

Chapter 1 God Sows Spiritual Seeds

This story begins over thirty years ago. I was living in Guatemala and I was a Peace Corps volunteer. I had been in the military, and thanks to the VA, just finished a rigorous program in mechanical engineering, graduating magna cum laude. In my last year of studies, I knew I was supposed to join Peace Corps and serve in a foreign land. My peers could not understand my decision, especially because of my academic success in one of the top engineering schools in our nation. Many had landed wonderful jobs and were on their way to the rewards of the profession. However, something in me had clearly guided my decision. I was not a Christian yet, but there was no doubt whatsoever that the Peace Corps was what I was supposed to do.

Flying Opel Story

A couple of events greatly influenced that decision. The first took place after a few beers one summer night on the way home from our family cabin. It is located on an isolated and beautiful point overlooking a main channel of water on Table Rock Lake near Branson, Missouri. After a wonderful weekend, my sister, her friend, and I left in two different cars at the same time. We needed to navigate about ten miles of winding Ozark back-roads to get to a main highway from our hidden family paradise.

Always looking for a way to make people laugh, I decided that racing would do just that – if you consider a VW bug (their vehicle) and a 1967 Opel Kadett station wagon (my vehicle) a race. We passed each other, pressing our vehicles to their limits on curves and straightaways. At one point, they deceived me into believing their car had broken down, which allowed them to pass me. Their deceptive plan only ignited more passion and desire inside me to be victorious.

I had installed an expensive stereo in my car, which was protected by the latest burglar alarm. The cylindrical-locking switches to operate such systems in those days were almost always located somewhere outside on the car body. Mine was easily reached by rolling down the driver's side window. I decided I was going to turn the alarm on and chase them like a police officer, with sirens blaring. I smiled in anticipation of their laughter as I turned off the car and pulled the key ring from the ignition which contained the alarm key.

The problem was, I had inadvertently locked the steering wheel as I headed into a curve at sixty miles per hour. My body pumped adrenalin into my veins as I saw the edge of the road

coming quickly. I am often complimented on the shape and strength people see in my arms but they were no match for the locking system in the steering column that protected the car from theft.

That old saying is true. When life ends, it does so in slow motion. I slammed on the brakes and my car skidded for a couple seconds before going airborne off the side of a steep embankment. I flew off the road like a professional platform diver who was going to perform a swan dive with a quarter twist. For a moment, I didn't hear any sound. As the valley below came into clear view, I grabbed the steering wheel and prepared for impact. After a couple of bounces, the car came to an abrupt halt and I slammed into the steering wheel. As I lifted my head and began to rotate it like a submarine periscope my mind was inundated with questions. *What just happened? Am I alive? Am I hurt? Why am I not rolling end over end to the base of this hill?*

As I regained my bearings and began to assess the damage, I realized that some sort of miracle had just occurred. The embankment contained two trees that formed a wedge and it had caught my flying vehicle. My first instinct was to exit the vehicle because I could smell gas. Fighting gravity, I pushed vertically against the heavy door propping it open with one arm as I pulled myself to safety with the other. Once my feet touched the ground, I fell to the side of the steep hill and began to wonder about the mathematical possibilities of this occurring again. Something, or someone, had just saved my life.

My sister and her friend made a 180 after realizing there was no road where I had turned. Before they arrived I crawled to the front of the car and slipped one leg under the front chassis. I decided to pretend to be severely injured, still wanting to get some sort of victory from our competition, even though they had clearly won. As they came to my rescue, their deep concerns quickly turned to laughter as I jumped to my feet to assure them I did not have a scratch on me. None of us could believe what had happened. We eventually had to call two tow trucks, since one could not complete the task alone. I had been drinking so I begged the drivers not to call the police. They reluctantly yielded to my request. They also seemed amazed and had one more story to add to their "never seen anything like this before" list.

A crowd was gathering on the road. Everyone was stopping to see what had happened.

"The people in that car must be dead or severely injured."

I couldn't help but smile.

I don't recall exactly what I said, but I was pretty proud to inform him that I was the stunt driver who had performed the amazing feat. But later that night as I began to contemplate what had happened; my eyes were opened to the possibility of divine intervention.

Tunnel of Light

The most significant event came shortly after being discharged from the Air Force. I was hanging out with some of my sister's friends one summer evening after playing softball. When they passed around a joint, I accepted it, even though I had never been much of a pot smoker. As the new kid on the block, I was trying to fit in, but it hammered me, causing me to wonder what I had smoked. When you use drugs, you place a lot of faith in the person who provides the illegal substance. They can add or subtract ingredients, depending on their intentions.

For example, during my final year in the military, I was living off base when a young couple who lived in the apartment next to mine invited me over for a cup of coffee. I was surprised when they delivered the freshly brewed java loaded with cream and sugar without asking if I wanted either. It was so hot that I couldn't drink it quickly, but with each sip, increased the feeling that I was going to pass out. I excused myself several times, telling them I had a prior engagement. They didn't want me to go but eventually relented.

