

Bruchko

by Bruce Olsen

Part 1

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Introduction

Bruce Olson (born November 10 1941, USA), is a Scandinavian-American Christian missionary best known for his work in bringing Christianity to the Barí people of Colombia and Venezuela. Olson's autobiographical book *Bruchko* was published in 1973.

The Missionary work of Bruce Olson

In 1961, when Bruce Olson was 19, he bought a one-way ticket to South America and traveled into the uncharted jungles of northeast Colombia. There, he found the Motilones, a fierce, primitive Indian tribe.

The Motilones called him “Bruchko” because that is how they pronounced his name. Though Olson had no official sponsorship from a missions board or organization, in the 30 years living in Colombia, he established medical clinics and schools for the tribe. He has translated Scripture into their language, and he has led many of them in accepting Christ as their Savior.

The small yet volatile country of Colombia has long been plagued with escalating problems, including revolutionary uprisings and plundering by drug barons. In the midst of the danger, the turmoil and the cocaine trafficking, Olson quietly and effectively won the love and respect of the Motilones, and in fact, the entire nation. In his book titled, *Bruchko*, Olson tells the story of his early years of ministry in Colombia.

Olson lived and worked with the Motilones until October, 1988, when the shocking news came: He had been captured by a band of guerrilla terrorists intent on controlling Motilone territory as part of their strategy for revolution. Bruce was in captivity for nine months and endured constant torture and death threats. During that time he was faced with a firing squad, only to find that the bullets were blanks in an attempt to break him, but it didn't work.

Finally, one of the guerrilla leaders, Federico, told him that he was released. He told Olson that they had made a mistake when they captured him. He went on to say, “It's an embarrassment to us that you've been held in our camps. If we've mistreated you we hope you can find the greatness to forgive us. We've decided to leave the Motilones as an autonomous people. We will leave them alone, and you many continue your work among them as before.”

Olson led many of the guerrillas to the Lord. Olson is thankful that God was quietly working out His sovereign will, not only in his life, but in the lives of everyone involved: the Motilones and other tribal peoples, the people of Colombia, the guerrillas, and indeed, people all over the world.

Bruce's work continues today. More than 30 professionals have graduated from Colombian universities, among which are physicians, accounts, translators, Bible scholars, forest rangers, agronomists, and more than 400 as technical apprentices and high school graduates. All the students are back among their respective communities sharing the expertise of their newly acquired knowledge.

Bruce Olson and the Motilone believers are the key to fulfilling the Great Commission in this area of the world. Jesus Christ has commanded us to go and “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:18-20).

PROLOGUE: NINE MONTHS IN CAPTIVITY

The jungle echoed with the calls of birds and the screeching of monkeys. In the background the monotonous drone of grasshoppers sometimes appeared to drown out everything else. Smoke from morning campfires filtered up through the dense foliage overhead. Guerrilla members huddled in groups, eating or discussing the events of the day ahead, occasionally glancing at their prisoner Bruce Olson.

This was to be a special day—the day Bruce was to be executed before a firing squad for “crimes against the people.”

His capture by the guerrillas had not come as a surprise.

The leaders of the ELN, (a communist-inspired National Liberation Army), had worked for years to gain a following large enough to enable them to overthrow the government. Three twenty-plus Indian tribes who lived in the jungle had not been considered citizens until members of the Motilone tribe, with whom Bruce had lived and worked for twenty-eight years, had begun to take their place in key government circles. Now, as a result of his school programs, the Motilones had emerged as powerful spokesmen for all jungle tribes. The ELN perceived Bruce to be their key to the Motilones. They had asked him to join forces with them several years before. When he pointed out that he could not as a Christian, they decided to capture him, hoping to persuade him through forceful indoctrination.

One day in October 1988, along with a group of Motilone companions, Bruce headed down the Rio de Oro to visit one of their Motilone food cooperatives. In all of his travels he was cautious to steer clear of the guerrilla camps. As they approached the landing, however, he suddenly saw two guerrillas emerge from the jungle with rifles in their hands. The confrontation proved brief since Bruce and the Motilones were unarmed. Bruce’s Motilone friends were allowed to go, but he was bound. Placed between armed guards, he was herded from the clearing at the landing to a camp high in the mountains on the border between Colombia and Venezuela.

Now, ostensibly on the last day of his life, his arms were bound to the tree behind him and a swarm of insects drew blood from his body. He watched the guerrillas move about the camp.

Nearly nine months had passed since Bruce’s capture. They had been little short of gruesome. Hour after hour he was interrogated. But he never argued as other captives did. Rather, he explained that as a disciple of Jesus Christ he could not become a part of an organization or movement that used force to achieve its goals.

The indoctrination process employed torture in many forms, mental as well as physical. Many of the guerrillas’ captives had broken under the unspeakable indignities to which they were submitted. But the Lord enabled Bruce to consider it a part of His program of demonstrating to his captors the love of God as He had to the Motilones during his many years with them.

But as Bruce had observed the guerrillas in their activities during his months of captivity, he began to feel a compassion for them. He still did not agree with their philosophy of using force to achieve their goals. But he could see how limited they were in their claim that they wanted to better the living conditions of the poor people of Colombia.

So he began quietly to offer suggestions he thought would be helpful to them as individuals. He showed the cooks how to make tasty dishes of jungle fruits, berries, and grubs. When the camp nurse saw that Bruce had medical knowledge, he asked him for help with choosing and administering medicine and maintaining dental hygiene in the camp.

Bruce was especially grateful to God for those who had attended discussion groups that the leaders of the camps asked him to conduct. The subjects had included health care, politics, history, reading, and writing.

A few months into his captivity Bruce had been allowed to have a Bible. As the guerrillas saw him reading, many had asked for an explanation of it. He told them that must be reserved for Sunday, knowing that as citizens of a Catholic country they might have a greater respect for it on a Sunday. When they returned on Sunday with questions, he was able to show them God’s

love for them that prompted Him to send His Son to earth to die in their place for their sin. He was astonished to see more than half of them respond—demonstrating in their daily lives that they had truly received Him as their Savior and the Lord of their lives.

Life in a guerrilla camp is not easy. Bruce had been held in twelve of them—probably moved about for security reasons. His captivity had come during the rainy season. Hence his clothes were constantly soaked. Most of the time he was under heavy guard, especially at night, and often his arms were tied behind his back.

Sickness is an ever-present companion of jungle living. Bruce had experienced his share of it, especially with malaria. Through the years he had instructed the Motilones in the use of medical treatments for it as well as the often-recurring epidemics of measles, hepatitis, and other ills that plague all who live in the jungle.

Shortly before his scheduled execution, however, he had become critically ill at one of the camps. This was the lowest point during his incarceration. He tried his usual tactic in such times of imagining himself outside the pain of his body. His real self, he reasoned, was hidden with Christ in God and was impervious to physical distress. But several weeks earlier he had suffered a severe attack of diverticulosis and had hemorrhaged badly. One night the pain became so intense he could not separate himself from it.

Weak and exhausted, he suddenly became aware of the hauntingly beautiful song of a mirla bird. But why now? he wondered. Mirlas simply don't sing at night.

Whether Bruce was delirious or not he did not know, but that song continued through the night in which he passed in and out of consciousness. What puzzled him most was why the melody appeared so familiar. Then it occurred to him that the mirla was mimicking the minor tonal chant of the Motilones as they sang of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Swinging in his hammock slung from the rafters of the longhouse, he had often marveled at the love of

God in revealing His plan of salvation so beautifully to these people, now his brothers and sisters in Christ.

The song of the mirla carried him through the horrible pain of the night. The next morning the guerrillas had even talked about the strange performance of the mirla bird that had kept them awake during the night. One of them even suggested it might have been an angel for their prisoner instead of a mere bird. Bruce wondered, too.

Now he could see the commanders calling the men to assemble as witnesses of his execution. Many men hung back, especially those who had participated in the discussion groups. But the commanders were adamant. All guerrillas must be aware of what happens when anyone refuses to respond to the dictates of their leaders. But despite the ominous atmosphere of the situation, Bruce was overcome by a quiet sense of peace, a peace that only God could provide.

Bruce had been subjected to hours of painful indoctrination. Clearly they were convinced that if they could persuade him to join forces with the ELN and serve as leader of all the Indian tribes in their revolutionary cause, success would come for the National Liberation Army. When the guerrillas finally realized that their indoctrination tactics were not working, they became desperate.

They switched his status from “political prisoner” to “prisoner of war.” The charges they rigged up against him were ludicrous. Their accusations included involvement in the drug trade, the murder of thousands of Motilones, using the Indians as slaves, and working for the CIA—all “crimes against the people.”

Three days earlier Bruce had been given the ultimatum: either join with them or be executed. He had been forced to witness half a dozen of these killings. They were not pleasant to see. Most of the poor victims died crying for mercy and pleading their innocence.

Over the past twenty-eight years, on a number of occasions his faith had been tested almost to the point of death. In those times the Lord had

sustained his confidence in Him. Bruce had come to the jungles of Colombia because he believed He wanted him there. So long as he remained obedient to that vision he had to believe that Lord would provide for whatever his needs would be.

But he'd never faced execution before. As Bruce could see the commander handing rifles to the men who were to be his executors, curiously the memory of the ineffable message of the mirla came back to him.

Had this been why the Lord had given him the mirla bird on that fateful night? It certainly seemed possible. After all, Jesus said He would never leave or forsake him. There was no way he could not believe Him now.

Bruce could only smile sadly as he looked at the guerrillas in their shabby uniforms. Many had been present in his discussions on the Bible. More than half of these guerrillas had made some sort of profession of Jesus Christ as their Savior. Bruce felt sorry for them. Had they refused the order to participate in this execution they themselves would be shot. Cartridges were handed out, and he could hear the click as they were slid into the chambers of their guns.

At the commander's orders, the guerrillas slowly raised their rifles. Then came the command: "Fire!"

Bruce waited for the thud of the slugs in his body. None came. The shots were blanks.

The commander never explained. But later, when the guerrillas released Bruce, the commander simply said it had been a mistake to capture him.

Bruce thought that the mock execution was their last attempt to convince him to join them. Then he learned that through the media the Motilones had roused the people of Colombia so that the whole nation had become his defense. As a result, the ELN leaders discovered they were fighting a lost cause. The public had demanded his release.

Bruce later noted how logically God had orchestrated his release. After all, it was Bruce who introduced the Motilones to freedom through faith in Jesus

Christ. And it was the Motilones who restored Bruce's physical freedom through their media campaign.

As you read the rest of Bruce's story you will begin to understand the deep, deep relationship that exists between him and the Motilone people. It is a relationship forged in the bitter realities of jungle life and Colombian politics. But it has brought forth the sweetest fruit.

