become missionaries in Honduras if that was His will. The first organization that I contacted was the BMAA. I learned that the BMAA prefers that their missionaries have some college or seminary level Bible study, as well as some pastoral experience. I continued

my correspondence studies through Central Baptist College and started praying that God would take care of the pastoral experience. I also continued my work as a firefighter and paramedic and began to read every book on general medicine that I could find.

Two months later in June of 1993, Springdale Missionary Baptist Church asked me to serve as their associate pastor. I served in that role for about a month. In early August, Old Baptist Mission in Westville, Oklahoma, called me to serve as their pastor. I told them up front that I was sure that sometime in the future that I would be elected as a missionary and that we were pursuing that route as God led us. They accepted that news and still wanted me to be their pastor. I accepted the call, was ordained, and served there for the next two years.

In April of 1994, Valerie accompanied me back to Honduras. She has always been a little quicker about some spiritual things than I am. This was one of those times. The night we arrived in country, we visited a small village named Portrellos. This village is very similar to Santa Rosita where I had visited the year before. She cried during the service, fell in love with the people, and felt that love changed to a burden - all before the end of the service. She told me that night as we laid down to sleep, "Yes Tom, we are supposed to come here."

When we got back to the United States, we started serious preparations for becoming missionaries. We started preparing friends, relatives, and the children. We made

formal application with the BMAA in July. I completed a few more Bible courses and I served as an observation apprentice with a couple of family practice doctors. I intensified my reading on general medicine. And we prayed. We asked for God's guidance. We prayed that God would open the doors. I also learned some more patience. In August, we met with the Directors of the BMAA Mission Department. Brother Kidd knew who I was now. The meeting was positive. Valerie and I explained to them what we felt God would have us to do in Honduras. We wanted to be church planters, develop children's nutrition programs, and offer limited medical assistance to physically help the people there. These programs would serve as open doors to help their spiritual needs. We wanted to work in the Santa Rosa area. We learned that Brother Spurgeon had left Honduras and we would be serving on our own..

We met with the Advisory Committee of the BMAA in November. They asked us many questions. They asked about our call to be missionaries in Honduras. The best that I could manage between the tears was that I was homesick to get back to Honduras. The next day they told us that we would be recommended to the BMAA body of churches the following April at the national association meeting.

The next four months was the longest period of my life. God taught me more patience. I continued as pastor of Old Baptist Mission; however, my heart was in Honduras.

When April, 1995, arrived, the entire family made the trip to Dallas for the meeting of the BMA of America. I was

again in the city where God had first touched my heart for missions five years earlier. Our family was a lot larger this time. We now had five children. Joshua was 14, Dalaina 11, Melanie 4, Joel 3, and Danielle was five months old. We enjoyed the services and the business sessions of the meeting. The preaching was great, the singing beautiful, but we were anxious for that last business session. That was when the business of the Missions Department and missionaries was to be conducted. The recommendations from the Advisory committee were read. I felt as though I had quit breathing. There were several minutes of discussion regarding other missionaries, money, and other things like that. I doubt that I had ever been so nervous in my whole life, except for my wedding day, and this day was going to be equally as life changing. The moderator finally got around to calling for a vote of those in favor of Tom Jopling serving as a missionary in Honduras, Central America. There was no opposition. We were elected. We could go to Honduras. Valerie and I hugged, cried, and made complete idiots of ourselves on the back row of that auditorium.

A few minutes later all of the new missionaries with their families, as well as all the veteran missionaries that were present, were asked to come to the stage. There we were, the Joplings, standing before a couple of thousand people representing about 1300 churches and we were elected missionaries. I will never forget it. They prayed for all of us, took some pictures, and shook our hands. *I was now a missionary.* I always knew that the title *missionary* would

carry a lot of responsibility, but I didn't know just how much until we were leaving the auditorium. A distinguished looking gentleman whom I had never seen before walked up to me and grasped my hand, told me what church he was from and said that he would be praying for me. He walked away leaving a one hundred dollar bill in my hand. That was when it really hit me. There were now over 200,000 Christians who would pray for me, and give of their money to support my family as we represented them as their missionaries. The tears started again. God was so good.

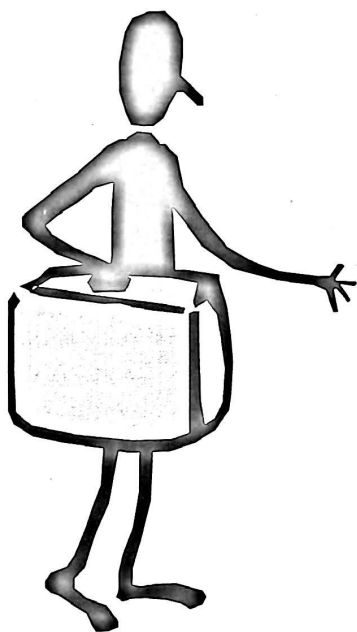
We began deputation May 1, 1995, and for just over three months, we visited churches all over the central part of the U.S. Deputation is a period of time for newly elected missionaries to visit churches and tell them about themselves and what they plan to do when they arrive on their selected field of service. We traveled from New Orleans to Illinois, from western Oklahoma to eastern Mississippi. The people received us with love everywhere we visited. I do, however, recall one pastor whom I called. I was making plans to be in his area. I had a Sunday evening opening and ask if I could visit his church. He told me that he did not want any missionary visiting his church right then because his church was supporting too many projects already. He left that church a few months later. This was an isolated incident and I prayed for that pastor.

I remember a few people who told us we were the first missionaries to ever visit their church. A couple of the churches did not even know who or what the BMAA was. To

some folks BMAA was just some initials on their sign. Deputation was a good time for us; we made new friends, as well as we also educated a few people about the BMAA and their missionaries during this time.

We also said our good-byes during these three months. We were the guests of honor at several "going away parties" and family gatherings. Of course, there were a lot of tears but we were ready to start our new lives in Central America and that softened the heartaches.

On the morning of August 14, 1995, family, friends, and the mission directors gathered at the airport in Little Rock, Arkansas, for our departure for Central America. A new chapter in the lives of the Jopling family was about to begin.



