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Prayer: Breaking Down Walls of Hostility

“Get out of our village!” Orange light from a small fire danced across the features of the Tawbuid elder. Every twitch of his hand, every glance of his eyes betrayed a fierce determination to keep me away from his people. Around him sat his council and the rest of the village, all intent on the same purpose.

“Yes,” another wizened old man rasped. “The elder told you to leave our village, and you will obey him. But I’ll take it a step further and tell you that the entire Tawbuid tribe doesn’t want you here, especially the highlanders that you are so persistent on living with. Get out, and leave the Tawbuid people to themselves.”

Eight years earlier I had first heard of the Tawbuid people, a remote unreached tribe on the island of Mindoro in the Philippines. When I tried to visit them, however, I ran into a brick wall. The tribe had set up an elaborate system to keep all outsiders out. For the next eight years, I visited Mindoro every summer, trying to break through the wall of hostility, but to no avail. Finally, in 2011 I arrived as a missionary with Adventist Frontier Missions (AFM) to formally begin working with the Tawbuid. Even after four long months of trying every plan I could imagine, the Tawbuid steadfastly refused to have anything to do with me. In fact, it was an honor that this border village even condescended to hold a meeting to formally forbid me from working with them. Most Tawbuid would not even look at me, let alone speak to me.

I had arrived in the Philippines full of fire and great ideas gleaned from AFM’s first-rate training program. I was certain (with God’s help of course) that I would be able to blaze into the center of the tribe, strike to the heart, and revolutionize their life by leading them to Christ. I knew that it would be hard, I grew up in the mission field, but I expected that my experience and new ideas would make the work easier. Now, four months later, I was still beating my head against the same brick wall. My

last card had been played, my last plan tried. There was nothing more that I could do. Nothing more, that is, except to pray.

It is not that I had not been praying before. I had prayed for eight long years that God would open the Tawbuid people to the gospel. However, I finally began to realize that my prayers for God to work had been mingled with my own ideas of how to reach the people. I knew intellectually that I could do nothing without God. Now I was beginning to understand at the heart level that without God, absolutely nothing useful would happen. My prayers for God to bring down the walls of hostility surrounding the Tawbuid were changing me.

In *Christ's Object Lessons*, Mrs. White says, "Prayer is not to work any change in God; it is to bring us into harmony with God" (1900:143). How often have I felt that if only I prayed in the right way, or for long enough, then God would answer my prayer? Thinking about prayer in this way is actually similar to animistic approaches to religion where the supplicant tries to manipulate God to do what is desired. When we as God's people think that doing something will influence God to answer our prayers, we are Seventh-day Adventist animists.

God knew all along how to break down the walls the Tawbuid had set up. Rather than God changing the Tawbuid in response to my prayers, though, he was waiting for me to change. I have found this to be a pattern in the hostility that I have met nearly daily in my work with the Tawbuid. Whenever I pray about hostility that is directed toward me directly, God works by changing me. And when I allow him to change me, the hostility evaporates. In this case, it was only a couple of weeks after this meeting and after I had come to know in my heart that I could not do anything unless God acted, that he answered my prayers and threw the doors wide open for me to move into the Tawbuid village of Balangabong.

I also discovered the hostility I met while working with the Tawbuid was not always directed towards me. Rather it came from hardened, lost people who were trying to stop God's work as a whole. I observed that in these situations God tends to work silently and invisibly to break down the walls.

The believers that I am working with now in the village of Balangabong are just starting to work to lead other Tawbuid people to Christ. The non-denominational evangelicals along the border of the tribe have also been quite active in trying to reach the unreached majority in the highlands, and between our two groups of witnesses we are starting to make waves.

Just last month, the entire tribe gathered together and summoned us to answer for our actions. The tribe has been trying to stop missionaries from evangelizing them for quite some time, but it appeared that they had every intention of sealing the decision at that meeting. They brought

with them representatives from the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, who are tasked with enforcing the native population's wishes by Philippine law.

I came to the meeting having no idea what to say in order to dispel the anger of the tribe or to keep the doors open for evangelism. Though I had been racking my brain for several days, I could find no solution. Over and over, though, I have seen God mysteriously turn such situations on their head. I sat calmly and prayed, trusting God to allow work to continue among the tribe if it was his will, while elder after tribal elder stood and slandered our Christian witness, claiming that we forced people to become Christians, did not respect the wishes of the elders, and frightened people.

Then it was my turn to speak. I stood up, still having no idea what to say. Jesus promised, though, in Luke 12:11, 12, "Now when they bring you to the synagogues and magistrates and authorities, do not worry about how or what you should answer, or what you should say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say" (NKJV). God was faithful to his word. As I began to speak words came to me.