—Robert Walker

CHAPTER 1: HOME TO THE JUNGLE

Bobby and I found Ayaboquina, a Motilone Indian chief, alone in the jungle clearing at the top of the bluff. Green banana shoots and yucca sprouts already were breaking through the ground, and there was plenty of space for cattle grazing on the fifty-five acres. As we talked with Ayaboquina about the progress the Indians were making, we heard a motorboat on the river below. It was too close to the bank for us to see, but we heard it pull in. Usually it takes several minutes for someone to get up to the clearing, but well before we expected it, a swarthy-faced man appeared.

"Good afternoon," he said roughly in Spanish.

He was out of breath and waited impatiently as I continued to speak with Ayaboquina. I saw out of the corner of my eye that it was Humberto Abril, one of the outlaws who had settled the area. I knew he had a bad temper and had threatened the Motilones. Now he obviously was angry.

When I concluded my conversation with Ayaboquina, I said, "Good afternoon, Humberto."

He was sweating heavily, big drops falling from his hollow-cheeked face, which was contorted into a shape that made me uneasy.

"I've come to tell you to get off this land," he said. "This is my land. I'm a Colombian colonist. I have the right to claim land for colonization, and I claim this land. You can get off..."

He spoke to me, but Bobby interrupted him. "And I have something to tell you." He spoke slowly and calmly, but with great force. "This is our land. It has always been our land. It always will be our land. We have ceded enough land to you. Six months ago we ceded land to you, at your demand, and what have you done? You have sold them, and now you demand more. But we will not give more. We will protect what is ours."

The argument was short. Humberto began to shake. His neck muscles stood out like steel cords; his face became bright red. He took Bobby by the shoulders and shouted, "These are my lands. They are mine. Anyone else must get off." Then he let go of Bobby and stood shaking.

Fear crept up my back like ice. But Bobby was sure of himself. "You are wrong. These lands do not belong to you. They will not belong to you," he said quietly.

"Shut up," Humberto screamed. "Shut up. You dirty Indian, shut up."

Spittle came out of the corners of his mouth and made little spots on his red face. Then he put his forefinger across the thumb of his right hand so that it made a cross. He held it toward us. His eyes bulged and his hand shook so much he could hardly hold it straight. He kissed his fingers.

"For God," he said, kissing his fingers again and spitting on the ground. "For the saints." Again he spit, his head jerking to the side so violently it looked more like a spasm than a conscious movement. "For the Virgin Mother." A third time he spit. "And for this cross." He spit again, then—looking straight at us—he held his thumb and forefinger to his mouth and kissed them. His voice grew guttural. "I'll kill you!"

Then he screamed it. "I swear, for this cross I'll kill you."

He turned on his heel and walked down the bank. We watched the back of his neck until he disappeared. It was still crimson, and the muscles and veins continued to stand out like cords. We were silent until we heard his boat start up, then fade into the distance.

I was trembling. "Bobby, he will. He will kill. I feel that he means it."

"You are right, Bruchko."

"And what can we do about it?"

Ayaboquina, Bobby, and I decided on some safety precautions.

"But Bruchko," Bobby said, "there is no real safety in these things. Only God can help."

So the three of us bowed our heads and talked to God together. As we did, my fear was replaced by the joy that had seized me when I saw Bobby waiting for me that morning as my plane landed on a rough jungle airstrip. That joy crept into my soul, down into my stomach. Yet it was not the same joy. It was more profound, as though pain, danger, and fear had been injected into it, making it deeper, warmer, more sensitive.

A lot had happened in those few hours since my plane had circled the town of Rio de Oro for landing. Beneath the plane I could see the jungle stretching to the horizon, a dense, heavy green mat. To the right, I caught my first glimpse of a dirty brown streak, like a misplaced string across a green carpet. It was the Catatumbo River. We flew over it at the ferry, and I saw the cluster of houses, all fairly new, that comprised the town. It seemed lost in the vast jungle.

"But it is growing," I thought.

It occurred to me that just ten years before there had been nothing but high trees blocking the sun, and dense foliage underneath. Perhaps a parrot had screeched at me. Now, in that same place, was a town.

A flush of joy engulfed me, not because of the town, but because I was coming back from America and soon would be reunited with Bobby, my pact brother. I strained against the window trying to see ahead of the plane, my emotions swelling from my stomach up my back in a shiver.

As the old, worn-out DC3 lost altitude, the trees came so close to the plane's belly it seemed certain that our wheels would hit and send us spinning into the jungle. But suddenly the foliage broke and we were over a clearing—a

narrow, long strip cut out of the jungle. We touched down with a thump and a bounce, the brakes straining to keep the big plane on the small runway.

As we taxied to the end of the strip, my eyes hunted the figures standing there for Bobby. I couldn't find him. But going down the ramp, I spotted him a little to one side, his short, heavy-set torso looking powerful and agile even under those loose-fitting red shirt and dark pants. His face was browner than those of the other people waiting, but even from the ramp I could see his white teeth flashing. It was a smile that said, "You are back again, Bruchko, and it is good." He never used my American name, Bruce.

I broke into a run. When I got to him I grabbed him and gave him a true Motilone greeting. We must have made quite a sight: a short, dark Indian embracing a tall, blond American. But that made no difference to us.

"My brother," I said. "My brother, Bobarishora." I called him by his given name, as I always did in solemn moments.

I held him at arm's length. "You look fine," I said. "How is your wife? And your boy? Are they well?"

"My wife is fine," Bobby said. "She's healthy and happy. And she's extremely pleased to be the mother of a fine, healthy son."

"Then he's all right?"

"Oh, yes. He's fat. You should see him. And he's already moving around the house like a little monkey."

As we walked back to the plane where all baggage had to be claimed, Bobby asked, "And how was your business in America?"

I thought the streams of faces and the endless hotel rooms every one alike. I shook my head.

"I don't know, Bobby. I guess I got things done that had to be done. But I'm awfully glad to be back."

Bobby chattered about his family. He was as happy as I had remembered him. His dark eyes were bright. I had worried about him after his daughter had died; for quite a few weeks he had been moody and uncommunicative. Now he didn't seem to be able to stop smiling.

After we got the luggage we decided to eat. We went into the town that had been founded directly on the airstrip. Its narrow, gravel streets were crowded with new homes, their unpainted sides still smelling like fresh wood, their tin roofs still bright among the older, palm-leaf housetops. They were spindly, rickety things, however, that looked as though they couldn't stand long.

I hadn't had any food on the plane, and Bobby laughed at the way I stuffed myself with Colombian delicacies.

"You'll have a full stomach from now on, Bruchko," he said.

I knew what he meant. For a Motilone, to have a full stomach means more than not to want more food. It means contentedness, satisfaction with life, happiness. He expressed so well the way I felt.

"Bobby," I said, "you now are the leader of your people. It is a great responsibility."

He shrugged. "Well, it's not really me. Lots of other men are able now to take my position. And besides, Bruchko, Jesus Christ walks our trails. He knows our ways, and He knows the things we need. As long as we don't try to deceive Him again, He will be our real leader." I nodded.

"Bruchko," Bobby said, "you should see the schools. They're crowded. Most of the students have already read through the books we translated, and they want more, especially more of the New Testament. They talk about the things they're learning as though they were discussing a hunt. The old people, too. We'll have to get to work and translate more for them, or they'll give us no peace."

I laughed. "All right. We'll get busy on that as soon as we can. It should go more quickly now that we've gotten most of the difficult words translated."

The prospect of more translating made me happy. For one thing, I learned much from the Bible in doing it. I thought of the word for “faith” in Motilone, the word that meant to “tie into” God just as a Motilone tied his hammock into the high rafters of his communal home. “Tied into” Jesus, we could rest and sleep and sing from far above the ground without fear of falling.

“I’m so glad to be back with you, Bobby,” I said. “I missed you the whole time I was away. I guess I am ‘tied into’ the Motilone people.”

“And we are tied into you, Bruchko.”

As Bobby stirred his coffee, his smile turned into a frown. “We’ve been having more trouble with the land settlers. They’ve sent us several threatening letters.”

The settlers had given us trouble before. Some were prison escapees who lived on the frontier to avoid arrest. They were interested in taking Motilone land for their own farms and declaring the territory a refuge.

“What do they want now?” I asked.

“Oh, you know. More land. More of our land. They treat us like animals to be pushed in whatever direction is convenient for them.

“So you expect real trouble from them, or just threats?”

“I don’t know, Bruchko. It may be real trouble. Most of the settlers seem to have sided with the outlaws, and that means they’ll stop at very little. They are thinking that if the outlaws run us off our land they’ll end up getting it, since the outlaws never will be able to own land themselves.”

“So what are you going to do, Bobby?”

His face grew sad, and he looked down. “Well, I can tell you this much: we’re not going to give up more of our land to them. We’ve given it up time after time, and there’s just no end to it. This time we’ll protect ourselves. “But Bruchko,” he said, looking up at me, “I hope, I pray that it won’t come to that.”

I had plenty of time to think about that as we rode the canoe up river. It was a seven-hour trip, and the big Briggs & Stratton motor made so much noise it was impossible to talk. It was incredible, unbelievable that the settlers were troubling us again. It was so two-faced. More than three thousand settlers had been treated by Motilone Indians in the Motilone health centers. They were happy to come to us when they needed help. The Motilones had given them their drugs and medical supplies free of charge. Yet, when they wanted more Motilone land, the settlers would do anything to get it.

I looked back at Bobby, who was steering the boat, and smiled. How strange that I had gotten to this place, that I felt the way I did about these people. It was God who had brought me. I never would have come myself. And even if I had wanted to, I never would have made it past all these problems, past the loneliness, past the danger. In fact, I never would have left my home in Minneapolis if I had not had His powerful, determined Presence inside me.

As I sat in the canoe, I thanked God for Bobby, for the Motilones, for the jungle that was on all sides of us, even above us like a tent. When the river narrowed and we went in under the trees, it seemed as dark as night. The air was hot and humid, stifling. Bugs circled us and bit. But I was immensely happy. This was my home. Everywhere else I felt out of place.

We rode for five and a half hours. Neither of us tried to speak. Yet there was communication. We would point at some object and remember experiences we’d had. We saw no life on the river. A few bright birds would appear in the trees for a moment, then be gone. When we stopped the motor to refuel, we could hear the animals calling. But there were no settlements, no signs of human life.

Suddenly we realized from the river bends that we were close to the communal home of Ayaboquina.

Bobby looked questioningly at me and gestured in the direction of the home that was at the top of a bluff. “Do you want to stop?” he was asking. I nodded yes. He pulled in to the side of the river. We tied the canoe to a tree, then climbed the bluff quickly. Just at the top, a few feet from the home, was a

large, new sign. It announced in bold letters that beyond was Motilone territory, and that settling it was illegal.

I gestured to the sign. “The government finally got it up, eh?”

“Yes. Two weeks ago.”

We asked for Ayaboquina at the home, and one of the women told us that he was in the nearby clearing. They were building a new home, and there would be a school and health center nearby.