# Two

## Costa Rica and Language School

We were on our way. Each of us was excited. Valerie and I were also a little apprehensive about taking the five children into a part of the world that some people still called uncivilized. Joshua and Dalaina were ready to see all of the things that Valerie and I had described to them over the past couple of years. Melanie wanted to make new friends. Joel was ready to see a jaguar in real life, which he told to everyone whom he happened to see on the airplane. Danielle wanted to pull the gold wings off of the stewardess's blouse.

Our first home in Central America was to be the city of San Jose, Costa Rica. There we would live and study the Spanish language for a year. Valerie and I did not know any Spanish except for a couple of important words — *comida* and *servicio*, which mean food and restroom respectively. Costa Rica has the highest economic level and is the most industrialized of the Latin American countries. It would be a good place for us North Americans to get over our “Wal-Mart” withdrawals.

We met two other newly elected BMAA missionary families on our flight south: John Calloway and his new wife

Melanie who would be going to Bolivia after language school, and Randy and Kristen Scaggs who would head to the Dominican Republic after their time in Costa Rica. During the coming year we all would become close friends.

Our year in Costa Rica would be an adventure, and it started out with a bang. As we flew over Central America, we encountered stormy weather. We were advised that, due to the weather conditions, we would be detouring through Panama City, Panama, for the night instead of San Jose. That made us just a little nervous because there was no one to meet us there to help us find the necessary things that we might need like food, water, and bathrooms. Joel started to cry because he was not going to Costa Rica and he would not see his jaguar. We finally landed about ten o'clock that night. The airline had arranged for buses to take the entire group to a hotel for the night. However, there were more passengers than seats, so the Jopling family had to wait for a taxi.

Finally the airline personnel found a taxi that was big enough for us and all our carry-on luggage. It was an old Chevrolet station wagon that appeared to have seen service in World War II as a tank and had taken plenty of punishment. I had to hold the front passenger door closed as we traveled down the road. As we rounded the corners, a very loud high-pitched screech came from the front end of the vehicle. We hit one bump in the road and the rear view mirror fell into my lap. The driver was much like the vehicle itself. He was either blind and deaf or he truly wished to commit suicide and take us with him. We were doing 60 miles per hour down city

streets, weaving in between other taxis, vehicles, trashcans, drunks, bicycles, lovers holding hands, and any smooth places in the street. The only things he did not weave between were the potholes. It seemed that he went out of his way to find every bump and hole in the road. And did you know that yellow lights in Central America mean to punch the accelerator and double your speed?

We finally arrived at a very nice hotel about midnight. We were told to be ready to leave from the lobby at 5:00 a.m. After a few hours of fitful sleep, we made our way down to the lobby. We rode in a bus back to the airport. About 8:00 a.m. after three hours sitting in the airport, trying to keep Joel and Melanie from destroying the terminal and creating an international incident that would have all of us serving lifetime imprisonment in a Panama jail cell, the flight crew made their way on board. We took off about thirty minutes later. Joel, once again, told everyone on board that he was going to Costa Rica and would get to see a jaguar.

Half an hour later we arrived at the San Jose airport. We got off the plane and headed toward customs. As we did so, Joel let all the security people know that he was now in Costa Rica and wanted to see a jaguar. I was dreading the customs check because we had twenty-one footlockers full of everything we needed to set up housekeeping for the coming year. I just knew they were going to have us unlock everything and then we would have to pay some large tax for those 15-year-old pots and pans. I began praying as we got in line. Ten minutes later when it was our turn to stand before

the inspector, either Valerie or God pinched Danielle. (I still don't know which.) She began to wail and cry so loudly that the sound of the jet airplanes taking off were drowned out. After checking just one piece of our luggage, the inspector, with one hand covering an ear, stamped our paper and waved us all through. Another prayer was answered.

BMAA missionaries Dennis Murr and Phil Knott, who were serving in Costa Rica, met us as we exited customs. They took all three travel weary new missionary families to what would become their homes for the coming year. It turned out that we were to have a nice, big house only a few blocks from our language school and about a thirty-minute walk from the school the children would attend. Our home was a short walk from four different language schools, so the area markets and business people were accustomed to gringos (North Americans) that could not speak Spanish. Thus, we began our year of studying the language and learning the Latin culture.

Brothers Knott and Murr wanted us to get in a missionary frame of mind immediately. After a couple of weeks Bro. Knott invited the three new guys out to a building project in a small village. After working hard physically one Saturday morning, the local pastor's wife prepared lunch for us. It was beans and rice with lemonade. There was also a jar of brownish clear liquid with a large, round, green pepper in it. The pastor poured a little of the liquid onto his beans and then handed the jar to me. Being a southern boy, I grew up with hot peppers to go along with beans, so I just poured a

little of the juice over my beans like he did and then forked what I thought was the last pepper in this jar of peppers. After a couple of bites of beans and rice, I picked up this large, juicy pepper and took a healthy bite of it. Approximately two seconds later I opened my mouth and great tongues of fire shot forth from it — and it was not the Holy Spirit. THAT LITTLE ROUND PEPPER WAS PURE FIRE! I made a few sounds that must have resembled those of evil spirits because everyone else at the table turned to look at me. I then reached for the glass of lemonade in front of me and attempted to extinguish the raging fire in my mouth. There was not enough in the glass. As I was reaching for the pitcher to refill my glass, Bro. Knott and the others realized what I done and began to laugh at me, even though I was sure I was passing away right before their eyes. The national pastor was either serious or a very good actor. He was looking very aggravated and started throwing his hands into the air and speaking in rapid Spanish. Bro. Knott just laughed harder and translated the pastor's words for us, "I can't believe you did that! You ate THE PEPPER! Now I have to go all the way to Panama and get another one." It turned out that this was a Panamanian Fire Pepper. One of these little "dudes" is strong enough to create several quarts of pepper sauce when placed in vinegar. You are not supposed to ever eat the pepper because it is said to be the hottest pepper known to man; however, this mere mortal had done so. Everyone had a good laugh while I stood at the water faucet. About six hours later after going through three quarts of lemonade, a gallon of

water, and a quart of milk I started to have a little relief. I reflected on this important lesson I had learned about living in a foreign country. Never put anything into your mouth until you see someone else doing so, and then only do so with great caution.

