



Gather The Fragments Bible Mission

Stephen & Laura Holt
Sierra Leone, West Africa

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Dear Praying Family and Friends

It has been an eventful two months since our last letter. To merely say we appreciate your prayers would be an understatement. Our container arrived in the port of Freetown more than a month later than scheduled. What initially seemed like a frustrating delay was actually a blessing as portions of the road received some much needed improvements following the end of the rains thus making transport of the container a bit easier. Your prayers sped our container quickly through customs without one item being removed for "inspection" (i.e. theft)! We are grateful to have these necessary supplies including the small toaster/convection oven so Laura can once again indulge my bread habit.

As the British gold mining company moves into the production phase many improvements in our town and surrounding areas have been promised and some have already begun. It was the company who made the recent road repairs as they prepare to move in heavy equipment and industrial building materials. The 10 mile trip to Mongeri used to take as much as 90 minutes. With these improvements it is now only 30 minutes. With many internationals joining the work force at the company, reliable internet service is a must so they have installed a satellite internet system which they graciously allow us to use free of charge.

PENTECOSTAL COUP: On November 6, the growing Pentecostal faction in the Baomahun church completely took over. It all began nearly a year ago with the return of a local man who had left town to attend Bible school in Freetown where he was trained in the radical Nigerian-style Pentecostalism. Shortly after his return two others of this same heresy, one from Ghana and one from Nigeria, also joined forces in our small town assembly. A year and a half of sound Bible teaching in church was flushed away in a matter of weeks. These men became increasingly aggressive and antagonistic during my Sunday school teaching; asking inflammatory questions regarding doctrinal issues and then creating so much disturbance as to not allow my response to be heard, regularly turning the service into a free-for-all shouting frenzy. Following my teaching they were allowed to have a tongues praise and worship service and then preach their false doctrine for the main service. All the while I was attempting to privately show the church leadership the errors, encouraging them to take control of the situation. This group succeeded in rallying a vocal majority to their side. They now have charge of the church and have thrust us out. They have slandered us and our school throughout town. This is all with the full knowledge and support from the weak church leadership; the very people who invited us here for the purpose of teaching them the truth of God's word.

When we bought our property, it was purchased from the church for the full sum they requested. We have a legal document, all in proper order, stating that ownership has been transferred from the church to the mission. The church was recently given a sum of money from the mining company for the purpose of building a primary school. Unfortunately they had already sold us the land which had been *donated* to them for their school; facts they never told us when we made the purchase. In an effort to live peaceably, we gave them back a portion of the property, allowing them to have it for their school and relations seemed to be going along just fine. Feeling confident in their perceived victory at church, the Pentecostal faction launched another attack on December 13 when they were successful in stirring up the church leadership in an attempt to steal back the remaining land. One of the men most responsible for our being in this town has completely turned on us saying the church will do what it wants on "church" property and that we can just leave town and country if we don't like it. The town chief has come down on the side of church leadership and given his endorsement for them to do as they please including destroying established gardens. Both of these men read and signed the document.

It also needs to be said that one of the main grievances with many in the church is that we are not the deep pocket they imagined we would be. I say *imagined* because we were perfectly clear on at least four separate occasions before moving here that we were not coming to pay teachers' salaries, fund their church, pay students to come to our Bible school, or any other humanitarian venture you wish to plug in. They continued to have the fanciful ideas that we were going to be an endless source of money and goodies. This is a direct result of the "humanitarian gospel" which has so polluted the harvest field here. Our faithful Bible students have backed us up in this matter testifying to the town leadership that we plainly stated our purpose to the church, what we would and would not provide, and that we never promised any of the things these people have *supposed, assumed, and imagined*.

AFTERWARD IT YEILDETH THE PEACEABLE FRUIT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS (HEB. 12:11): Despite the loud voices of this group, we have many supporters in town who have boldly spoken on our behalf to the chief and counsel. Some, including Muslims have said they appreciate our being here and respect our stand for the Bible. Our strongest students have willingly testified for us and boldly stand with us. They are a great blessing to our hearts. It is not unusual in this culture for a fierce challenge to be made and then quietly dropped when the challenger sees he is not going to get his way. We have taken the wrong patiently and the Lord is using that to the benefit of our students as they see us handle a difficult situation not by our own might but rather, in the strength of the Lord. We are seeing spiritual growth in these men and women as a direct result of our buffeting. We are waiting for the next step, not really knowing what that may be. Though I could easily win a court case on the strength of our document, I will not go to law with a brother over a piece of dirt. We will out-grace them and ask your prayers for continued patience and wisdom.