It was there we found Ayaboquina. Shortly thereafter, Humberto Abril showed up with his threatening words.

Later, I thought of those words, “For this cross I’ll kill you.” They were chilling, icy. Were they only a curse, only a threat? Or did they say more? Were they prophetic of something the cross was yet going to do to us?

It was for the cross that I could love the Motilones and be loved in return. But was it also for the cross that I would die? Was it also for the cross that Bobby would die?

CHAPTER 2: WHO IS MY GOD?

“Who is my God?” I asked. I was fourteen years old. “Who is He? “There was no one to answer. Across the high school yard I could hear the thuds and whistles from a football practice. For the thousandth time I wished that I were good enough at sports to be asked to play.

But there was something besides sports on my mind—something that had been bothering me for days.

“Who is my God?” I asked myself again. “There’s the Lutheran God, whom we talk about in church. There’s the God of all the Christian churches, whom we study about in school. There’s the God I’ve been reading about in the Bible. But which of them is my God?”

No answers came out of the frozen Minnesota sky. I began to walk home.

It didn’t seem that anybody knew the answer. The Sunday before, I had gotten enough courage to ask my Sunday school teacher. He’d smiled a big toothy smile. “Didn’t you take your confirmation vows?”

I knew all about confirmation. While studying for it, I had learned theology. But I wanted to know God.

My dad would rather I didn’t think about it. I hadn’t asked him—but I knew what he would say. He’d look down at me with his crystal blue eyes and tell me that I was wasting both his time and mine.

Maybe I was. It didn’t seem at all likely that there was any God other than the fierce Lutheran one. It frightened me just to think of Him.

“This icy wind cutting my face is His wind,” I thought. I kicked at the brown dead grass along the sidewalk. This morning it had been laced with snow. A few icy patches were left in the shadows of the gutters.

Why was I born? I’m too spindly... too nearsighted... too awkward. I can’t even play football. When they throw a pass at me, it hits me, and they make fun of me.

I could see Kent Lange’s freckled face ringed with dark, curly hair, his mouth stretched into a big laugh. He was my best friend. My stomach got a cold heaviness, like when I ate ice cream too fast.

Why did I take it all so seriously? It was only a game. “When I get home,” I thought, “I’ll get out my books. Then all these problems will be forgotten.”

I loved to line up my books on my bed, to have them scattered around me in their different languages. For the last two nights I had been practicing my Greek by reading the Bible. I had a big leather Bible that was beautifully printed and bound, and I loved to leaf through the pages. For years I had been reading the Bible, mostly the Old Testament. Now that I was learning Greek, it was interesting to dip into the New Testament.

But for the time being the Old Testament was still my favorite. I was enchanted by the histories, intrigued by the battles. Sometimes on Sunday afternoons I would read through many chapters at a time.

The prophets were different. They often frightened me so much that I would slam the Bible shut until I could convince myself that this was a “dream book,” not actual prophecy. God’s judgment was all too easy to imagine: the earth opening and people being carried down into the pit of eternal fire, and Jesus coming with His armies of bright, fierce angels with swords to destroy all creation for its sinfulness.

It frightened me to think of God. Sometimes when I lost my temper I would realize what I was doing and would cringe inside, my stomach muscles tightening. Yet I couldn’t stop. I would go ahead and fight, feeling terrible the whole time. Later I would think, “O God, I’m going to be judged.” I would be sorry but would know inside that I would do the same thing again.

The New Testament seemed different. For two nights I had been reading the Book of John. I was confused by it. Jesus didn’t seem at all as He had been described to me. Or had I confused Jesus with the God I feared? Everywhere Jesus went people were changed by Him—and always for the better.

I thought of my Sunday school class. I knew every kid in it. I’d gone to church with them all my life. they’d never changed. None of us had ever changed.

Oh, there was lots of talk about change, all right. The minister told us, “You’ve got to change because God is going to damn the earth and its sinners. You must be holy, just as God is holy. That is what He demands of you. Short of His perfection is short of His eternity.”

And that damnation frightened me. Sometimes Kent came to my house on Saturdays, and we would talk about horror stories and movies we’d seen. We’d try to scare each other, and we’d giggle and stick our heads under the cushions. We enjoyed being scared. But sooner or later we would talk about God’s judgment, about the burning pitch and the sky being rolled up like a scroll. Then we’d get very quiet. We knew that was no invention of a movie director or a story writer. It was real. It was going to come.

Mother was preparing dinner in the kitchen when I got home. I was chilled from the dry, bitter cold wind. I took off my coat and hung it up, then went into the kitchen, rubbing my hands.

She pushed back one of her blonde curls and looked at me.

“How was school today, Bruce?”

“Fine,” I said. “Where’s Dave?”

She looked down. “Your brother and your dad had a fight. He’s up in his room.”

Suddenly I felt bone tired. Someone was always fighting in our house. Things seemed to go best when we didn’t talk to each other.

I climbed the stairs to my room, noticing how each one was polished to a dark red—like a ripe cherry. I liked that. Everything should be in order. Everything should be neat and clean. Why couldn’t our family be like that? To look at us you would think things were fine. My mother was a beautiful Swedish woman, perfect like a statue. None of my friends had a mother who looked like that. And my father was handsome, with a strong jaw and deep brown hair that was never out of place. But we seldom got along.

I went to my room and put my schoolbooks away. Then I got out my other books and put them on my bed. I had an English Bible, a Greek New Testament, and some books to help me understand the Greek.

I stretched my lanky body on the bed. My feet stuck over the edge. My books made a little circle around me. This was the closest thing to a home that I had. I felt comfortable here.

I read into the evening. My mother called me to dinner, and I went down to the silent ring of my family, still thinking about what I had been reading.

My father noticed that I wasn’t saying anything.

“Why don’t you contribute something to the rest of the family?” he asked. He spoke with great precision.

"I was just thinking about something else, sir," I said.

"And what was that?"

I looked helplessly at my mother. I didn't want to have to talk.

"Bruce," my father said, "don't look at your mother. I'm the one speaking to you."

So I was forced to try to explain. I told him that I'd been reading the New Testament and that I didn't understand it very well.

"Of course you don't," he said. "It was written two thousand years ago. It's not expected to make sense today."

A mouthful of food stuck in my throat. I was tired of hearing my father dismiss things with a sentence. What did he know about it? I looked down at my plate. It was easier if we didn't talk at all.

As soon as I could be dismissed I went back to my room. Everything was wrong. I picked up my Bible, but the words swam around the page. My face felt hot.

I took off my glasses and lay down on the bed. "Stupid things," I said, looking at the thick lenses I had worn as long as I could remember. I hated them. Those glasses had gotten in my way in sports and had gotten me called "four-eyes" and "bug-eyes" for as long as I'd had them.

I put my head down. What was the point of getting mad at the glasses?

Surely somewhere there was someone who could help me. The apostle John had met Jesus and since then had never been the same. All the Gospels told about people being changed by Jesus. I longed for a change, too. But my God didn't care enough about me to do anything, I thought.

"Who is my God, anyway? Where is He?" I said to myself.

"Maybe if I keep reading I'll find the answer," I thought. But I didn't really expect to find something helpful. After all, the Bible was written before there

were Lutherans. Then I came across a verse that shocked me and sent electricity jingling through my body.

I sat up and read it again: "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." I knew God's justice, that He would judge me on the basis of my impurities—but here was a verse saying that Jesus had come to save the lost. I knew instantly whom He was talking about. Me. But how was Jesus going to save me? And from what? Was He going to do some miracle?

A verse I had read in Romans began to make sense: "If thou shalt... believe in thine heart that God hath raised him [Christ] from the dead, thou shalt be saved." And saved was the opposite from lost.

"That's all?" I thought. "Just believe? Shouldn't I have to do some great thing? Shouldn't I have to live a perfect life?" What was the idea I had gotten from my church.

I thought of all the things about myself that I didn't like. My temper. The bad thoughts that sometimes filled my mind. Could Jesus change these things?

Maybe He had been able to change water into wine two thousand years ago. But what did that prove about Bruce Olson? I thought about all those people in the Gospels who were changed by Jesus. But what did they have to do with me?

Hours passed. There didn't seem to be any solution to my questions. I was tired. The clock on my dresser said it was two o'clock in the morning.

Then I felt, very suddenly and very strongly, that those questions weren't for me to answer.

I felt drawn to try to speak to Christ. Of course, I had prayed before, only formally, in church, reading from the hymnal. This was different. I lay on my bed, face down, and spoke to Jesus. It was a simple talk, but it was the first I had ever really had with Him.

"O Jesus," I said, "I've read about how everyone around You was changed. Now I want to be changed. I want peace and fulfillment like Paul and John

and James and the other disciples. I want to be delivered from all my fears and... ”

At that moment I felt a presence in the room, like a stillness. It was at the same time small and quiet, huge and rearing, covering everything.

“Lord, I’m frightened by You,” I continued. “You know I don’t even like myself. Everything is messed up around me. And it’s messed up in me, too. But please, God, I want to change. I can’t do it myself. And I don’t understand how You can do anything within me. But Jesus, if You could change all those people in the Bible, I guess You can change me. Please, Jesus, let me know You. Make me new.”

And then I knew that I was being saved. I felt miserable and broken and sick of myself. But I also realized a peace coming into me. It wasn’t something dead and passive, that peace. It wasn’t just a silence ending the war inside me. It was alive, and it was making me alive. I could feel that I was going to be able to like myself. And I knew that I didn’t ever want that peace, that stillness to go away.

I lay on my bed, feeling amazed, too astounded to move or even to think. I kept speaking to Jesus, knowing that He was there. Jesus was there. I didn’t have to worry about the Lutheran God or the Christian God or anyone else’s God. They weren’t my problem. Jesus was my God, my personal God. And I had just talked with Him.

CHAPTER 3: CONFLICT

The peace was still there in the morning. “I’ve got to share this,” I thought. It will change my family completely. And the kids at church. They need to know Jesus.

Sunday afternoons the Lutheran youth group met in the basement of the church. I arrived early. Only a few boys were there, standing in various parts of the room, talking.

I went over to a group of three whom I knew and started explaining what had happened to me. I was smiling broadly and expected them to react in the same way. Instead they had a careful, reserved expression on their faces.

Something was wrong, but I didn’t know what. A few other boys came up and listened, all of them solemn. When I finished, there wasn’t a sound.

Then one of the boys looked up at the old wood ceiling and said, “So you’ve found a special door into heaven, eh, Bruce?”

“Yeah, you’ve really gotten super spiritual all of a sudden, Olson.”

They didn’t understand! I must not have explained it right.

“No, no, that’s not it at all,” I said. “It’s there for anyone, not just for me. I’m not trying to tell you I’m something special.”

I looked back and forth across the little circle of cold, withdrawn faces. These were my peers! I wanted them to understand. But they were looking at me as though I were an animal in a zoo.

Pastor Peterson came up, and I turned to him. Here was someone who would understand. He could explain it better than I.

