

also forewarned of how easily misconceptions are formed in the minds of tribal people. We were determined to be cautious before presenting the gospel so as not to misrepresent the message. However, God was about to show us that He had His own plans for reaching these people.

We felt totally unprepared and inadequate to begin teaching spiritual concepts. Learning vocabulary about the everyday activities and concerns of the people: the weather, food, medical needs, fishing and shell diving, occupied our waking hours.

Toward the end of an extremely hot and busy day, our neighbor shocked us with the news, "Olibiya's deaf! She can't hear any more!" (They knew that hearing is usually the last of the senses to fail before death.)

"She couldn't be! Not Olibiya!" I knew she was sick and refused medicine, but I thought she was getting better. I must go to her! "Oh," came the thought, "I'll take a Gospel of John we had received just the day before from the translator working on a distant island. Many years of dedicated work culminated in this precious gospel.

When the box of gospels arrived, I glanced at a copy and decided that I needed to give it some close scrutiny. Lengthy words loomed from the pages—difficult words. I laid it to one side, knowing that it would take time to go through it. But now it was as if the Lord was saying, "These people have been waiting almost 2000 years to hear about Me. Go!"

With a quick prayer, I tucked the green booklet under my arm and hurried to Olibiya's hut. The mob was already spilling out the doorway onto the sandy beach below. As I drew closer, the crowd parted to let me through, exposing the slanted pole I was to climb. Accepting the challenge, I inched my

way on all fours to the top. Straightening up, I peered through the doorway into the dismal, stuffy room, as the crowd inside parted. Gingerly picking my way across the creaking slats toward where my friend Olibiya lay, I headed for a small space on her far side directly across from the witchdoctor. Promptly squatting, I rested my back against a welcomed pole.

Suddenly one of the supporting beams shifted. Alarm spread through the group, but no one left. The hut just simply readjusted itself to its new position, and so did the crowd. Then silence. All eyes turned to me.

Another quick prayer. Then I leaned over to Olibiya and shouted, "Your friend is here to see you. I came to read God's Word to you."

Turning to John 14, I read haltingly. Everyone was attentive, including those on the outside who were peering through the holes they made in the thatch. The first three lines presented some challenge, but then the word "magpakabegbeg" stopped me cold. After two attempts, the frustrated witchdoctor obliged and pronounced the word perfectly for me. I read on. Then I stumbled on "ipanagpaangay." Now after only one attempt, the witchdoctor helped. Each time I struggled, she came to my aid. As I continued to read, the words of an old hymn raced through my mind,

*Channels only blessed Master,
But with all Thy wondrous power,
Flowing thro' us, Thou canst use us,
Every day and every hour.*

I read some other random verses about salvation and clumsily shifted positions from a squat to sitting directly on the slats. My legs were numb. What air was left in the

room felt stuffy. Then the women proceeded to prepare Olibiya for burial. They stroked fresh coconut oil though her hair, patted lime on and around her eyelids; then slipped a dress over her head. All this time Olibiya lay motionless.

Suddenly the commotion at her feet startled me. Two tribal women, struggling over a piece of twine, were arguing whether or not to tie her big toes together—the final procedure in the burial preparation. One insisted she was dead; the other disagreed. Their conflict continued.

I wondered how much longer I should remain. I didn't just want to *wait* for her to die. After a few minutes I leaned over to Olibiya and shouted, "Your friend is leaving for home now" (the proper parting greeting). "I'll come back again tomorrow to read to you from God's Word."

I thought I detected a slight response, a low groan, the tribal way of saying "yes!" Was I imagining it? Did she hear anything I read?

On my way out, I noticed my friend Sabina at the doorway. "Let me know when anything happens," I whispered, being careful of course not to mention the word 'death.' She promised she would.

Backwards down the pole with the Gospel of John tucked back under my arm, I headed for home. The sun was just wedging between the ocean and the huge rock ledge, hiding from view as I trudged through the sand.

Arriving home, I related the event to my family. We prayed together at the dinner table for Olibiya, half listening for the final death wails.

By morning I wondered why no one had let me know anything. As tactfully as possible, I asked my neighbor about Olibiya.

She looked at me a little perplexed and said, "Oh, she's fine; she's eating!"

"She's eating?" I quickly questioned. (For the tribal people to accept food meant that they are on the mend!)

"Oh, yes! She asked for food and she's recovering!" She noticed my surprise.

It was then that I remembered telling Olibiya that I would return the next day to read God's Word to her. Tucking the green gospel back under my arm, I headed for her hut. Yes, Olibiya was alive and responsive. Her gaunt body slowly regained strength, and she listened with rapt attention along with her family members. This time I started reading from the beginning of John, returning daily to read more.

After about three weeks, I didn't find Olibiya in the village and asked where she might be. The neighbors informed me that she was planting crops on her parents' island. I was amazed that she was fully recovered and back in the work force. However, I still wondered about her understanding of the gospel. What really happened that day? I decided that the next time I saw her, I would ask her outright—about her sins, about Christ's death for her, about heaven and hell. I had to know.

Three months later, it was already dark, two tribal ladies bounded upon our porch calling out to us. Grabbing my lantern, I went outside and strained to see the shadowy faces of Olibiya and Sabina. How good to see them! Olibiya came back! Jovial, plump, and enthusiastic, were words that described her now.

The Lord provided the perfect time for me to ask my burning questions. With the lantern hissing overhead, I began, "Olibiya, remember four months ago when you were dying?"

"She was dead!" interjected Sabina.

"Well, Olibiya, (ignoring Sabina's comment), if you had died then, what would have happened to you?"

She assured me that she would have gone to the "fire."

"And now, Olibiya, what about your sins?"

"Oh, Jesus died for my sins. I don't have them anymore. Jesus took them away."

I questioned further, "If you died now, what would happen to you?"

"I would go to be with Jesus in Heaven!" Then she looked at me with the most distressed look as if to say, "Wasn't it you who read God's Word to me and told me all about Jesus?"

My questioning was over. I felt rebuked. Olibiya *did* hear God's Word; she *did* understand; and she *believed* the glorious gospel of Christ.

Untie her toes! God has other plans for Olibiya!

It was an important lesson that I learned from this experience with Olibiya. God is not waiting for perfect vessels; He is waiting for available vessels—*channels only*—ready and willing to be used in whatever way He chooses. He also wants us to be available to share the good news, while totally depending on Him for the results. He *is* building His church!

By Dottie Connor Bingham

© Gracestoration

www.gracestoration.org



UNTIE
HER
TOES!

"Don't tie her big toes together! She's still breathing! She's not dead yet!"

"Yes, she is! There's no hope!"

"No!. Untie her toes! She's still alive. Hand me that twine!"

Unaware of the commotion at her feet, Olibiya lay motionless on the split bamboo floor protected only by her hand-woven mat. Widowed just a year before, she now welcomed her own death. Friends and relatives came from all around knowing that her last breath was imminent. The dry thatch walls bulged to admit the curious crowd. No furniture adorned the room—just people—some standing, others squatting.

Olibiya's four surviving sons (out of the twelve she bore), and her aged mother hovered closest to her daughter's shriveled body. The wailing continued relentlessly above the din of the crowd. At her side, the old woman witchdoctor kept vigil, remaining alert for any signs of life.

In typical native fashion, the eight-by-ten foot hut rested atop five-foot poles. Along the sandy beach perched many such huts. But today, the threat of imminent death interrupted the monotony of daily life. Olibiya was dying.

When we arrived as new missionaries, our goal was to evangelize and plant a church. Trained in linguistics, language learning principles, and cultural anthropology, we were