I managed to drive to a friend's house on base, and once I got there I found a spot on the floor. It took several hours for whatever they had drugged me with to lose its affect. When I returned to my apartment the next morning, the young couple was gone. They had left in the middle of the night with all their belongings. I'm pretty sure their intentions were to rob my wallet, apartment, and maybe my vehicle.

Those thoughts and feelings were on my mind after smoking marijuana with my sister and her friends. In fact, as I was driving home, I almost passed out at a stoplight. Staggering through the front door, I barely made it to the second floor bedroom I shared with my younger brother. As soon as I hit the bed, the thought came to me that I was going to die. I told my brother, and he got my sister, who was in the next room. They returned, and stood over my bed.

"Look at him," one of them said. "He's white. He's not breathing. We need to get him up!"

Those were the last words I heard before leaving my body and heading down a tunnel of light. My attempt to describe what happened will fall as short as trying to explain what God is

like. But the two biblical words that outline my experience would be God's *sovereignty* and His *love*. Regarding His sovereignty, I was awed how perfectly designed and held together His universe was. My mind was fascinated and amazed as He revealed to me many macro and micro details of His magnificent creation. But even more than all the supernatural insights exploding in my mind, my whole being was bathed and saturated with what had to be His indescribable love. Every fiber of my being was satisfied to the fullest possible measure with divine ecstasy and warmth.

After some amount of eternal time had passed, I realized I could not stay. My heart mourned deeply for the loss before it even occurred. I remember nothing else. I woke up the next day. My brother, sister, and I would not speak about what happened for years. I didn't have a reason to speak to them or anyone else for that matter about something they could not relate to. But I was a different man. I knew life after death existed. From that day forward, I was not afraid to die. In fact, I began looking forward to death. After that night I began to seek God in earnest. I was not sure how to return to this paradise, but I was determined to find out.

Some may question why I was allowed to experience such bliss as a non-Christian. Only God knows fully, but what I do know, is that it forever changed the priorities of my life and placed godly desires for eternity in my heart.

Selfishness Revealed

After graduation, I was trained by Peace Corps in appropriate technologies and sent to Guatemala to serve. I lived in a coastal Caribbean town, teaching, building, and promoting biogas-producing systems and wood-burning cooking stoves made from earthen masses. Once a month, most volunteers headed to the capitol, Guatemala City, to claim their pay. They enjoyed the opportunity to speak English with other volunteers, and eat American fast food. A month of eating beans and rice would have us drooling for a greasy hamburger and fries.

A year into my service I went to the annual Christmas party held at the main office of Peace Corps. There was a talent show, a big party, and lots of drinking. I became an instant celebrity winning first place for my song about three volunteers who had a bout of diarrhea – a very real part of our new lives. We called it the one-two step dance. One step forward from the toilet and two steps back.

Their favorite verse detailed a young man's trauma in an overcrowded "chicken bus." Adults, children, and chickens share buses that are crammed so tightly into seats and aisles that you can barely move. Guatemalans have a saying about them. "If two fit... three will fit... and if three fit... four will fit." On a hot day the bus reeked of natural body odors including vomit. It is so bad sometimes that you have to breathe through your mouth to keep your own cookies down. And while you were dealing with all that, an occasional iguana might be thrashing around under your seat.

The hero in the saga was plastered against a window in the back of the bus on a long trip when his stomach began to gurgle. With no possible means of escape, the unthinkable happened. His bowels moved. Unfortunately for him, and everybody else, he had to pass by every person on the bus as he exited. As some movies claim, all was based on true events. Eduardo (not his real name) was wearing what used to be bright white kakis now with tie-dyed brown blotches. It was a good thing he could not understand much Spanish at the time.

An hour after enjoying my new fame at the Peace Corps music awards, I reached the end of my tolerance for those who had too much alcohol. I had decided during my initial language training in Costa Rica not to drink while serving because of the way I usually responded. So I left and was accompanied by a young, attractive, and intelligent woman of Greek descent who had also seen enough. As we walked to our hotel rooms, our conversation turned toward my reasons for joining the Peace Corps.

"David, why did you become a volunteer?"

"I want to help people." I said.

"But why do you want to help people?"

"Because I enjoy it."

She smiled. "But why do you enjoy it so much?"

"Because it makes me feel good."

"See! You don't really do it for them. You do it for yourself!"

Her words were like a dagger to my heart. The Holy Spirit (although I didn't know Him then) had closed the mouth of a works-based person and exposed the hidden but true motives of his heart. I knew in that moment I would never look at what I was doing the same way. My noble calling of serving the poor came crashing to the ground as all selfish buildings eventually do. I will be forever grateful for that night.