“What is it, boys?” he asked. “What’s going on?” He turned to me. “What’s happening, Bruce?”

He was a tall man with a thin red face. He had a huge Adam’s apple that bobbed up and down distractingly when he talked.

I explained what I had been saying. He listened kindly, nodding as I talked. I felt relieved.

“Well, that’s wonderful. That’s fine, Bruce. I’m happy to hear that you’ve had such a fulfilling experience. But don’t forget that you were confirmed in the Lutheran church, right here in this building, and at the moment of confirmation you dedicated yourself to Christ. The Christian life began for you even before that, however, when you were baptized and given your name.”

“But when I took Communion and had my confirmation, nothing of it was real to me,” I said. “I was still the same.” I remembered how I had walked home in my white confirmation robe, trying to feel different somehow, but saying to myself, “Is that all there is to it?” I had hoped there was something more.

Pastor Peterson’s face, which had been friendly and warm, grew cold—like the boys’ faces.

“Olson,” he said, “I prayed over each of you boys when you were confirmed. Are you telling me that my prayers meant nothing? You’ve got to believe in your confirmation vows, that they were real and meaningful.” His face grew a little redder. I wished that I had never brought up the whole thing. But I had to go on.

“Well, I believe in them now,” I said. “Jesus is a reality to me. I’ve been changed. I’ve begun to feel for people when I never did before.” The words gushed out. I wanted them to stop, but they wouldn’t. “Jesus is in my life now. If He was before, I never knew it.”

Later, Pastor Peterson talked to me in private. He was stern. “Listen, Olson, you’ve gotten some kind of Holy Roller ideas from somewhere. But don’t give your life to fanaticism. Take the mask off. You’re no different from anyone else.”

I sat quietly, tired of trying to explain myself. How could something so good, so basically simple, make people so upset?

He leaned forward in his seat. “Bruce, when you come right down to it, Christianity is a moral imperative that obligates us to do right, to love our neighbors. That’s the point of the whole thing.”

After that, I really listened to his sermons. He preached about reform and about Christian ethics, but nowhere did he speak about the power for them. He spoke of change and gave a wonderful model of what we should be, but he didn’t tell how we could begin to match up to the model.

I couldn’t match up to the model either. I knew that. Not yet, anyway. But my life had changed, and it was changing more. I had peace with God. He was real, and I knew Him. My temper always had been a terrible problem. But after I came to know Jesus, it seemed to dissolve. Even my friends in the youth group, with all their jeering, didn’t rub me the wrong way. I was frustrated and hurt, but I only wanted them to have a personal encounter with Jesus, too.

My attitude toward school also changed. I became interested in what I was studying, because I could see how it related to Jesus. My mother began to enjoy going to PTA to see my improved grades.

I’ve always liked languages, and I’d been studying Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Now I had a reason for studying them. In Greek and Hebrew I could read the Bible in its original languages, and in Latin I could read the writings of the early Christians.

But as school became more meaningful, church grew more painful. I would sweat through the services, wanting to shout back at Pastor Peterson that he didn’t understand Jesus. I stopped taking Communion because I had been taught that to take it you had to be in communion with other believers and God—and I didn’t feel much communion with either the pastor or the congregation.

I had not told Kent Lange about my experience; in fact, I hadn’t seen him very often since he had changed high schools. About two weeks after my encounter with Jesus, however, he came over on a Saturday afternoon. He’d run to the house and was breathing almost too hard to talk.

“Bruce, the most incredible thing has happened to me,” he finally gasped out. “At church last night, I asked Jesus to come into my heart, like they tell you to do all the time, and, Bruce, He did. I lost all track of what was going on in the service. Bruce, He was there, in the church, and in my heart, and I knew it.”

I shut my eyes as a wave of relief and joy washed through me.

“Oh, Kent, that’s great,” I said. Then I told him about my own experience. We stood talking both at once. Then Kent jumped on me, and we rolled around the room, wrestling, pushing each other, as we compared experiences.

“Kent, I just can’t believe it. Both of us... ” I was standing, looking at him. “But Kent, what did you mean—that they always tell you to ask Jesus into your heart in church? They don’t do that in my church. No one ever heard of it.”

Kent told me about his church. It certainly sounded different from the dry Lutheran church I’d attended all my life. Nearly all of the people acknowledged Jesus as their Lord and Savior, Kent said.

The next day was Sunday, and Kent invited me to go to church with him. From the outside it was like any other church. But I felt excited. I’d never been to any non-Lutheran church.

The inside didn’t look like a church to me. There were no pews, no elaborate altar decorations. It looked more like a school auditorium. Plenty of people were there already, but they weren’t sitting in their seats. They were talking. It made me think of a hive of huge bees buzzing about. In the Lutheran church people came in silently and immediately took a seat to pray.

We sat down in the folding chairs, toward the back. When the service began, Kent’s father, who was the minister, went to the front. “We’ve met together today to praise God for what He has done in our lives through His Son, Jesus Christ,” he said. “Let’s all join in singing hymn number thirty-eight.”

Everyone reached down and opened a hymnbook. They sang a hymn I’d never heard before. Kent found the place, the piano began to play, the pipe organ roared, and the congregation sang. Somebody behind us began to clap. Everyone else joined in. I was shocked. What was going on? Where was the reverence, the respect?

After the song Mr. Lange returned to the podium. “Well, we’re clapping in praise to the Lord,” he said. “It’s a beautiful song and full of truth about what the Lord has done. And we’re here in the house of the Lord today, and if you

believe that God is real, say ‘amen.’” And everyone did—filling the hall with a big, booming sound. A-men!

But Mr. Lange put his hand to his ear and said, “Didn’t anybody say ‘amen’ out there? I couldn’t hear it.”

So they said it again, louder than ever. I squirmed. I thought everyone must be looking at me, the lone non-amen-sayer. I remembered how once in the Lutheran church I had dropped my hymnal in the middle of the service and my mother had grabbed me and said, “Shhhh. Don’t pick it up now. Stay standing up.” And here were people saying “amen” out loud.

A band was present that Sunday evening and began to play. Soon everyone around me was tapping his foot.

Mr. Lange asked for “a testimony.”

“God is with us this evening,” he said. “We know that because we’re together reading His Word and singing His praises. But we need a testimony. Who will stand up and tell us what God has done for him?”

I didn’t expect anyone to be willing to do that. But before I knew it, a man stood up and began telling about some of the problems his family had been having.

“But I praise God for those troubles,” he said, “because He helped us with them. We were able to pray about them as a family, and He’s really helping us solve our differences in love, day by day, and we’re becoming closer as a family.”

He had his whole family stand up. There were four boys, and some of them weren’t too far from my age. The man reached out and hugged each of them. Then they hugged him and each other. They even hugged some of the people sitting near them. And everyone clapped.

It was all strange. But, oh, how I wanted it. I wanted to be able to pray with my own family. I wanted to be hugged and accepted by my father!

Then came the sermon. It hadn't gone very far before the man sitting next to me leaned back and said, "Amen!" I nearly slid off my chair with surprise—it was so close and unexpected.

But even though it was strange, I was attracted to it. Here was a church where people seemed to know the reality of Christ.

I went back to the Wednesday night service. Then I went to the Thursday night prayer service and again to an evening service on Friday. Then all day Sunday. I couldn't get enough of it. And I was learning much from the Scriptures. I had been reading the Bible, of course, but Mr. Lange's messages opened my eyes to things I'd never thought or dreamed of.

I suppose I knew there would be trouble with my parents. It wasn't long in coming. They had been upset when I first told them about the reality of Christ in my life. My father was particularly apprehensive about this. If something couldn't be explained in Lutheran terms, it wasn't understandable—or acceptable. He had been confirmed a Lutheran, and to him being a Lutheran meant respectability. He thought that I was trying to be better than him when I started telling him about finding Christ.

He tried to talk me out of going to the interdenominational church. When I came home, he would look up from the paper and say, "Well, here's our Holy Roller son back from the kingdom of God. What's the message of God to us poor sinners tonight?"

He said that every night—every single night that I came home from church. It got so that I couldn't stand it. I would run by him and up to my room and bury my head in the pillow, trying to stop the ringing of his voice in my head.

He also would clap his hands in imitation of the church (because at first I had tried to describe it to them) and sing, "Oh, yes, Jesus, we're going to be saved. Oh, yes, Jesus, come down on us tonight."

It was five miles to the interdenominational church, and I had no way to get there, other than walking. I would go to the Lutheran church each Sunday morning to appease my mother, and then I'd set out for the other church. It

was winter, and the wind would blow up my pant legs and the sleeves of my coat. The cold would come up through the soles of my shoes from the ice-covered sidewalks, go through my feet, and climb up my legs. There were days when every second of the walk was agonizing.

Then I would reach the church. Inside it was warm. Friendly faces would look up and greet me. We would open the Bible, and my body would sink down into itself and relax, like a cat preparing to sleep. But my mind would be wide-awake. I found constant happiness when I was reading His Word. When church was over, I would linger as long as I could. I always refused a ride from anyone. I was too proud—or too shy.

My father had done everything but command me to stop attending the church. One night I started for home late. The wind, with nothing to block it, swept waves of powdery snow across the roadway and into my face. I also could hear it whistling. I wanted to rest, but I was afraid to stop. I remembered stories of trappers freezing to death because they had stopped to rest and couldn't get up again.

I could see the lights of the houses, beautiful homes like white shells in the snow.

"O Jesus," I whispered, "help me."

But I went on and somehow walked up the incline, past the houses to my own house. It was dark. I felt relieved to be home. I reached for the doorknob and had trouble gripping it. My ice-coated mitten slipped off the cold brass.

I went through the slow procedure of taking off my mitten. I finally had to work it off with my teeth; my fingers were just too stiff. I put my hand on the doorknob again and turned it.

The door was locked.

I tried it again to be sure. There was no question. My parents had forgotten that I was out.

I hated to wake them up, but I had to get in, so I rang the doorbell. I watched the window of their bedroom, waiting for the light to go on. It didn't. I rang the doorbell again. No response.

My mother could sleep through that noise, but my father was too light a sleeper. I knew he was awake. I called to him.

"Dad, it's me, Bruce. Come down and open the door for me, please. I'm freezing."

There was no reply. Although I didn't want to, I started to cry, the tears freezing on my face.

"Dad, please. It's Bruce. Please let me in."

I took a deep breath and held it in. Then I felt a little calmer. I looked up at the dark window again. It seemed to be looking back at me, like a dark, hooded eye. Finally I thought of the Langes. I knew they would take me in. But it was two miles to their house, back along the way I had come.

"Please, Dad," I called, and waited. There was no response. I turned on my heel and began to run. I ran as hard as I could until I couldn't run any farther. When I stopped, my breath was heaving, and the cold air burned my lungs each time I breathed.

I made it to the Langes, exhausted and shaking. They got up and gave me a warm place to sleep.