We had been in the country a couple of months when we decided to do a little sightseeing. We took a group tour to see one of the most active volcanoes in the world. It was a magnificent sight as lava, smoke, ash, and fire shot out of this perfect cone. It was just like watching a National Geographic special on television. There were also some hot springs located near the volcano that had been turned into a small swimming area and observation area.

Since I am an avid hiker, I decided to do some exploring in the surrounding jungle with a couple of other students. About a mile into the jungle I felt something snap in my right calf muscle and my right foot ceased to work. The pain seemed to subside a bit after a couple of minutes and I was able to hobble back to the main group. By the time I got there my leg had already begun to swell and the pain was increasing. I knew I had a problem. This was on a Saturday afternoon and the nearest medical facility was several hours away, besides that, no more buses went back into town that night. I would have to tough it out until the next day. By the time I got to a hospital Sunday night about nine o'clock, my leg was twice its normal size and my foot was blue and cold. I had a tear in the calf muscle and the swelling had cut off circulation to the foot. It was not a good situation.

A surgeon was called in and preparations were made to cut into the leg to relieve the pressure before I lost my foot. He decided to wait another hour. He came back and said we will wait another hour. This went on for twelve hours. Between his visits I was really getting close to God and begging that God's will be done. I was also telling God that I really did not want to lose my foot or have surgery. The swelling finally started to go down a little. I was in the hospital for four days and on crutches for a couple of weeks. It took over a year before I regained full strength in that leg. Another lesson to remember — 911 does not exist in third world countries and a small accident can have big repercussions.

We have many good memories of our time in Costa Rica. The language school was excellent and the instructors were beautiful people. The school specialized in training missionaries. All of the teachers were born-again Christians. A couple of them were deacons and one was a Baptist pastor. The classes were small. The school also admitted a few non-missionary students to fill the classes. In my class were Randy, John, myself, and a young lady from Taiwan. She was very soft spoken and sweet. She was also Buddhist. Our pronunciation teacher was the Baptist pastor and the four of us all had a great desire that this young lady would accept Christ as Savior before she left the school. Several months into language school, one of our lessons was to go through the plan of salvation in Spanish with a partner. Mae, the young Taiwanese woman, was my partner. I went through the whole

plan and as I was nearing the end of my presentation, I asked the question, “Would you like to pray to Jesus at this time for salvation?” To my surprise, Mae said, “Yes.” I was sort of dumbfounded and asked if she was serious or if she was just playing the part. She said that she wanted to become a Christian. Was I ever excited! We had been praying for her for several months and trying to be good witnesses to her. Here was the harvest. I asked for my teacher to assist me with this part because my Spanish was still very weak and this was too serious to be stumbling over words. This was my first opportunity to lead someone to Jesus in the Spanish language and she was Chinese. Don’t try to tell me that there is no God in control. Who else could bring a poor south Arkansas boy to a Spanish language school in Central America to witness to the daughter of a very rich Taiwanese family in a language that was new to both of us. God has His ways and they are not our ways. He uses our weaknesses through His strength.

After a year in language school, we were ready to move on. One year to the day after arriving in Costa Rica, we left that beautiful country for the United State where we would make final arrangements and prepare our household goods for shipping to Honduras. We were at last ready to go to the country that God had called us to — our adopted home and place of service.



# Three

## So, This is Home? Or God Does Answer Prayers

After about six days in the United States, we had packed most of our earthly possessions into a seagoing container. Joshua and I hopped on a plane and headed for Honduras. We were planning to arrive before the rest of the family in order to get the house prepared. We wanted to make the transition from the land of “Wal-Mart” to the land of “What’s a mall?” a little easier. Joshua quickly realized that we were no longer in Arkansas when we dodged an eight-foot boa constrictor that was on the road not many kilometers from the airport.

Speaking of the house, here is another example of how God answers prayers in big ways. Valerie and I had been praying for the house situation while we had been in Costa Rica. We both knew what most houses were like in Honduras, so we were apprehensive. Where were we going to find a house big enough for a family of seven gringos that had not been recently used as a cattle barn? We each had our personal prayers for the house. I would pray nightly, “God,

you know how much water this family uses. You know we have to have our baths. Just think of all those dirty clothes that have to be washed. Now God, I know that water is a very precious commodity in Honduras, but God, could you help us out with the water situation and at least provide a good spring near the house?" Valerie's prayers went something like this, "Okay, God, we know that no house in Honduras has a yard larger than postage stamp, and in fact there is not even a word for "yard" in their vocabulary. But, Lord, we have a Joel. And if I am going to survive in that country, you know that we have to have a place for Joel to get outside during the day."

We left things in God's hands. After all, he knows the real estate market better than we do. Oh, my, did he find us a house! The house that God provided for us was unbelievable. It turned out to be one of the largest homes in western Honduras. It was a ranch style house with four bedrooms and two baths. It even had an inside kitchen with running water. No hot water, but, that was acceptable. The water system had two deep wells and a cistern so large that you could park four pickup trucks in it. We had more water than the rest of the country put together. The yard had two acres of the most beautiful grass you have ever seen and all kinds of fruit and shade trees. The place looked like a park. Strangers still come to the house and ask permission to have a picnic in the front yard. God really does answer prayer.

Finally, only thirteen days late, we received our shipment. We were told that we set a new record for getting

the paperwork, completing customs inspection, and getting the shipment delivered. Again God answered prayer. I think maybe the idea of me standing up on a couple of desks and throwing a crazy fit may have helped a little also. Joshua and I worked feverishly trying to get the house in somewhat of an order, as the next day Valerie and the rest of the family were to arrive. As you can imagine, we did not succeed. The place was still a disaster area when we left the next morning for the airport.

The airport was something out of an old black and white movie. It was hot, full of mosquitoes; and rather antique with what seemed like three thousand people all shouting to the top of their lungs. Somewhere in this mess were my wife and four younger children with twenty-five pieces of luggage. Finally I saw her with sweat pouring off her brow, hair in tangles, and clothes sticking to her body. There was Valerie, my beautiful wife. She was standing at the customs table with some agent who was pointing at the luggage and screaming something about start opening every piece for inspection and taxes. It was about that time that baby Danielle, whom Dalaina was holding, started to cry. It was not just a normal cry, but rather a bellowing, ear-splitting, high-pitched scream. Valerie and Dalaina say they did not pinch the child, so maybe it was the Holy Spirit again. It didn't really matter who did the pinching; the crying child worked. The customs agent covered her ears and motioned with her head for Valerie, the bellowing baby, the other three kids, and the twenty five pieces of luggage to leave the building as quickly

as possible. Again God answered our prayers.

