

June, 2013

We Christians have an implacable enemy who seeks to intimidate us and discourage us. But we also have a mighty God who is working in answer to prayer, steadily gaining ground inch by inch.

Edward and Susan's house was in a part of town far to the west. Now it stood empty. The section of town (let's call it Nazareth) was strategic for the spread of the gospel for several reasons. It was a sort of cultural center for religious belief and practices. It had no Christians living in it. And from it branched many small footpaths, leading to hundreds of smaller villages and farms nestled in the hills, places full of people who knew no Swahili and who needed the gospel in their language. Colin asked our team to pray about who should move to the empty house in Nazareth. Initially no one wanted to move. They all liked the houses they were in, and had made friends with their neighbors.

Two Sundays a month we met as a team for worship. The other two Sundays we attended the small Assemblies of God church, alternating half the team one week and half the other, so we didn't overwhelm them with our numbers. Attending an African church service is one of the most difficult skills Americans have to learn. If a newcomer continues to attend, however, in time the things that are valuable begin to be more obvious and the "muscle" of patient, appreciative, worshipful endurance is strengthened. Our African brothers and sisters greatly appreciate our humble willingness to join them. But attending an African church service can be, for a new missionary trainee, three hours of living by faith, not by sight.

Academic studies in English continued, with lively discussions of books and an "end of term" language exam for each student that involved Colin's taking a walk with each one to hear how they interacted with people. "This is terrifying to think about," one student confessed, but after the ordeal she said Colin was encouraging and gave helpful suggestions of how to continue improving. At the end of our study unit, we took a three-day retreat in Bethany to review what we'd learned and celebrate our progress. During that time, we wrote the names of all the people we'd met in Cana on a large piece of poster paper, and prayed for them. In three years, we promised ourselves, we would look at that paper again and see which of those people were now followers of Jesus.

It was almost harvest time on the farms. An empty town of Cana got emptier when school let out for six weeks and all the kids were free to go help their parents harvest the rice, beans and sesame. We were told it would take about a month to dry the grain, put it in gunny sacks, and bring it home for the year. If they had a lot of extra food, they would sell it and enjoy the profit. Otherwise they were just glad to have food for their families. Mice began to proliferate and invade our houses; we found it prudent to lock up our food at night, and tuck in our mosquito nets.

Meanwhile, back in our town, we invited one of the few Christians, an elderly retired schoolteacher named Fred, to come help us one Friday during class time. We wanted to translate the gospel as written in 1 Corinthians 15: 3,4. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. He was buried, and He rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures." With Fred came a polite young man in his early 20's who said no, he was not a Christian. Fred helped us with pronunciation and cadence; the young man kindly went around the classroom and checked our spelling. One by one we repeated the verses over and over, then we recorded Fred as he read them aloud. As we wrapped things up before lunch, the young man politely said goodbye. Only after he left did we discover that he was a visitor in the community who just happened to be walking along the road, and everyone thought he was someone else's invited guest. We all looked at each other in amazement. God brought a total stranger to our classroom to hear the gospel on the very first day we translated it! In the late afternoon, as our students went home, the young man found Joseph. He was interested in what we had discussed. Did Joseph have a Bible he could sell him before he left town? He was in Cana for his grandfather's funeral. Yes, said Joseph happily, and invited him to read it together.

We rejoiced in that progress, yet we were sobered by another incident. One day Colin walked to Nazareth to sit in town with the men who were talking together in the town square. As he left, an older man, a religious leader, walked with him. Did he know why the family on our team had to leave the house there? It was because someone had cursed the house. No one would ever be able to live in that house without getting sick with fevers. If Colin would like, he could bring a group of Muslim leaders and recite Koranic prayers around the house at midnight, prayers that would remove the curse and allow our people to live there without trouble. Colin answered gently that we were eager to have friendly relationships with everyone in town and get to know them well. But we ourselves would be praying over the house in the name of Jesus, and had no need to hire others to remove the curse.

We who go with the gospel to other cultures suffer the indignity of being made a spectacle to people and to angels. Wherever we go, people are watching us, talking about us, drawing conclusions based on what happens to us. We began praying for Christ to show Himself stronger than curses and evil spirits, having triumphed over them on the cross. It was not our reputation that was at stake, but the reputation of our Savior.

Below: Our first team retreat in Bethany; a day of translating the gospel with Fred; Colin and Fred consulting the passage together.