That was the worst time. But it wasn't the last. I never knew whether I would find the house locked or unlocked when I got home.

My mother was caught in the middle. She feared my father, but there was little she could do to constrain him. I remember coming home one afternoon and finding her in the kitchen, leaning against the stove with tears staining her beautiful, flawless face and dripping down in splashes on the burners.

It frightened me. "Mom, what's the matter?" I asked.

Her voice shook. Twice she started talking and couldn't. Finally she said, "Bruce, what's going to hold our family together?"

I thought I knew the answer. I had been trying to give it all along. But now, when I was asked, it seemed difficult to phrase.

"Mom, we need to be real Christians. With Jesus in our lives, there is hope for us," I said.

I hadn't expected to make her angry. But when she looked at me, I knew she was both angry and hurt—not only at me, but also at life.

"Oh, Bruce," she said. "How can you say that when it's your Jesus who is the source of half our problems? At least before Him we could all tolerate each other. But He's stirred up everything."

It was true. But I didn't know then that Christ had said He would bring divisions as well as unity to people.

I was discovering that the cross of Christ meant more than joy and peace. It meant suffering, too—suffering that was necessary to bring a later hope.

But there would be plenty of opportunities for me to learn that lesson.

CHAPTER 4: A MISSIONARY?

When I was sixteen, the interdenominational church I now attended regularly held a missionary conference. It was something new to me, and I was intrigued. Missionaries from all over the world gathered to talk about the areas in which they were working. For the first time I heard the term "Great Commission." It had a mysterious ring to it.

One of the missionaries, Mr. Rayburn, "served" in New Guinea. He was a short, dumpy man with an expression of continual surprise. The night he spoke he wore a bright green polka-dot shirt, black pants, and dirty tennis shoes. I was surprised that anyone would dress that sloppily to speak in church, but I soon discovered that he had a forceful message.

The church was full. I had been reading about New Guinea and was looking forward to a firsthand report.

Mr. Rayburn showed movies that he had taken. In one scene, a man was eating a rat. You could just see the tail of the rat hanging out of the man's mouth—then, phht, it was gone.

"That fellow eating the rat there. He's not a Christian," Mr. Rayburn said.

"Poor fellow," I thought, remembering how miserable I had been before becoming a Christian.

There were other pictures: some of extreme poverty in the midst of modern cities, some of "natives" and their odd clothes, houses, and eating habits. Then Mr. Rayburn made his appeal.

"These people are starving, dying of disease, living in ignorance, eating rats. But most of all they are starving for the knowledge of Jesus Christ. They are dying lost, without knowing how Jesus Christ can save them from their sins. Can you sit comfortably in your seats and accept that? Do you care about these men and women living in squalor and filth? They're dying, damned to eternal condemnation! And what do you do? Maybe if you're really virtuous you put a little money in the collection plate on Sunday morning. Maybe you put in a dollar to reach these people starving for the gospel.

"But Jesus wants more of you. He wants more than your lip service to the great cause of missions. It's your responsibility to take the gospel of Christ to these people. Otherwise, their blood will be required of you."

That night I had nightmares. I dreamed that the man eating the rat pulled the rat's tail back out of his mouth. It became a whip, and he used it to beat me while he screamed, "My blood is required of you! My blood is required of you!"

I woke up in a cold sweat.

"That can't be right," I thought. "God's not like that. He's a God of love. He loves me."

"But do you love Him?" the question came.

"Yes, I do love Him. Of course I love Him. How could I not?"

"Won't you serve Him, then?"

"Serve Him? I am serving Him. I study the Word. I've shared with all my friends what He means to me. Isn't that serving Him?"

The next evening I talked with Mr. Rayburn. "You're wasting your time here," he said. "The whole world is damned, and it's your responsibility to give them the truth."

For weeks after the conference I quarreled with God.

"But why are You set on making me a missionary?" I asked. "Why can't I be Your servant here in Minneapolis?"

My aim was to become a professor of languages, to get a PhD in philology. But something within me said, "That isn't what God wants you to do."

"Listen, God, these missionaries are ridiculous," I argued. "They wear tennis shoes in the pulpit. Their prayer letters aren't even written in decent English. And their theology. They're always talking about hell and damnation. Where is their love for the people they're living among? They're failures, Lord. They can't make it in normal life, so they go off to be missionaries.

"But I can succeed here, Father. Everyone agrees. Why should I have to work with naked, starving people?"

God never told me why. But He did change my heart. Gradually my pleasant, sane dream of becoming a linguistic professor vanished into this ridiculous idea of going to other countries to talk to savages about God. I knew it wouldn't make sense to my parents; it didn't even make sense to me. But over the months, as I walked to school, as I sat and daydreamed in class, as I read the Bible, He gave me something I'd never bargained for: compassion.

I couldn't fight it. God made no demands. He didn't force me. But I found myself irresistibly interested in other countries and in other cultures. As I

continued to read, South America captured my attention, and I began to identify with the people there. Soon I found myself dreaming of this enchanting land and her people. I gave in to God.

I told Kent Lange that I had been “called” to be a missionary to South America.

“You? You? A missionary?” Kent’s face broke into a grin. “Bruce, that’s impossible. Don’t you remember when we were Boy Scouts—what a great adventurer you were then?”

I grinned with him. My parents would drop me off at the front door of the Methodist church where the Boy Scout troop met. I would go through the church and out the back, over to King’s Pharmacy where I would buy a book and read it until it was time to go home. The great outdoors had never interested me.

Nominal friends also discouraged me. They reminded me of my physical disabilities: I’d had bronchitis when I was younger, and I still wasn’t too strong.

“And Bruce,” they told me, “You’ve got a great life ahead of you as a linguist. Don’t throw your abilities away.”

It was a convincing argument. However, I was changing my mind about the stature of missionaries. When I’d looked into mission board requirements, I’d discovered to my surprise that you needed a Bible institute education (or its college equivalent) to be accepted. So I postponed my decision and went away to Penn State in the fall of 1959. For either vocation—linguistic professor or missionary—I would need a college education.

But I couldn’t escape from my fascination with the people of South America. I compulsively read books on their history and culture and became especially interested in two countries: Colombia and Venezuela.

I enjoyed my classes at Penn State and did well. But I was lonely. I made few friends. And nagging at the back of my mind was the thought that I should be planning to go to either Colombia or Venezuela in the near future.

I transferred to the University of Minnesota the next year. I had hoped that by being home again our family situation would improve. But it was no better. I had been praying that God would change both my parents’ attitude toward me and my attitude toward them. I knew I wasn’t of much help to them. But my father in particular remained rigid, and it was too much of a strain for me. We alternated between coldly ignoring each other and openly arguing. Somehow I was never quite an adult in their eyes.

Through it all, my compassion for the people of South America continued to grow. What had been a lukewarm commitment became a driving urge. Finally one evening I decided that I wouldn’t wait until I finished school. I would visit South America now. Maybe I would find peace in my heart when I got there.

I began the process of applying to a well-known mission board in Venezuela. It was a tedious, slow process, and I felt school chafing against me. Once I had made the decision to leave the United States, it didn’t make sense to me to keep going to school. And the thought of going to Venezuela was becoming more and more exciting.

I had an inner peace about it, too. I knew that, irrational as it seemed, I was doing the right thing. I was obeying God.

Then one day I received my long-awaited reply from the mission board. With great excitement I opened the envelope. I found a single sheet.

“Dear Mr. Olson: We are sorry to inform you that we cannot accept you at this time for missionary service. You understand, I trust, that...”

I didn’t finish the letter. I couldn’t. The words seemed to have lost all their meaning—as though they were written in hieroglyphics. I stared at it. My mother came into the room and noticed that something was wrong. “What’s the matter, Bruce?” she asked, putting a hand up to my forehead, checking to see if I had a fever.

I closed my eyes and breathed a deep sigh. “It’s nothing, Mom,” I said. “Just some bad news.”

She looked questioningly at me, but I couldn't explain. Not then, anyway. I turned and left the room.

Later, when I was over the original shock, I felt better. "Well, at least that's over and done with," I thought. "I won't have to worry about God wanting me in South America for a while at least."

And for a few days I felt relieved. I enrolled in new classes at the University of Minnesota and really looked forward to studying. My dream of becoming a professor of languages returned. I could pick up where I had left off and forget South America like a nightmare forgotten after waking.

But many times as I studied in the library I felt God nudging me. "Bruce, I want you in South America."

"But, Lord, I tried that. Don't You remember? I was turned down."

"Turned down by whom?"

"Why, by the mission board, of course."

It was as though God were smiling at me, amused and tolerant. "Bruce, I didn't turn you down. I want you in South America. Follow Me."

"God, this is ridiculous. How can I go down there without a mission board? You want me to go down there without anyone to take care of me? I mean—without protocol and all?"

"Bruce, I'm in South America, too."

And then slowly, unwillingly, I began to see what God had been trying to teach me. He hadn't called me, really, to be a missionary like Mr. Rayburn. He had called me to Himself, to be like His Son, Jesus Christ. And He wanted me to follow Him to South America. Now.

I knew my parents would never be able to accept it. Even the thought of going with a well-established mission board had upset them. To go all by myself... they would consider that impossible.

So I went to Chicago on the train to get my passport and visa without telling my parents. I had only enough money for the round-trip train ticket: nothing for food or a place to sleep. All the way there I prayed that God would take care of what I needed.

I was hungry when I arrived in Chicago. I had about thirty cents in my pocket. I found my way out of the huge, bustling, echoing station and onto the sidewalk. I stopped for a moment to get my bearings. It was hot and windy. I glanced down and saw some green out of the corner of my eye. It looked like money.

I picked it up and unfolded it. It was a ten-dollar bill!

"Wow. Thank You, God," I whispered. I looked around, expecting someone to claim it. No one was near. There was no way to find out who had dropped it. I could keep it.

Later, a friend gave me the name and address of a missionary in Venezuela. I wrote him and asked if he would be willing to meet me at the airport. I told him I was a student and that I was interested in missions. He wrote back, telling me enthusiastically that he'd be sure to be at the airport and that he'd show me around Caracas and help me find a place to stay. That helped calm my mother's fears.

I showed my parents pictures of Caracas and told them about its high standard of living and highly civilized Western culture. But nothing would convince them. They were sure that any place other than the United States or Europe was barbaric and that I was throwing my life away.

But they let me go. I was given enough money for my plane ticket to Caracas and seventy dollars for expenses. I hoped it would be enough.

I barely made my plane. I had dropped my ticket at a big church send-off, and someone had found it and reported it just in time. When I got it, there were only a few minutes left for a quick good-bye to my parents and to the Langes. Then I went up the loading ramp and boarded the plane. The flight attendant showed me to my seat, and I sat down and tried to relax.

For a moment, panic flooded me. What on earth was I doing? I was nineteen years old. I had seventy dollars, no knowledge of Spanish, no concrete plans. Only a drive within from God that nearly everyone else thought was foolish.