About four hours later we reached our new home in Santa Rosa. Valerie started crying as she got out of the truck and started looking around at how God had blessed us. The kids immediately started looking for trees to climb and fruit to eat and shouting, "This is a great place to live." Dalaina walked through the house and stated, "So this is home? What, no cable?"



# Four

## Assurance

The next three weeks we spent settling into our new home, meeting our new neighbors, and getting acquainted with a new culture. Let me tell you, there was nothing easy about this transformation, neither for us, nor our neighbors. We felt like the neighborhood goldfish with everyone looking at us. Literally, people would come and stand outside the front gate, just watching and listening. Some of the bolder ones would actually walk up on the porch and look through the windows. At first, we didn't know what they were doing, but it soon became apparent that they were just curious about this new pale-faced gringo family. Their culture shock to us was just as great as our culture shock to them.

During those first few weeks, Valerie and I asked God to make it plain to us that we had actually followed His will. We needed to know that this wasn't just some hair-brained stunt in which we were involved. He gave us that assurance. The first two times that I preached in my horrible Spanish, professions of faith were made. The churches and the people accepted us with open arms and really made us feel at home. We actually begin to feel more at home in this new land than

we did the last three or four years we were in the USA. We felt permanence, something we had not felt in a long time.

Though we felt that we were to be church-planting missionaries, we realized that the existing two churches and two missions in our area needed help and should be given top priority in our work effort. We immediately began visiting, preaching, teaching, and offering any kind of assistance that we could to them and their members. God blessed those efforts. Within the month, the church at Cucuyagua was ready to expand and start a new mission. We purchased a building sitting on an acre of land, then remodeled the building, cleaned up the land, and opened the Mt. Horeb Baptist Mission. Within a year, the mission had outgrown the mother church. Although I did a lot of the preaching and teaching during that first year, it was the national missionary, Bro. Manuel Pinto, who did the largest share of the work in this mission. Bro. Manuel is a real “go-getter.” The only thing that keeps him from doing more than he already does is the number of hours in the day. Currently Bro. Manuel is pastor of one church and a mission, as well as preaching and teaching in two other villages. I am honored to be associated with men like Bro. Manuel. He is a real soldier in God’s army.

Joshua, Bro. Paco (Francisco Espinoza), and I were headed from Santa Rosa to the Cucuyagua area one morning. We encountered an overturned truck on the mountain road. It was a large box truck and it was dangling precariously over the edge of the cliff. We also noticed that there were a lot of

bystanders hanging around the open doors of the truck. As we approached to investigate what was going on, people started grabbing up the new car batteries that had spilled out of the back of the truck. These folks were doing a little looting, which was no big surprise. What we saw next did surprise us. There, pinned in the cab of the truck, was the driver. Not one person was offering any assistance to him, though he was yelling loudly for someone to help him. These folks had decided that they either would not or could not help the driver, but they could help themselves to some new batteries. Seeing this situation, old instincts kicked in, and I started shouting orders, at Josh, at Bro. Paco, and at the surprised looters. Someone had to help this guy and we didn't have "Rescue 911" to call. We were it. I crawled into the cab and started doing what I could for his injuries while the other folks were gathering up chains, pry bars, hack saws, and a mule harness. We used all of these items over the next hour as we worked to free the severely injured man. Finally, about the time the police and the ambulance arrived, we had the man free. Though he had lost his truck, his cargo, and one leg, he still had his life. Bro. Paco visited the man a couple of days later in the hospital and lead the man to Christ.



# Five

## Starting a New Mission

As I mentioned earlier, we did not immediately plan to start a new mission in Santa Rosa. However, that is what happened. You see, since we are from Arkansas, it came natural for us to be neighborly. And that is what we were — neighborly. Valerie and I would go over to our neighbors' houses and sit out on a rock or under a tree and just visit. Sometimes we would drink a little coffee and just enjoy time with them. We did this every day and everywhere. We soon noticed that there were a lot of children around our house. Since we love children, we decided to start doing something every week with the neighborhood children. We did not have any children's literature in Spanish, so we looked at what we had in English and could modify. The BMAA Sunbeam program looked promising.

We contacted the *Casa Bautista Misionera de Publicaciones* and learned that another missionary had previously translated the lesson plans of the program, but not the visuals. After receiving a copy of the lesson plans, we set out to modify and translate the visuals into Spanish using a desktop computer.

Soon thereafter, we started having weekly Sunbeam meetings for the local children. By the third week, we had outgrown our living room and had to move outside to the porch. A month later we had to move out to the patio. We began to notice that not only did we have children coming to the meetings, but adults as well. Mothers, fathers, big brothers and sisters, and grandparents were coming to these classes. It was really something to see some little old lady or a grizzled coffee bean picker with his old hat and machete coloring a picture of Noah and the ark.

Soon people began to make professions of faith during the meetings and during the week. Sometimes people would come to our house and knock on the door and say, “ Brother Tom or Sister Val, I want to get saved right now.” We were evangelizing the people through a children’s program!

After about nine months of this, we had outgrown the patio. We realized that we had planted a mission with out even trying. This was great. God also worked it out so that about that time that the older mission in Santa Rosa was mature enough to organize into a church. Now in Santa Rosa, we had a church in town and a mission just out of town.

It was also during this time that I learned another important lesson about being a missionary — NEVER ASK WHAT YOU ARE EATING, JUST SMILE AND ENJOY. One day I took a trip to the farm of one of our church members. It is a huge farm and is covered by Mayan Ruins and artifacts. After a day of exploring these ruins and going inside the pyramids and seeing two thousand year old

skeletons and other such sights, it was time for a good, hearty meal. We had beans, rice, tortillas and the best tasting pork roast I had ever eaten. Or, at least I thought it was pork roast. As I was biting into my second helping of this meat, I was asked to pass the tongue. I must have looked kind of puzzled because the host repeated his request. This time I was sure of what I heard. "Please pass the beef tongue." The taste of that meat just changed right there in my mouth — sort of like magic.