"Friends," I said. "I grew up just north of you with the Alangan tribe. When I was young I heard of how hard your lives are because of the fear and utter terror which rules your people. I loved you, even then, because of God who loves all of us. When I was old enough I came to try to help you. I followed every command that your elders gave me. They are here today, and can bear witness to the truth of what I say. I never have and never will force anyone to become a Christian, because God's law is love, and love is no longer love when it forces itself on someone else. I did not come to frighten people. I came because I have the only antidote to fear, and I want to freely offer it to every Tawbuid who will receive it."

The elders sat in silence. I knew that there was nothing special in my words, but they had been given to me by the Spirit in the very moment that I needed them, so I trusted the Spirit to work. Suddenly a wiry old man jumped to his feet. "Look, we really don't have enough time today to figure all this out. Why don't we all just go home and think about what we've heard, and we can talk about it again another time."

Heads nodded in assent, and the meeting began to break up. The very elders who moments before had been intent on pressing the issue to the point of legal action against us now simply wandered away. I smiled with contentment and praised God in my heart. None of them knew what had really happened. God had powerfully demonstrated once again that when hostility is shown toward God's work and lost people back God's cause into a corner, God works in mysterious ways to break down the walls of hostility.

Sometimes, though, the hostility is found in the heart of someone who is almost a believer, or who is still young in the Christian faith. Rather than showing open hostility, this type of wall is usually in the person's heart which keeps him or her from fully committing to God. It is in these situations that I have also observed God working earth-shattering miracles.

One Sabbath after church I sat chatting with Pablito, one of our church elders on the AFM project where I grew up. Pablito was also trained as a medical worker, and he asked me, "What does it mean when the red in the thermometer goes all the way to the top?"

"Well," I replied. "I guess it means that the person has a really high fever."

"Oh, ok" Pablito said, and then started to leave.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" I said. "What happened? You can't just leave me hanging! What's the story?"

"Well," he said. "It happened like this. You know that Bunsoanan became an Adventist when she was a young girl. She was still a baby Christian when her father forced her to marry a man from deep in the mountains. He dragged her with him back to his village in the interior, and over the years she forgot about God and drifted back to the old ways.

"Just a couple of months ago, Bunsoanan and her family moved back to our village. Not long after, her oldest son, Rison, became very sick. I treated him, and he began to recover, but you know how jungle folk have a hard time remembering to give medicines at the right times. Bunsoanan began missing doses, and Rison started to get sick again.

"One day, Rison coughed and coughed until a foamy substance came up from his lungs, filling his nose and mouth. Within minutes he was dead. Bunsoanan was desperate. Somehow in her grief, she remembered the God of her childhood, and seeing a little girl running by the house she yelled for her to go get the church elders.

"Well the little girl didn't know what had happened, so she took her time walking the half mile or so to where Aning, the other elder, and I were plowing. We are called for medical situations all the time, and most are not serious, so we took our time finishing up plowing and then tied up our water buffalo in a nice shady spot. About an hour later we finally showed up at Bunsoanan's house.

"Please!" Bunsoanan cried, tears running down her cheeks. 'Please help Rison, he died!'

"I looked at Aning, and Aning looked at me. 'The missionaries never taught us anything about praying for dead people,' Aning said. 'What should we do?'

"Yes, that's true.' I answered. 'On the other hand Jesus raised people from the dead, and his followers did too, when they prayed in the name of

Jesus. You know that Bunsoanan remembers God, but she hasn't followed Him in a long time. Maybe we should pray for Rison as a witness to her?"

"And so that's what we did. We figured that if God was going to bring Rison back to life again he would need to breathe, so first we cleaned out his mouth and nose. Then Aning and I knelt down and put our hands on Rison's head.

"Father," Aning prayed. "We know that you have the power to bring Rison back to life again. If you choose not to, we still know that you are the true God. But we ask that you would give him his life again as a witness to Bunsoanan and her husband that you are the true God, and that they should worship you. Thank you for hearing and answering. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

"When we opened our eyes, Rison opened his too! God brought him back to life again as a witness to Bunsoanan!"

These are just a couple of the ways that I have seen God work to break down walls of hostility in my own mission work. Through the years, I have seen these patterns repeated over and over. When I pray about hostility that is directed toward me, God responds by changing me, and at which point the hostility usually evaporates. On the other hand, when the hostility comes from hardened unbelievers trying to stop God's work, God answers my prayers by working silently and mysteriously to remove the walls. I have also noticed that God usually works his earth-shattering miracles in response to someone praying for walls to be broken down in the hearts of almost-believers, or young Christians.

Whatever way God chooses to work, prayer seems to be a vital part of the equation for breaking down walls of hostility that keeps people from hearing and responding to a Gospel presentation.

Works Cited

White, Ellen G. 1923. *Christ's Object Lessons*. Washington, DC: Review and Herald.



John Holbrook grew up church planting with his family among the Alangan of the Philippines. In 2011 he returned to the Philippines with Adventist Frontier Missions to church plant among the unreached Tawbuid, just south of where he grew up.