At least Mr. Saunders, the missionary to whom I'd written, would be at the airport to meet me.

I settled back in my seat and watched as the airplane left the ground behind. The checkered fields and the trees gradually became a single green blur—then were lost to my sight as the plane was enveloped in clouds.

CHAPTER 5: FIRST MEETING WITH INDIANS

A small boy sat next to me on the plane. He looked at me with curiosity.

"Hello," I said.

He opened his mouth and a long stream of Spanish came out.

I laughed and put up my hands. "No comprendo." He stopped talking and

looked puzzled.

"Americano," I said, pointing to myself. I picked up the newspaper, printed in Spanish, which the flight attendant had given me, and tried to read a sentence aloud. The boy showed no signs of understanding, but I didn't let that stop me. Suddenly he said, "Bien, bien," and I knew I'd pronounced something correctly. But I had no idea what it meant.

I had to laugh at myself. Here I had studied Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, yet I had never studied Spanish. "Sometimes," I thought, "God is not very practical."

As the hours went by, I got more and more nervous. Finally Venezuela came into sight.

I pressed against the window to watch the plane land. As we got lower I could see the mountains rising far behind the coastline. After circling over the ocean, the plane touched down at a modern airport on the coast.

When I stepped out of the plane, the Venezuelan heat rushed over me. It was incredible. By the time I had walked to the terminal I was sweating profusely.

As I stood in line to go through customs, I looked around anxiously for Mr. Saunders. The glass partitions gave me a clear view of waiting family members, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I spotted a familiar figure. But after two hours in the customs section, I discovered I was mistaken.

No one was waiting for a nineteen-year-old from the United States.

I got my luggage and sat on it, expecting Mr. Saunders to come around the corner at any minute. Every time I heard footsteps I looked up, ready to greet him, then sank back when I saw it was a janitor or a Venezuelan businessman.

I couldn't believe Mr. Saunders had forgotten me. Something must have delayed him.

But no one came. Then I was alone except for a janitor who was mopping the floor. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid that, if I left, Mr. Saunders would come, and I would miss him. I felt foolish sitting in the empty room waiting for him. I wished I were home.

Finally I carried my luggage to the ticket counter and asked if someone had been looking for a Mr. Olson. The ticket man listened intently, then repeated probably the only English phrases he knew. "I'm sorry. I don't speak English." He went back to his work.

I looked around the room. "Anyone here speak English?" I asked loudly. No one turned.

Then a priest walked in, an elderly man in flowing black robes. I rushed over to him and tugged on his sleeve until he came with me to the ticket counter.

There I spoke to him in Latin—and he understood! What a wonderful feeling to be understood!

The priest was in a hurry, though. He translated my questions to the man at the ticket counter—who didn't know a thing about a Bruce Olson or a Mr. Saunders. Before I could ask any more questions, the priest was off again.

What was I going to do? What could I do, except wait? He had to come.

But he didn't. At one o'clock in the morning, when I was the only person still at the terminal, a Pan Am attendant walked over to me. In English he told me that I would have to leave. No more flights were expected until morning, and I couldn't stay at the airport overnight.

I ended up in a luxurious hotel in the vicinity, but all I could think of was how much it cost me. My seventy dollars would be gone in a week!

The next day I got up early and walked around the hotel grounds, trying to decide what to do. The sun was bright, and it already was hot. To conserve money, I went without breakfast and lunch. But when five o'clock came, I was too hungry to resist.

I had no way of contacting Mr. Saunders except by mail, and by the time I got a letter to him I would be completely broke. I couldn't ask for advice because I didn't know Spanish.

Then a strange thing happened. The next morning a young man stopped me and asked if I was an American. He was a cheerful-looking fellow with snappy black eyes. Speaking very poor English, he introduced himself as Julio and told me that he was a college student at the University of Caracas.

"What are you doing here in Venezuela?" Julio asked.

"I want to work with the Indians," I said. "I expected to be met by one of the missionaries who works in the Orinoco, but something went wrong. He never showed up."

Julio frowned. "You're not staying there, are you?" He pointed at the hotel.

I shrugged. "Where else? I don't know Caracas."

"Well, you won't get to know it staying at that place. Why, it's just for... for..."

I laughed. "It's for Americans, you were going to say? Well, I'm an American."

"OK," he said, "you're an American." He smiled. "Too bad for you. But you shouldn't stay there. Why don't you come home with me? We'll put you up. My family will be glad to have you."

My heart jumped. In no time we were lugging my suitcases onto a bus that took us up the beautiful mountains to Caracas—which Julio told me was the most modern city in South America. But I was shocked to see the thousands of squatters' huts on the mountainside, made of cardboard boxes and plywood crates.

When we arrived at Julio's house, he introduced me to his mother, a pleasant, heavyset woman. She spoke no English, but with her gestures she let me know I was welcome. A stream of Julio's brothers and sisters trailed after her.

I was given a small room upstairs with one window permanently nailed shut and one bare light bulb. But I was happy to have a place to stay, and they soon made me the center of their attention. I asked Julio and his brothers and sisters the Spanish names for different things and began to learn the language. I was introduced to Colombian food and loved it.

But in a few days I began to feel restless. I had difficulty communicating with anyone when Julio was gone, and I had nothing to occupy my time. I wanted to help this family in some way but couldn't figure out how to do it. I often wandered through the streets of Caracas, wishing I could talk with people. I felt uneasy about sharing the family's food and house: they obviously weren't prepared financially to have another family member. Also I began to feel in the way.

One day when Julio came home he asked, "Are you serious about wanting to live with the Indians?" We had talked about it before. To him, the Indians were just curiosities from whom to collect artifacts for a rustic decor.

“Yes, I am,” I said.

“Well, then, there’s a fellow you had better meet. He’s a medical doctor who lives near the Orinoco River. He’s employed by the government’s Indian commission. Furthermore, he’s an American. His wife is a friend of a friend of our family.”

I followed him down the street until we came to a small café. There Julio introduced me to Dr. Christian. A tall, slender man of about forty, he was sitting in a little cane chair, his long legs stretched out, holding a drink and smoking a cigarette.

“So you’re interested in Indians,” he said. “What for?”

I hesitated a moment, wanting to phrase my answer just right. “I just want to have the opportunity of meeting them and seeing their way of life. Maybe later I can be of some help to them.”

He smiled, leaning forward a little. “What makes you think you can help them? Do you have any skills they need?”

When I didn’t answer immediately, he held up his drink and stared at it. “You wouldn’t even like the Indians,” he said. “They’re dirty and ignorant. There’s nothing noble about them, except that they care for their own, even if they ask others to do it.”

“What are you working with them for, then?” I countered.

He laughed. “Good question.” He shrugged. “It’s a job. I have to do something with my medicine. This is as interesting as anything—and it involves travel.”

There was a short silence. Julio left.

“What Indians do you work with?” I asked.

“Oh, several tribes on the Orinoco River.” He began to tell me about them, and as he did his attitude changed. Little crinkly laugh lines appeared around

the corners of his mouth. He really loved the Indians, and it was fascinating to listen to him.

Then he stopped talking and studied me. “All right,” he said, “if you’re serious about this, you can come with me. I’m going next week, and I’ll be gone for a month and a half.”

I kept a calm exterior, but my heart raced. We shook hands and talked about arrangements. Then I left. As soon as I had put a block between the café and me I let out a big whoop and ran down the street, dodging people on the sidewalk.

A week later we were in Puerto Ayacucho loading staples, supplies, and drugs onto a truck that would take them—and us—to transport canoes on the High Orinoco—a sixty-kilometer trip on the only out-of-town road. People were crowding onto the truck, shouting back and forth. A big, lumbering DC-3 had carried us into the little town that morning.

As we finished lashing down the cargo, people were hanging off the truck on all sides. We climbed up onto the top of the truck with them. A big jug of wine was passed over to us; I passed it along to the man next to me. Everyone was talking. The truck started up and lumbered ahead onto the thin strip of dirt road. We entered the trees, and immediately the town was out of sight. Ahead was savanna, interspersed with spots of jungle.

When we reached Samariapo, we were sore and tired. The constant jolting of the truck had exhausted us. This was the end of the road. From Samariapo we would have to travel into the High Orinoco by boat.

We unloaded our cargo and took it down to the muddy, yellow Orinoco where Dr. Christian had two huge dugout canoes bound together. We filled them with our supplies for the next month, and then, with two guides to navigate day and night, we set out upriver.

It took us more than a week to reach the first Indian settlement. Mile after mile of the river rolled behind us. I soon lost track of the bends—and of the deadly wooden snouts sticking out of the water.

The rich vegetation on either side of the banks was unchanging. Occasionally we would reach a small clearing where a settler had his shack. Always he—or someone in his family—would look up from his work or run to the riverbank to watch us. But for the most part, we saw no sign that men had ever been up the river before.

“Most settlers are farther up the Orinoco inlets where the lands are less apt to flood,” Dr. Christian explained. I was excited and asked endless questions about the Indians and about the missionary work there. I hoped to meet some of the missionaries, including Mr. Saunders, for this was the area in which he worked. I was sure he’d be friendly and apologize for forgetting to meet me at the airport.

At one point, Dr. Christian looked over at me. “You’ll never fit in with these missionaries,” he said. “They’re a mess.”

“What do you mean?”

He waved his hand. “You’ll see.”

We finally reached the first Indian village on the High Orinoco. From the riverbank I could see a small group of round huts. There were no Indians in sight. I felt somewhat apprehensive, but Dr. Christian routinely tied the canoes to a tree on the bank, and we stepped out.

All around was the disgusting smell of human excrement, and as we walked up to the village I could see flies buzzing around piles of filth only a few feet from the people’s huts.

Dr. Christian didn’t seem at all perturbed. A few of the natives greeted us, and he talked with them, having learned some of their vocabulary on a previous visit. Most of the Indians, however, had been frightened when they heard our canoes and had hidden in the jungle.

One by one they came out of hiding, and Dr. Christian examined those who had ailments, gave them shots or pills, and made suggestions about sanitation. Their eyes glowed when he spoke in their language, and Dr.

Christian obviously enjoyed their company. He treated each one patiently, trying to explain everything as well as he could.

We stayed there only for the day, then continued up the Orinoco to the point where the Mavaca River junctures into the Orinoco.

“You’ll have to live with the Indians before you can begin to understand what their life is like,” Dr. Christian said.

As I thought about it, a little chill went through me, but I decided I could be left for three weeks at the Mavaca while Dr. Christian continued upriver and into the other tributaries. He could pick me up again on his way back. I was particularly interested in staying at that particular place because Mr. Saunders worked near it. My meeting with him, however, was a great disappointment.

“What makes you think you can come down to South America without a mission agency?” he asked right after we had been introduced. “You just want to come down and impose on us. You think we’ll have to take care of you. But you’re wrong. You’re on your own, Buster.” He turned and walked off.