So remember, JUST SMILE, EAT, AND ENJOY..



# Six

## Everyday Life

The next several months were basically uneventful. We had become quite well adjusted and were enjoying our new lives as missionaries. Though the time was mostly uneventful there were some interesting times. I suppose the best way to fill you in on some of the more interesting times is through the eyes of my diary.

November 6, 1996 – During the past week I worked with a surgery team from the USA at the BMMA hospital in Sula. One night, the emergency room nurse woke us for two stab wound patients. One patient was eviscerated and needed blood badly. Since I had O negative type blood, I gave some of mine. The man survived two and one half hours of surgery losing nearly half his blood volume. The next afternoon I visited with the man and was able to lead him to Jesus Christ. The same afternoon, Joshua gave blood to another patient.

November 20 – I gave blood to the hospital in Santa Rosa so that a neighbor boy could have an operation. The boy's father and mother were too scared. I feel a little weak today.

December 1 – We used our truck as a hearse for the funeral of a neighboring woman. I was able to witness to the family over the next few days. Two professions of faith resulted from the assisting with this funeral.

January 3, 1997 – A 68 year-old man stepped in front of me on highway near San Pedro Sula. He suffered a broken leg and concussion. Police and witnesses stated that the fault was with the pedestrian. However, Honduran law states that the driver of vehicle always pays for damages. After lengthy discussions with police, family, and lawyer, I paid L1300 (\$100) for damages and L77 (\$7) for medical expenses. The price was originally less, but because I'm a North American, I had to pay more. Not a good experience, but I learned a lot.

March 18 – We hosted a construction and medical team from Charlotte, Virginia. We saw patients; also dug and constructed outhouses and latrines.

March 24 – I started teaching Emergency Medical Technician course to the Red Cross. I interviewed for local a radio program and was given the opportunity to talk about Jesus Christ while on the air.

April 22 – The lawyer who was helping us to obtain our residence papers is in jail for theft. Now we have to find new one and start the whole process over again.

May 15, 1998 – We received our papers indicating that we are now permanent residents of Honduras. Thank you, Lord.

# Seven

## José

One of the projects that we had in mind when we applied to be missionaries was to set up a nutrition program for malnourished children. Honduras is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and starvation is an everyday occurrence. We felt the desire to do as Christ did when he walked the earth and try to relieve a little of the suffering.

The nutrition program feeds, provides medical care, vitamins, and personal hygiene products for many, many children everyday. It also allows opportunities for education. Though the program is wonderful and certainly an appreciated ministry, it is designed to be a door opener for the entrance of Christ into the lives of many who might never hear the gospel through other means. The family of José is an example.

In late 1997 we heard of a family who had moved into a house a few kilometers back in the woods behind our home. We heard this news after a couple of tragic deaths. Two young daughters of the family had starved to death. I immediately made my way to the family homestead and found the mother and father working in the cornfield. I told

them about the program and told them their children under age twelve were welcome to come to our home and be part of the nutrition program. They were very pleased and said they would send three of their children.

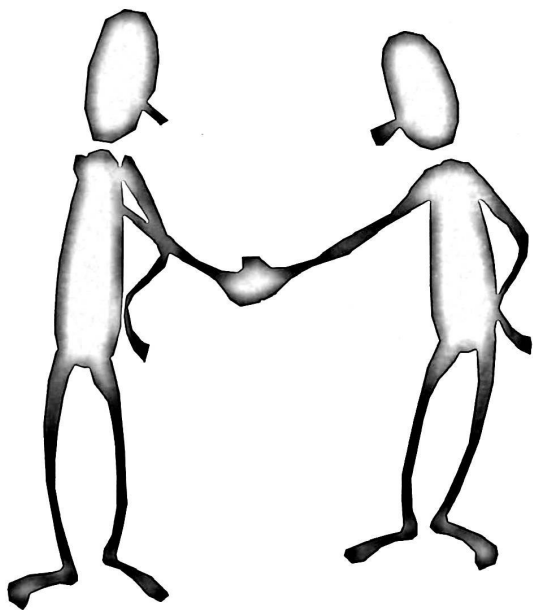
The next day José and two of his sisters were there for lunch. José was a little guy about six years old. Though it was very obvious that he had never owned a pair of shoes, nor more than one change of clothes at any time in his life, he was all smiles. He smiled from ear to ear. You couldn't help falling in love with the kid.

After about six months on the program, José and his sisters were looking better and were much healthier. One day, one of our neighbors knocked on the door and told me that Jose's father wanted me to meet him at his house. So I made the walk back to their home. I was met by Jose's father and invited into the house. It really wasn't much of a house — a fifteen by ten foot adobe structure. There was no electricity and no water; a cooking pit outside served as the kitchen. This served as home for a family of seven. There was a small torch which provided light inside the "house." As I entered, I noticed that Jose's mother was lying in a make-shift bed. Jose's father shook my hand and made small talk. He then told me that his wife was sick with cancer and was dying. He said that she knew this and that she told him that she wanted to talk with someone about God before her death. He went on to tell me that he offered to go up into the town and bring the Catholic priest. He said that she told him no, she wanted to talk with the missionary up the path who not only talked

about God and Jesus, but also helped the people. That missionary was I. Tears filled my eyes. I made my way to her bedside and started talking with her. Some twenty minutes and a prayer later, the angels were praising as another lost soul was saved.

Over the next few weeks, either someone from our mission or I would go to her house and read the Bible to her daily. When she passed on, I was asked to conduct the funeral. It was the first evangelical funeral these folks had ever attended. I preached Jesus that afternoon. Because of that funeral, several of that sweet lady's nieces, nephews, and cousins started attending our mission and several accepted Christ in the following weeks.

That's how the nutrition program works. It opens doors. Our sponsors provide resources for us to knock on those doors. You see, because someone cared enough for a little guy named José to provide him with some meals, his mother and many of his other relatives found Christ.



# Eight

## The Medical Ministry

The other door-opening activity that we wanted to get involved with was a medical ministry. I had been involved with medical activities since I was sixteen years old. I certainly had a great interest in it and knew that people, especially here in Honduras, would be receptive to such help. Once you start talking to folks about their physical problems, it is easy to open the door to their spiritual problems. Thus, the medical ministry got started.

