

Counting Trials as Joy?

(October '71 - April '72)

Piercing cries of wailing came one Saturday morning from the bungalow of our helpers. We saw people rushing from all sides towards the bungalow. Shouting and crying, a little figure ran toward us: it was Samuel's younger sister.

"Samuel is dying!" she sobbed, and already she was gone to the next house.

Quickly we ran across. Samuel lay on the floor, in a pool of water, unconscious. His friends had tried to revive him by pouring buckets of cold water over him, but without success.

Paul bent down and felt his head, his pulse. He was not dead yet. Paul knelt over him, placed his hands on Samuel's chest and started praying. More and more people gathered around them. In a loud voice Paul confessed our own faults, our impatience, our harshness, and asked the Lord for forgiveness. Then he commanded the spiritual forces that wanted to hinder our work to leave. He proclaimed the victory of Jesus over the enemy, a victory that was still valid for us at that moment.

Paul prayed until Samuel opened his eyes. He recovered very quickly and within a couple of hours was ready to be on the way to his weekend preaching. However much we tried to keep him back for more rest, he did not want to leave the young church on their own.

The Lord used that weekend to speak to all of us. It was as if Samuel had been given back to us by the Lord. In the preceding weeks we had often sighed about him. In his own draft work he had been hasty and careless, and in the sessions with Paul, going over his draft, he had often been indifferent and unconcerned, his thoughts always wandering elsewhere. Now the Lord had to show us how much of a loss he would have been to us. He showed us that we had sometimes been expecting too much from him. After all he had had only 6 years of primary schooling which sometimes caused him - quite unnecessarily - thoughts of inferiority. Paul had to scrutinize Samuel's work daily, criticize it and make changes. It needs a lot of maturity and humility to accept such criticism, even if it is constructive. This became very clear to us.

It is quite possible that Samuel's blackout had been due to a strong dose of malaria treatment which we had given him. From a spiritual point of view, however, this is irrelevant. The Lord spoke not only to us, but to Samuel as well.

The greatest danger for all, and especially African translators, is to follow the original text so closely as to render sentences literally even if they lose their

intelligibility, instead of searching for a natural rendering that would make sense to the hearers. Therefore much wisdom, patience and prayer are needed in the consulting sessions. Theory alone does not help. How often Paul and Samuel would get entangled in discussions and arguments about such expressions and would not be able to agree.

On that Sunday, as he stood in front of his 'congregation', Samuel was going to talk about the Kingdom of God. He used the expression that the Ibo church also used, 'ali-eze' = 'king's land of God'. For weeks he had defended this expression, whereas Paul had tried to prove to him hundreds of times that it was meaningless for an Izi.

While he was preaching and using this expression, in a flash God showed him in the faces of his listeners that really this did not mean a thing to them. So while he was talking he changed to the rendering Paul had suggested for this verse: '...where God is King'. The reaction of his audience completely convinced Samuel! From now on he would be more cautious in defence of literal expressions...

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Pastor Otu was disappointed. He had been criticized by the area-wide church, and the support of the translation project was denied to him. The only one who wholeheartedly encouraged us all the same was Dr. Ibiam, that man who had welcomed our Institute at its first public meeting in Enugu and had become the President of the Nigerian Bible Society after the Biafran war.

It was a discouraging time for us. But then we received a letter from our Swiss church: they accepted with joy their share of partnership and were ready to help us financially.

*Our family (without Bernhard who had gone to boarding school in Jos) with various helpers :
(from right) John our household helper, Emmanuel (Izi typist), Daniel Eze (Ikwo translator)
Samuel Iyoku (third from left), Thomas Uzim (Ikwo translator, fourth from left)*

A new disappointment awaited us. People were delighted about the calender which we had printed for all three dialects in order to promote literacy. They admired it, but paying money for it? That was another matter!

"They are beautiful," exclaimed the headmasters. "Certainly we will help you to sell them. Just leave a few bundles here."

We never got a penny from those bundles. Whether the recipients never paid for them or whether the money was 'eaten' by the teachers - we never found out. After we had sent Samuel once or twice on the rounds to collect the money - without success - we gave up. His time was too precious.

"Remember, these people have never in their lives spent money on 'paper', they do not know the value of a book!" somebody tried to comfort us. Sure! But still, we were disappointed. Obviously we had made the serious mistake of being over-optimistic.

The Swiss church indeed provided the encouragement we needed. They agreed to become responsible for the whole of the budget, although they, too, had to raise the money first.

With this promise of support, our hope was renewed, and Paul's vision enlarged. Surely, once the Lord had given us the finances, He would not let us down in other tests. He would surely also provide us with helpers, co-workers, co-translators. The three we had, Samuel (Izi), Daniel (Ezaa) and Elias (Ikwo - typist) were not enough. We asked the Lord for at least two translators for each language and one typist each. Nine team-mates as a minimum. Where would we get them? How could we test their suitability?



Our first translation assistants : from left, after Paul with Eveline on his arm : Samuel Iyoku, Emmanuel (Izi typist) , Daniel Eze (Ezaa translator), Elias Uguru (Ikwo translator)