I was at the mission compound only a short time. The various missionaries there were extremely guarded in their approach to me. They did tell me that they were having “a certain amount of success at reaching the Indians with the gospel of Jesus Christ,” but that now there was “a great deal of persecution of the Christians by the other Indians.” They had been cut off from the rest of the tribe.

Since the missionaries offered me no accommodations, Dr. Christian dropped me off on the north part of the Mavaca River with a group of Indians whom the missionaries said weren’t Christians. They spoke a broken Spanish. I had learned to speak it a little by that time, so we had a crippled communication—much better than my first encounter at the international airport in Venezuela.

I couldn't believe that these were the Indians the missionaries had described. These Indians persecute anyone? Impossible. They were too innocent. They allowed me to accompany them when they went hunting, and when I couldn't keep up their pace, someone stayed behind with me. When I tripped over vines and roots, they helped me up. They shared everything that they owned. I ate their food, slept in their hammocks. How could these Indians be "persecutors"?

When Sunday came I suggested to one of them that we all go to the church, which wasn't far from their camp, and listen to stories about God. He looked at me and frowned. "No, we don't do that."

"Why not?"

"Those Christians, they're strange."

He wouldn't say more, but he did take me to the chief of the village, a big, strong character who laughed when he was told what I wanted to know.

"Listen," he said, "those Christians don't care about us anymore. Why should we care about them?"

"How do you know that they don't care about you? They're part of your tribe."

"Why, they've rejected everything about us," he said. "They won't sing our songs now. They sing those weird, wailing songs that are all out of tune and don't make sense. And the construction that they call a church! Have you seen their church? It's square! How can God be in a square church? Round is perfect." He pointed to the wall of the hut in which we sat. "It has no ending, like God. But the Christians, their God has points all over, bristling at us. And how those Christians dress! Such foolish clothes..."

I thought of the Indian Christians I had seen at the missionary compound. They had been taught how to dress in clothes with buttons, how to wear shoes, how to sing Western songs.

"Is that what Jesus taught?" I asked myself. "Is that what Christianity is all about? What does the good news of Jesus Christ have to do with North American culture?" In Bible times there was no North American culture. Were the missionaries making a mistake in their preaching? Of course, it probably made them happy to see the Indians dressed like Americans, singing "Rock of Ages." But was that the only way Jesus could be worshiped? And was there a certain amount of satisfaction in having the Indian Christians persecuted by the rest of the tribe? I began to wonder.

I decided to try to tell the Indians what the gospel really was about, but it was difficult. Not only was my Spanish poor, but also I had to overcome their suspicion and mistrust of "foreign missionaries." The Indians would listen politely to my explanations, then point in the general direction of the Indian Christians and shake their heads.

"We don't want to become like them," they would say emphatically. "Our way is right."

CHAPTER 6: LAST-MINUTE HELP

After three weeks Dr. Christian returned, and we went back to Puerto Ayacucho where he kept a suite of rooms in a hotel. He invited me to stay there while he went on to Caracas.

Once again I was alone. My money was gone. The suite of rooms, crammed with the vases and china figurines Mrs. Christian liked to collect, felt small. I also was uncomfortable staying in someone else's private home and wished that I were back in the Orinoco jungle.

However, Puerto Ayacucho was a pleasant frontier town, so I went out early each day to walk. The streets, shaded by almond trees planted in the sidewalks, were never crowded, so I was free to pray and think.

The mission board with which Mr. Saunders was associated had a large house in town. One day I met Bob, one of the missionary kids. He was eighteen, sandy-haired, with a big, boyish smile. Because he was only a year younger

than I was, we soon were having a good time. It was a pleasure to be able to speak English after straining at Spanish for several months. We compared stories and told jokes. Later that day another missionary kid named Tom joined us. He was a little older but had a good sense of humor and kept us all laughing.

When it began to get late, Tom said, "Bob and I have to be back in time for dinner." He could see that I hated to see them go. "Look," he added, "I wish you could come for dinner, but my dad, well... he wouldn't."

"Oh," I said. It was the same thing the other missionaries had told me. If they offered me hospitality, they thought it would commit them to taking care of me.

I went back to the dark and empty apartment, sat down on the sofa, and put my hands behind my head. In doing so, I knocked a ceramic vase off the shelf. It broke with a crash. Trembling, I swept up the pieces and threw them away.

How I ached to get out of that apartment, to be with friends. But where could I go?

I lay down on my bed. "O Lord," I prayed. "I don't have anything. No money... no friends. Christians here won't accept me. I'm not a missionary with a home board, so I have no support either from there or here. Please help me. Please keep me sane."

The next day there was no sign of Tom or Bob on the street. I decided to call on them at the mission station. When I knocked at the door, it opened just a crack.

"What do you want?" a voice asked.

"I'd like to see Tom, if I may," I replied.

Tom came to the door, obviously embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I'm not allowed to see you anymore," he said.

"Why not?"

"My father says that you've been put out of fellowship. That means none of the missionaries are supposed to greet you."

"Out of fellowship? Why?" I knew my voice was rising, but I couldn't stop it. Tom shrugged. "You won't obey them. They told you to go back to the States, join the mission, then come here and work."

"How could I even get back? Will they buy my ticket? And since when do I have to obey their orders?" My breath was coming fast.

Tom squirmed, hesitated. "I don't think I should talk to you about this any longer," he said. "Good-bye." He shut the door.

I walked down to the city square, feeling lonelier than ever. I wanted to run. But to where?

I sat on a bench in the square, wishing I could stay there in the sun forever.

After an hour or more, a priest approached and started a conversation. He said he was an Italian and was teaching English to high school students but dreamed of working with the Indians. He had never been able to go upriver to see the settlements. When I told him of my experience with Dr. Christian, he was fascinated. In spite of my prejudice against Catholics—especially against the clergy—I soon was happily engaged in conversation and forgot my troubles. And when he got up and left to teach his class, I continued to sit in the sun, feeling somewhat cheered.

A little later a group of boys came up the walk, grinning at me self-consciously. They surrounded me and took turns shaking my hand and saying "Hello" with an exaggerated accent that made it sound like "Hey-loe." After that ceremony, one stepped forward, looked up at the sky, and recited, "We wish for to invite you to our school class to talk of English."

Trying not to laugh, I thanked him solemnly, then followed them to their school where, not too surprisingly, the priest was the teacher. I spent at least an hour there, talking about America.

After school the boys crowded around me. One of them went to get his older brother, a university student home on Christmas break. I was introduced to him. He was short and muscular with heavy, dark eyebrows and bronze skin. He had a fierce look, but his mannerisms were gentle. His name was Rafael. He invited me to stay with his family, and I accepted. I discovered later that it was unthinkable among responsible Latin families to let a young person such as I be alone. I also discovered that they believed when you do good to others, someone will care for your children when they are away from home. But at the time I wasn't worried about the reasons. I was just glad to be accepted at last.

Rafael's house, in the poorest district of town, consisted of one room. It had a dirt floor, dark walls, and a thatched roof. Cockroaches were everywhere. I slept in a hammock, as did the rest of the family. But I couldn't have cared less.

The next morning Rafael woke me while it was still dark. "Hurry," he said, "it's the first day of the Christmas celebration." We joined crowds of people in the streets. It was fun. We ran up and down, shooting off firecrackers and cherry bombs in the cool, early morning air, jostling against other happy people and talking and yelling at each other. It was like the Fourth of July in Minnesota.

At five o'clock all the people started moving toward the church.

"Come on—let's go to Mass," Rafael said.

I shook my head. "I can't. I'm a Protestant."

He pulled my arm. "It doesn't matter. Come along."

I looked at him. He was now my friend. How could I refuse to go to Mass with my friend? This was a big event for him and his family. So I went along.

Those were wild days. Every morning we got up early, threw firecrackers, then went to Mass, and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

But when the missionaries heard that I was attending Mass, they completely cut me off. Since they'd already said I was out of fellowship, however, I

couldn't see that it made too much difference, although their words of condemnation hurt.

"Nothing would please them anyway," I decided, "except my leaving—and I'm not about to do that. Not now."

At last I could comprehend a little of what God was trying to teach me. So what if the missionaries had rejected me! So what if the people I had counted on most didn't act the way I thought they should. Jesus had not rejected me. He had led me to the Venezuelan nationals. It was His plan I was following, and He would use every experience for my good.

After Christmas, Rafael had to make a trip, then go back to the university at Caracas. I didn't want to stay in his house while he was gone, so I made plans to leave when he did.

"But where are you going?" he asked.

I told him that I was going to Caracas, too; that Dr. Christian had described an American-Venezuelan cultural exchange program there that I might be able to get involved in.

"But where will you stay?" Rafael asked. "You can't just go to Caracas and walk around. Riots are going on, and there's a lot of anti-American feeling."

He gave me the address of the private boardinghouse he stayed in and a letter of presentation to the owners.

"This is the best place in all of Caracas," he said. "It's cheap and clean and in old Caracas. We all stay there."

What I didn't tell Rafael was that I had no way to get to Caracas. Yet I knew, somehow, that it would work out. I made plane reservations.

The day I was to leave, I stood by my suitcases in Rafael's house, wondering what I should do. I had already said good-bye to all my new friends. But Caracas was a long way off for a penniless young American.

Then Rafael's little brother came in with a letter for me—the first letter I'd received since I had left Caracas with Dr. Christian.

It was from the Langes, just a short note. But with it was a check for one hundred dollars—the promised support from the church. It had come when I needed it, not a day sooner, not a day later.

Down at the airstrip, I paid for my ticket and flew off to Caracas, not realizing that I would nearly be killed my first day there.

CHAPTER 7: COMMUNISTS

The day before I arrived in Caracas, a state of emergency had been declared — because of demonstrations against the government. I had trouble getting a taxi and noticed many troops patrolling the streets.

The boardinghouse my friends had directed me to was an old adobe building near the Plaza de Simon Bolivar. The walls were several feet thick, for insulation, even though the temperature only reached a maximum of eighty degrees. I was given a small room with a window on the street.

The house was filled principally with students, and I wasn't long in feeling at home. The narrow halls, illuminated with glass roofing, were painted in bright colors. The "dining room" was a wide point in one of these corridors where a long row of tables had been set up. That night at dinner, when the tables were covered with food and the old straight-backed wooden chairs were filled with arguing students, I was reminded of a carnival.

The next day there was trouble in the streets—much of it almost outside the boardinghouse door. While I was dressing, I heard a few distant pops. It never occurred to me that they were gunshots. As soon as I stepped out of the boardinghouse door, however, I heard the sounds that the thick walls had disguised: the rhythmic chanting of the crowd and the spatter of bullets. I stood frozen in the doorway. Then some soldiers ran around the corner, driving people in front of them. They stopped abruptly. I heard a rat-a-tat

from their machine guns and saw little spurts of dust fly as the bullets hit the dirt that had accumulated on the paved street.