The Honduran Ministry of Health looked over my credentials and licensed me as a physician assistant. We made a makeshift clinic behind our house in what was once the maid's quarters. The medicine is donated and/or purchased through the gifts of individuals, medical teams, and Baptist Medical Ministries International (a separate ministry of the BMAA). We see non-emergency patients a couple of days a week at the clinic and emergencies whenever I am at home. We also make trips out into the smaller villages of western Honduras on a regular basis. We see two to three hundred patients a week. We see a lot of common ailments along with a good amount of diseases that are found only in the tropics.

We have also treated serious emergencies including lacerations, broken bones, and burns. It is pretty much the everyday family practice. Our clinic is open for the poor people. Those who have the means to pay a regular doctor are not seen as patients in the clinic.

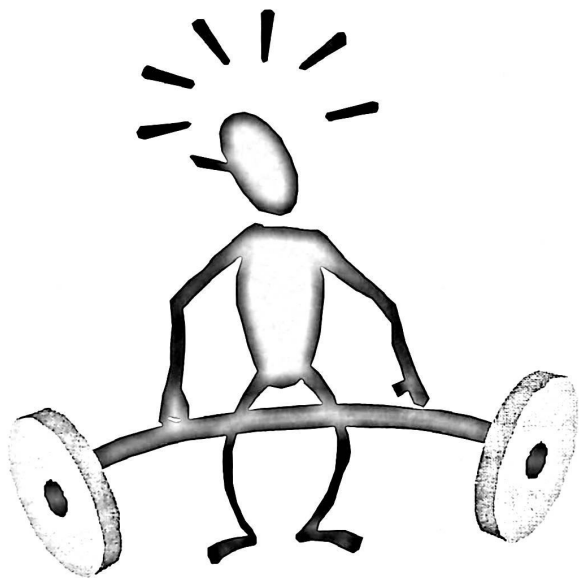
Again, this medical ministry is a door opener for the gospel. Let me tell you about a young lady and a young family who are typical of how the Lord uses this ministry.

Gloribell, a sixteen year-old young lady, came to the clinic one morning because of headaches. It was obvious by her actions, her words, and her body language that much more was going on than just a few headaches. As I questioned her, the truth slowly came out. She was depressed — because she felt unworthy. Her parents and grandmother had joined a very charismatic group of Christians and she had been going with them for some time to their meetings. The problem was that while most of the adults, including her family, had at one time or other spoken in ‘tongues’, she had never received this ‘gift.’ She also suffered from many temptations. The charismatic leaders told her she would not be having these temptations if she were a good Christian. This counsel caused her to feel unworthy and unchristian. Those feelings led to depression. After counseling with her for some time, I invited her to come to our mission and become involved with our young people. Our mission has a large group of young people and depression is something these kids do not suffer from. She fit in very quickly as the youth made her feel welcome. She is now one of our helpers in our AWANA youth program.

She has the assurance of her salvation and realizes that not every person has or receives the same gifts and talents from God.

Luis, Patty, and their three-year old daughter showed up at the clinic one morning with a few common physical ailments. As I treated them, I began to talk with them. I found out that they had been married for five years and at the moment were having some marital problems. I counseled them for a while and invited them to church. I also gave them a tract. They said goodbye and promised to come to church. That afternoon, Luis came back and wanted to know if I could visit them that evening in their home. I assured him that I could. When I arrived, Luis had his New Testament out and the tract. He had been reading and said that he wanted to get saved right then. He felt the Holy Spirit leading him. So he prayed and got saved right there, right then. He was baptized into the mission three weeks later. Patty, who was saved when she was a teenager, also attends with him. They have become very faithful and active in the Lord's work.

That is how the medical ministry works. It opens the doors to the mind so the Holy Spirit can open the hearts and souls for Christ to enter as Savior.



# Nine

## The Big Gringo

During our first couple of years in Santa Rosa, I had the opportunity to befriend a couple of Honduran army officers. They helped me with problems with our paperwork, and I was also acting as their base medic. One day they came by the house and asked if I would be willing to go with them on a humanitarian aid mission. They would provide a lot of medicine if I would go along and help see patients. This was going to be a large project. Two Honduran physicians, a dentist, and I would be the medical team. I said, "Of course, I would help."

Two days later I was picked up in an army truck and we headed off into the mountains. We traveled about an hour on the paved highway before we turned off onto a rock road. We traveled this good road for another hour and a half. Then things started getting interesting. We were heading up Mount Celaque, the highest mountain peak in Honduras of almost 10,000 feet. The road kept getting steeper, narrower, and rougher. Soon the road became a trail so narrow that the vehicle passed with an inch clearance between the sheer, rock wall on one side, and the straight-down cliff on the other. I was certainly catching up on my prayer time during this trip.

After about three and a half hours from the time we left the house, we arrived at a fairly large, however very remote, indigenous village. These people were of the Lenca tribes who have been occupying these mountains for the past 2,500 years. It was here that we set up for two days of medical assistance. I noticed right away that the people, especially the children, seemed to be drawn to me. I am about three-fourths kid myself, so I had no trouble developing a rapport with these young people. They told me that I was the first white man who had ever visited their village. Since these people rarely left their village, I was the first white man most of them had ever seen.

The people were wonderful to help us in setting up the clinic areas. We used the village community building as our headquarters. They brought candles and kerosene lamps for us to have light; they hauled water and boiled it for us to drink and to have for washing. They prepared beans, rice, tortillas, and chicken for us to eat. They really went all out to take care of us. We worked! We worked hard seeing and treating patients. We worked until a storm drove everybody inside. What a storm it was! Most of the storm was below us. We were looking down and into the clouds as the streaks of lightning passed within what seemed like inches of us. It was such a strange and beautiful sight. The rain then started and the raindrops drumming on the clay tile roofs provided a wonderful beat for sleeping that night.

The next morning started early as we saw more patients. People were coming from more distant villages for

treatment. In the two days that we were there, the two physicians, the dentist, and I saw and treated 800 patients.