On the Road to Truth

During the next year, it became clear to me that I was unable to stop the appetites of what the Bible calls the flesh and headed down a path that would have eventually led to death. I do not believe I am to give more details than that at this time. Sin, Satan, and the world he currently controls all have the power to steal, kill and destroy. As much as one enjoys sin in the moment, the emotional and physical price you pay always significantly outweighs the pleasure!

Shortly afterwards I moved to Guatemala City to work on a research project. The project leader was a vibrant Christian man. His words, constant smile, and magnetic personality set him apart as someone I wanted to be around. I became so interested in what made him tick that I finally accepted one of his many invitations to attend a worship service. I remember nothing about that evening except for the question I was asked moments after braving the threshold of this new religious establishment.

“Are you a Christian?” one member asked me.

I cannot think of a more inappropriate greeting to a complete stranger. Most of the western world, except for atheists and those in eastern religions, would acknowledge some sort of connection with Christianity, so I answered after a slight pause. “Yes.”

My friend squirmed to find the correct words to relate to those who were present that I wasn't, without offending me. It was uncomfortable for him, but it did not bother me in the least. I already knew that my career choice was based in selfishness and that honesty had brought a measure of freedom that I was really enjoying.

As I worked on the research project in the capitol, my sin was out of control. God, in His great mercy, decided it was time to open my eyes to what I had become. One sunny day, as I stood on the side of a busy Guatemala City street, looking toward the sky with tears streaming down my thirty-three year old face I said, “ God, I never want to do that again!”

Born Again!

The next day, I went to work with my Christian friend and told him what had happened. I recall nothing that he said but one word: “Jesus!” That Name penetrated the hopeless darkness that surrounded me. The moment he said it, Truth entered my heart and changed something inside. When the project was over, I returned to my town on the Caribbean coast as a born-again

Christian, with eyes that saw everything differently, ears that heard everything differently, and a heart that now loved and desired everything differently.

Before I had left the US for Guatemala, two of my co-workers that I delivered furniture with had given me a paperback New Testament. The only reason I kept it was because they had written something very special in the front cover:

This is the way of expressing our gratitude for sharing your friendship with us. As you read, our prayer is that the Lord will guide you into the truth of His Word. He will be light to guide you, strength to sustain you, and solace to comfort you. Always remember that Jesus is a very special friend. We are praying for you and will think of you often.

Adam R. Luna and Daniel West

Those words had, and would continue to be fulfilled. I knew something had changed in me because I wanted to read a book. For me, reading was like asking an out of shape and overweight man to run a marathon. Even the thought would be enough to send him to the E.R. The New Testament was only the second or third book I had ever read from cover to cover.

God wanted to feed my new heart with pure food and He wanted me to begin to get to know Him. So for three days and evenings I laid in my bed reading that New Testament. I fell in love with this Man named Jesus. I loved the way He talked. I loved the way He treated people. And I loved His ability to recognize false religious leaders and teachings that misrepresented His Father.

Deciding to Become a Missionary

A couple of months after my conversion, the director of my area in the Peace Corps became the vice minister of agriculture, an extremely powerful position. He was a man of great integrity and he had a heart for his country. John, a fellow Peace Corps volunteer who also had recently decided to follow Jesus, and I were invited by him to lead a program to serve the poor in some of the most destitute areas of the city.

So I moved to Guatemala City to co-lead the project with John, and at the same time began to search for Christian restaurants of the Word in the evenings and on weekends. I had become ravenous for everything that had to do with Jesus. I knew very little about Him or those who followed Him. The beauty of third-world Christianity is that you can find fellowship any night of the week, and that is what John and I did. We heard about a Bible study, and we went. We found an English-speaking church called Union Church of Guatemala. It contained

missionaries, diplomats, and nationals and we began attending worship services there. It was my favorite place because it was in my native tongue.

On June 1, 1986, sitting in the back row of that church building, after gorging myself for a few weeks on the things of God, I dedicated my life to Jesus. Oh the joy I felt. I had finally found the source of Truth I had encountered in my near death experience. I wanted nothing else and nothing more than to live in that Presence. There were moments when my heart was so full I thought it would burst.

I began to see people differently, having compassion on them for their circumstances. One day shortly thereafter, I was riding a city bus through a tough part of town and observing street children who were wandering around. *What can I do to help them?* Within a short time, I decided I was going to be a missionary and reach them.

John and I had begun to attend an English-speaking Bible study, led by a leader of a large Christian ministry. Most of the attendees were mature missionaries and Bible translators. They loved John and I and our hunger for the things of God. At one of the meetings, John and I told everyone that we were going to be missionaries, too. As I looked into the leader's eyes, I discerned in his heart that he wanted to say something to us, but didn't. Looking back now, I believe God had chosen a unique path for both of us that would reach our deepest needs and best prepare us for our future assignments in the kingdom.