NOW FOR THE GOOD NEWS: On December 4 and 19 Brothers Alfred and Joseph traveled with me to nearby village churches to assist and encourage the pastors. The congregations of Pejehun and Karvoma were more than happy to have us with them. Their traditional Mende praise and worship time is always a blessing to me. Though I cannot understand what they say, the joy of the Lord is clear as they sincerely worship from the heart. Such a stark difference from the carnal flesh-fest of the Pentecostal praise and worship. Occasionally Alfred will interpret their songs for me and the content is solid and uplifting. Traveling to these villages remains a highlight for me. Often there is not one person who can read, including the pastor. They are just doing the best they can and are eager for help. Laura's illustrations have a great impact for these dear hearts and they go home enriched by the teaching of God's word. We believe that the Pentecostal preachers with their prosperity message do not reach into these villages because they are the poorest of the poor and collections are very small. We also had a grand time with the Tendabu group of churches preaching the combined service on New Year's Day.

I have been encouraging my students to spend time with their families, especially their wives, around the word of God. To help in this we regularly loan recordings of the Bible in local languages making it easier for the women to understand. Two men are actively witnessing to their wives and we ask that you pray for Jusu and Bendu for salvation. Their husbands, Alfred and Joseph respectively, are my most zealous and committed students. What a joy it would be to see them enter into service with their help meets solidly by their sides.

The response to our in-town evangelism is seeing an improvement. Two years of consistent public ministry in the form of visitation and open air preaching is having an effect. Many are giving us more time in conversation and are engaging in lively group discussions. We ask that you pray for the salvation of an older gentleman named Jacob. He faithfully comes to Bible class but is caught in a confusing tangle of the Islam in which he was raised and the Pentecostalism to which he has been recently exposed. He also visits with Joseph on a regular basis which is helping Joseph learn how to effectively witness.

On Friday, January 13, Laura had four eager ladies accompany her for town visitation among the women. This was a surprise to her as she had only asked one if she would be interested but had set no start date. But on our regular visitation day, there they were, in their best clothes, smiling, and enthusiastic! While Joseph and I made our rounds of visits with men, the women hit the market armed with wordless Chick tracts telling the story of Adam and Eve and the need for a redeemer, the Lord Jesus Christ. There were three different tribal languages represented among Laura's four women. Consequently, much of what was said, Laura did not understand but fun was had by all and the reception was warm. It is hoped that this will be a regular addition to our schedule. Work on our own wordless evangelism books has begun and we are very grateful to now have the necessary equipment to produce and bind them.

❧ From Laura's Journal ❧

*His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.
Jeremiah 20:9*

Popping, snapping and boisterously crackling, the 12 foot high elephant grass just beyond our property line is dancing with flames. Dense smoke is choking the air and sparks are flying, reaching heavenward. The glow will go well into the darkening evening. It is the dry season and so it is also the slash-and-burn season of preparation for the coming planting times. Unfortunately this method of agriculture depletes the weary soil and produces nothing sustainable; nothing for future generations.

Shouting and whooping, drawing attention to themselves with great raucous and show while calling on the spirits of the wind, two or three men will set an area blazing and then mildly walk away. When we first came to Baomahun I was amazed by these fires. To my utter surprise they did not burn down the whole jungle. The fires made an intense show for a little while and then just quietly went out.

This is West African Pentecostalism. Oh, they can make a grand show in the flesh. They can work themselves into a heated, dramatic frenzy and make a lot of raucous doing so. But this does not produce anything lasting. It scorches the earth, robbing it of its nutrients, and leaves nothing behind for future generations. The history of these churches in this region bears this out. They start with an emotional blaze of energy, shouting, and whooping and then just fizzle out.

In the evening when a woman begins to prepare her family's meal, a child is sent to beg a coal from the fire which is already burning under her neighbor's pot. The smallest crumb of glowing ember will suffice to ignite the flame with which to cook their supper.

This is the fire of true Christianity. One small glowing ember shared with a neighbor, quietly and unceremoniously given. Humble, no fanfare, no attention to self, just a service from the heart. This fire nourishes, this fire is shared, this fire produces something for all who gather around it.

While discussing this custom with Joseph, an interesting point emerged, revealing a another group of people. There is nothing in the Sierra Leonean cultural code of conduct which requires them to give the requested coal. "The woman may grudge and not give it," explained Joseph, "She forgets that one day she may need a coal; she forgets that someone else has given to her before." I explained to him that this was like Christians who will not tell others about Jesus Christ and he quickly understood the analogy. Later that day, in the cool of the evening, I was at Joseph's house to help him witness to some young ladies. After they left he told me that as he was returning home that evening he stood to marvel as he watched a woman start *three* fires with a small ember which had just been given by her neighbor. This simple lesson from their own culture had a great impact on Joseph. It is also having a great impact on me.



While we certainly are being squeezed on the one side, we are rejoicing in what the Lord with and in spite of the squeezing. Thank you for your continued prayer and support.

Because He is Worthy

Stephen and Laura Holt

Please be sure to view the accompanying photo pages