That afternoon we begin to pack up and prepare for our trip back to Santa Rosa. The village people willingly began to help us, doing their very best to assist us. However, the boxes of equipment and supplies were heavy and these people are not very big. The average man is about 5'3" and the ladies are around 4'6". Due to heredity and poor nutrition, these people just do not grow very big. I was a giant among them standing at 6 feet and weighing 250 pounds. They tried their best to help out. As I was playing with some of the children, I noticed a group of four men trying to pick up a box of supplies. The box was large and they were having a tough time with it. Not wanting the box to fall, I ran over and grabbed the box out of their hands and put it in the truck by myself. The men and children just stepped back and said, "O-o-o-o-h!" Now, that was fun. So I picked up another box and put it on the truck. "A-a-a-a-h!" went the crowd. Now the kids started shouting and waving to other kids and their parents to come watch the big, strong gringo move the heavy boxes all by himself. Soon the village square was full of people watching me pick up boxes. I had an audience. And what do missionaries do when they have an audience? They preach. So, that is just what I started to do. Now I can't say for certain that anyone was saved after that short sermon, but they heard about Jesus and I received an invitation to go back to that village to tell them more about the Christ Jesus who is a lot stronger than this big gringo.



# Ten

## Furlough Is...

In late June, 1998, we returned to the States for a furlough. A furlough is a period of time given to missionaries who serve in foreign countries to come back to the USA to visit their families and see their doctors. It was a great time of visiting family, making new friends, and renewing old friendships. I would summarize what a furlough is with the following comical notes.

### Furlough Is...

...using up the 12,000 mile warranty on your new, used van in four months;

...being taken to a restaurant with a 200 foot buffet and your young daughter crying because there are no black beans and rice to eat;

...becoming a gold member of Holiday Inn's Priority Club;

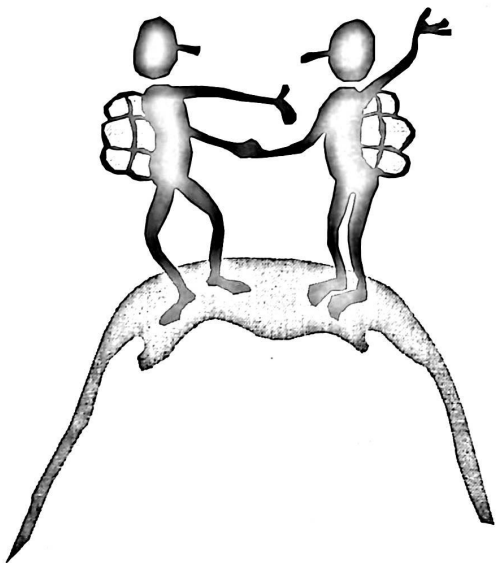
...saying that its great to be here in the First Baptist

Church of Magnolia when you are not in the First Baptist  
Church of Magnolia;

...dropping your oldest child off at college and then  
crying the whole 300 mile trip back home as you realize what  
you have just done;

...calling back to Honduras and being told that  
everything is going just as great as if you had never left;

...realizing that home is truly where the heart is and the  
heart is 2000 miles away in a different country.



# Eleven

## Army Duty

We arrived back home in Honduras on January 5, 1999. Our friends met us with open arms and we settled back down very quickly. Honduras was home for the Joplings now.

Before I left on furlough, I had been asked to serve as chaplain at the local army base. The last Sunday afternoon of January, one of the officers with whom I have become friends stopped at the house. He asked if I was free the following Tuesday to come to the base and meet the new commanding officer. I said, "Sure," and made plans to go.

The following Tuesday I arrived at the fort (it is the original fort built in Spanish style about a hundred and fifty years ago). I was ushered into the Colonel's office and had a nice visit with him. He told me that He felt it was important that his men receive spiritual instruction to go along with their regular military training. He then asked me if I would be able to come weekly and give Bible lessons and talk with the men. Of course, I jumped on this opportunity in a heartbeat. As we concluded the meeting and I was preparing to leave, he then asked me if I would stay for a change of command ceremony

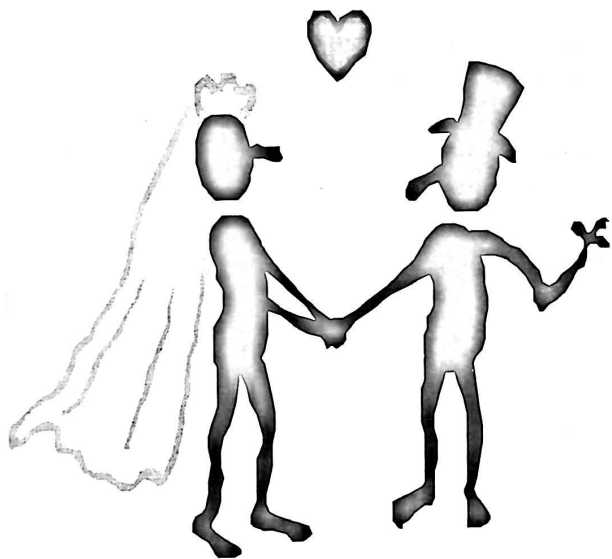
in which he would be formally accepting his new command and its responsibilities. This type of ceremony is a very formal, special event in any army officer's career.

As the three hundred plus soldiers and officers gathered on the parade field, to my surprise, I was escorted to the podium with the high ranking officers. After the battalion was called to attention, I was introduced to give an invocation. Though someone had failed to advise me of this, I was able to perform this mission. I then sat down and enjoyed the ceremony as it progressed. As the Colonel was concluding his speech to his men, he included his goals, plans, and ideas for the battalion. He then told them that a soldier could not be the best soldier possible without God's blessings and will. Then, to my surprise, he asked me to come preach to him and his men from God's word. Fortunately, I did have a New Testament in my pocket, and as I stumbled to the microphone, I thought of the first sermon I ever preached — about Nicodemis when he came to Christ in the night. I explained to these soldiers that everyone needs salvation and that the lowest private is equal to his new colonel in the eyes of God. This brought a lot of smiles from the ranks and a few of the officers; however, the Colonel didn't smile quite as big.

After the ceremony several officers came to me asking when they could talk with me in private about the Bible and salvation. The Colonel even asked when we could visit again. I told him to just give me a date. He did so and weekly Bible studies were planned.

At the first meeting nearly all the officers and the Colonel were present, along with about 150 soldiers. One of the officers came to me and made plans to visit with me the next week. He said that he was like an ox looking for a drink of water.

I met with that officer the next week in his home and in his office. Late one night, after all the rest of the base had gone to sleep, this officer accepted Christ. He was only the first. These weekly Bible studies soon became worship services on Sunday mornings. Not just at that one base, but now at another one also. It was not long before two other officers accepted Christ along with several soldiers. These men started nightly devotionals in the barracks, which led to other professions of faith. It is just unbelievable to see how God can take a simple friendship and use it so mightily.



# Twelve

## A Funeral, a New Birth, and Two Weddings

The Friday before Easter I performed a funeral for one of our Miraflores mission members. One of the teenagers drowned while swimming with his brother and friends. This young man had been saved and baptized about a year earlier.

As the Bible tells us, all things turn out good for those who love Christ. God can use anything for His glory. This death and funeral was no exception.

When I arrived at the family home, the boy's father, ran to me and never let me out of arm's reach until several hours after the funeral. He was not a Christian and a bad alcoholic. Now he was a broken man sobered by the death of his son.

At the graveside, I gave a short sermon and I prayed that if there were any persons present that were not saved, they would be miserable, unable to eat, sleep, or function until they accepted Christ as their Savior. Four days after the funeral, the father came to see me. God had answered that prayer. This man who had lost many jobs, been in jail, seen his family suffer and go hungry because of his drinking, came asking for salvation and the help of God to give up alcohol. He told me that he had not slept more than a dozen hours and had not

been able to eat since the death of his son. He told me that he had been broken and wanted God to repair him. In our front yard, he found the best mechanic — Jesus.

He has remained sober. He attends church services, reads the Bible, and his family members tell me that he is a completely new person. There is an old saying that every time the bells ring for a funeral, they also ring for a birth. It certainly held true this time. A new birth had occurred because of the death of a son.

Love is the same all over the world and I have had the honor to perform a wedding in two of our more remote missions.

The first was in the village of Corlatina. This young couple had been living together for the past three years and had two children. They both had accepted Christ in the past few months and wanted to become disciples. They realized that the first thing they needed to do was to become husband and wife.

I was invited to officiate and the pastor of our Miraflores mission was invited to preach a *short* message before the vows. Please realize that these were the first Christian weddings that these villages had ever experienced. It was a candle light ceremony (no electricity), the bride dressed in her finest dress (she only has two), and the groom wore his newest cowboy hat as he rode up on his burro.

The air was thick as over 50 invited and uninvited guests, 4 dogs, a couple of chickens, and a piglet filled the small room. As Pastor Manual was concluding his *short* 30-minute sermon, he told the story of a man and woman whom

he knew that had been married for 35 years before the woman's death. He told us how miserable the husband had been for the entire 35 years because the woman was so overbearing. He ended this story by telling us that he finally saw the husband smile as the police led him away after he had strangled his overbearing wife.

I then took over the ceremony and led the couple through their vows. The rings were exchanged after we found them among the pine straw and sawdust where the three-year-old daughter had dropped them. As the groom kissed his beaming wife, her father shouted a loud whoop, ran outside and set off the half stick of dynamite that he had been hiding under his shirt.

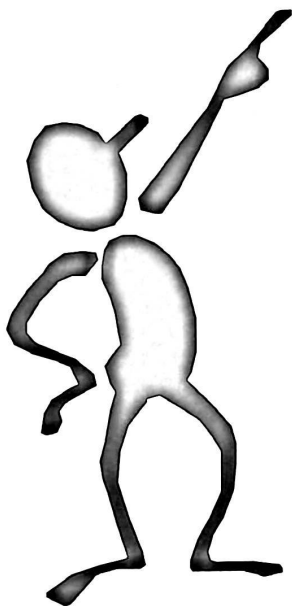
The next week I was in Potrerillos to assist with wedding vows. The building was filled with beautiful flowers and people. The ceremony began and we sang about 24 songs and hymns — the groom was 45 minutes late.

Finally, the groom entered with his best man and then the bride entered. She was dressed in a beautiful, long, white gown, her face was perfectly made up, and her hair was freshly cut and styled. I had never seen her so beautiful. Apparently, neither had the groom as he fainted at the sight of her and we had to quickly find a chair for him to sit in. In order not to make the groom feel too awkward, we also found a chair for the bride to sit beside her perspiring groom. The chairs turned out to be quite a blessing as the local pastor preached a *short* 45-minute message.

At some point during the message, I was told that the

groom had forgotten the marriage license and the ring. Having the only vehicle within 10 miles, I quickly grabbed the groom's father and sped down the goat trail that led to their home where we recovered the forgotten items and arrived back at the temple just as the pastor was asking my whereabouts.

After the ceremony, I was invited to the reception where I ate some of the best roasted goat you could ever ask for. Who says weddings are boring?



# Thirteen

## “It’s Gonna Get Even Better!”

As I look over the past four years since we were elected as missionaries, I can see many victories. We have witnessed countless professions of faith. We have seen lives changed in ways that would bring tears to anybody’s eyes. We have seen children who had faced starvation given a new chance at life. We have seen people accept Christ on their death-beds, and have seen young people give their lives to the Lord and really mean it.

We have seen some defeats, felt some pain, and cried many tears of disappointment. Not every profession of faith is real; not every changed live stays changed; and Satan will attack anyone who is against him. We have witnessed spiritual warfare on a personal basis. Do we welcome this warfare? No, but we don’t shy away from it either. James 1:12 gives us comfort:

*“Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”*

This verse means to us that even if it is a little rough now, its gonna get better in the future.

One question that is often asked of me is, "What qualities must one have to be a missionary?" My opinion is that a missionary must have two things:

- The first necessary quality is found in 1 John 4:21:

*"And he has given us this commandment:  
Whoever loves God must also love his brother."*

You must love the people. If you don't love the people, don't go.

- The second quality is illustrated by this little joke:

Do you know how to tell how long a missionary has been on the field?

*A short term missionary* will complain to the waiter about the fly in his soup.

*A medium term missionary* will quietly take the fly out of the soup then go ahead and eat the soup.

*A long term missionary* will grab the little beast by the neck and yell, "Spit it out! That's mine!"

You just have to be a little crazy to serve as a missionary.