As the action unfolded in front of me, part of me said, "Move, for heaven's sake!" But I stood still, my legs like roots. One young man who was running suddenly collapsed—like an untied balloon—and fell face down in the street. The machine guns fired again, and I saw two more people fall, blood oozing from their bodies.

Most of the mob was gone from the street by now, but a few people seemed to hesitate at the corner. One of them, a dark-faced boy with a red bandana around his neck, turned, picked up a rock, and ran back toward the troops. He wound up to throw his missile, but as he did, the machine guns, which had been quiet, went rat-a-tat-tat, and he seemed to explode; an arm flew off in a red shower and rolled in the dirt.

Then I moved, without thinking first, as though my mind said "Move" to my body a minute after my body was already moving. I slammed the double door of the house shut, locked and bolted it, then ran to my room. I shut the window to quiet any sound. I threw myself on the bed. I felt cold. I lay there that way all day, listening to the spatter of the guns.

The next day I had a fever and remained in bed. When my friends came back to school, I was thoroughly sick, with a fever of 103 degrees Fahrenheit. They got me a doctor. He prescribed some medicine; I didn't ask where it came from because I couldn't pay for it anyway. I later learned that a young man named Lucio Mondragon, a student, had paid for it. He had been stopping in to look at me every day, telling a joke or two, and leaving.

The medicine helped. I was able to move around, although it was some time before I was really well.

As I was convalescing, I struck up a friendship with a local bum and met him each day for an hour of conversation in Spanish. I studied an old Spanish textbook at night.

I shared my room with another student, but after I had been there for two months, he moved out. That meant that I had to pay for the room by myself, which was twice as expensive.

Lucio, probably surmising that I didn't have much—if any—money, invited me to move upstairs with him. He even helped me. He was a handsome, thin fellow, with black hair that fell across his forehead and quick, nervous mannerisms. He opened the door to his room, and my first impression was that everything was red. Then I realized that the red was in the shape of hammers and sickles—one entire wall of them!

Lucio walked in and set a box of my things down.

"This is your bed," he said, pointing. "Everything else is at your disposal. Feel free to use the radio." He walked over and switched it on. It was tuned to Radio Havana from Cuba. Lucio looked up at me, the barest twitch of a smile on his face. "It's best not to try to tune it to different stations. It's very temperamental. It can be difficult to get back on the right station."

It didn't take me long to discover that Lucio was one of the student leaders of the Socialist party on the university campus. Anti-American feeling was strong there, and Lucio constantly tried to aggravate me with it—half in fun, half in submerged fury.

The bum with whom I conversed regularly was quite a character and wasn't teaching me the best Spanish. My student friends laughed at some of the things I said.

"Your style isn't too good, Olson. Why don't you come to the university where you can really learn?" one asked.

Although attending the university had been beyond my dreams, I decided to try it. There weren't many other foreign students there, so a tall, blond American like me stood out like a sore thumb. Soon most of the students knew me.

It was Lucio and his extremist friends who were kindest to me, however. I could see that their ideals were important to them, that they really wanted

to help the poor in their country. I shared their compassion—but we did have some furious arguments.

For example, Lucio always held me directly responsible for whatever the American government did.

"You capitalist pig," he said one day as we sat in a café with a group of other students. "We hope to develop our country, to make it good for the poor as well as for the rich, and what do you Americans do? You come down here and exploit our country, take all the resources out and leave nothing. You dominate our government by paying people off."

"Wait a minute," I said. "I don't do that."

"Oh, so you don't support your government! Are you a revolutionary?"

"No, I didn't say that."

"Then what are you here for if not for capitalistic reasons? You're a spy, trying to find out how we work so that you can use it against us, just as your government has used it against Vietnam and Cuba. Isn't that right?"

"No," I said. "I'm here because I want to help the Indians, if I can."

The students who had gathered around to listen began to laugh. To them the Indians were not worth enlisting in their political rebellion.

I looked at them with scorn. "And who are you, you elegant communists, that you can build equality by pulling down the structures and then set up your own that pays no attention to the Indians—the real Venezuelans—who have real needs? Aren't they your people? Or are you as selective as the rich who govern now—to use your own words?"

Lucio always took impossible positions and baited me with them. It made life tense; I never knew whether he was joking or serious. We were friends, yet there was hate in his life, and some of it often was directed at me.

One day I went swimming with him at Catia La Mar, one of the beautiful beaches on coastal Venezuela. We had argued, and he had called me names.

When we got into the deeper water, we splashed and pushed each other in fun. But there was a grimness in our play that both of us felt.

Suddenly Lucio said, "I'll kill you, you capitalist dog." He grabbed me and ducked me underwater. At first I didn't struggle. I was sure he would soon let me go. But he didn't. He kept a fierce grip on me. Soon my blood began to pump hard, and I felt a terrible urgency to breathe. Still he held me under. I was going to die. I knew it. I fought him with strength I didn't know I had and finally felt a weakness in his hold. By wrenching with all my strength I got away. Lucio had dived underwater, out of sight. I felt weak and terribly sad. I swam in to the shore and lay down on the sand.

Lucio stayed in the water another twenty minutes, then came over to me. I didn't look up.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here." We walked home silently.

My landlord had never mentioned the rent I owed him, nor had my friends ever asked me to pay my part of the bill when we went to a café for coffee. But it is an uncomfortable feeling to be dependent upon others for everything.

I asked God about it but received no response. No more money had come from America, and I had no reason to believe it would start coming after all this time. And it was theoretically impossible for me to work for money as a visitor to Venezuela.

One night at a party, however, I met Miguel Nieto, who worked with the Ministry of Health in Caracas.

"What are you doing in Venezuela?" he asked, then explained that he was looking for someone to teach English to some students who were preparing to attend Harvard's School of Tropical Medicine. "Would you be willing to do it?" he asked. Was I willing! "But Señor Nieto, I've been told that it is illegal for me to work in Venezuela," I said.

He smiled. "That's OK. We'll pay you in advance. If anything happens, there won't be any contract. We'll just consider it finished business." He stuck a bill

into my hand. "Here's your first month's salary. Come see me tomorrow at the Ministry of Health."

I went home so happy I could have danced in the street. I had a job. Soon I would have enough money to pay my bills.

In 1961 President Kennedy and South American presidents met in Punta del Este, Uruguay, to determine U.S.–Latin American policies. It was a period of political tension at the university. Huge, brilliantly colored posters on most of the buildings opposed cooperation with the United States. One poster showed Uncle Sam as a pied piper throwing dollars to the South American presidents, who followed him eagerly.

University elections were coming, and Lucio ran on the radical Socialist platform. He worked many hours forming a coalition of different socialists. He often came home in the early morning, then would be gone before sunrise.

By this time I had become sympathetic with the goals of the communist students. I had seen the rude tourists riding in buses and parading down the streets. I had seen the unbecoming behavior of the American embassy staff, and I wasn't proud of them. The communist students had, at least, a deep concern for their country, which expatriates never seemed to show for theirs.

Lucio's coalition won the election at the university. "Now you'll see something, Olson. Now you'll really see," he said.

He soon found that the worst enemy of a political reformer is winning an election. Within a few months the coalition began to break apart. Few of the students were as committed to it as Lucio; there were squabbles and power struggles and constant threats to withdraw from it. Lucio finally was forced to admit failure. One night he threw himself on his bed, cursing.

"Olson, what's the point of all this? No matter how good my ideas are, someone always ruins them."

That was the first time he had ever asked me for my opinion on anything. I hardly knew how to answer him.

“I know what it is like, Lucio,” I said slowly. “Everyone wants you to conform to what they want you to do.”

He looked up from his bed. “How do you know what it is like?” he asked. “Have you been a political organizer?”

“No,” I said. “But when I first began to follow Jesus, the same kind of thing happened. My father in particular—he is a rich banker, you know—wanted me to go after success, a good job, all the things he thought were important. And my church wanted me to explain everything in the traditional way.

“But Lucio,” I said, “it was Jesus who gave me the ability to see beyond all that. That’s why I’m here, planning to help Indians. Do you think my father or my friends thought it made sense? They thought I was crazy! They tried to talk me out of it. But Jesus gave me a whole different outlook. He can give you one, too. He can give you the right perspective on life.”

“No, no, no,” he said. “We’ve tried Christianity here. It doesn’t work. The church is right in with the status quo. They own more land, more business than anyone else in Venezuela—or in all of South America.”

We talked late into the night. He knew all the arguments. But he also knew that there was something more to be had in life—something that couldn’t be touched, something that could give peace. He sensed it in my life—that peace that wasn’t just apathy, that peace that gave me a divine purpose, even an unexplainable power.

Three days later he rushed into the room. “Olson,” he said, “does it really work? Are you telling me the truth?”

“About what?”

“About Jesus. You’re not lying to me?”

“No, Lucio. I’m not lying to you.”

He sat down quietly and folded his hands.

“All right,” he said, looking down at the floor. “All right. I’ll do it.”

“Do what, Lucio?”

He looked up at me, his face determined. “I’ll accept Jesus. I want Him to run my life.”

CHAPTER 8: ALMOST KILLED

Loneliness plagued me. Often I would walk the streets for hours, just looking at people’s faces and trying to overhear their conversations.

“You’re being silly,” I told myself. “You’re just a stupid, homesick Minnesotan.” But I didn’t want to go back to the States. South America had captivated me.

What I needed was a real friend—one who knew me completely: a brother. I couldn’t have put it into words, but the desire was there. And somehow I knew that Lucio would never be that to me.

I also was troubled by my enrollment at the university. I was in South America to help Indians. I had told everyone that. But the university was a funny place to look for Indians.

Miguel Nieto, my superior at the Ministry of Health, knew of my interest in Indians and called me into his office one day to discuss them.

“Have you ever heard of the Motilone tribe?” he asked. Our conversation proved to be monumental. Through it I discovered why God had directed me to South America.

The primary contact between the Motilones and civilization came in the form of arrows, Nieto told me. No one had ever learned any of the Motilone language, nor had he ever been close enough to describe their physical culture. The Motilones lived in a wild jungle area on the border between Venezuela and Colombia, he said.

Only the big American oil companies seemed to be interested in that area. Every time their employees entered Motilone territory, however, they were

shot at. Great numbers had been wounded by Motilone arrows; many had been killed.

It would have made sense to forget about the Motilones. But I couldn't. A gnawing, troubling curiosity grabbed me. And it wouldn't go away, no matter how good the arguments I used against it.

"What on earth can I do for a bunch of savage, primitive Indians?" I asked myself.

It didn't matter what I thought I could do. In my innermost self I somehow knew that God wanted me to go to them. But I was afraid and tried to talk my way out of committing myself. I had forgotten how hard God can make it on someone who won't do what he's told. I lost my ability to concentrate, to do anything but think about the Motilones.

Even so, I wasn't going to go!

I was sitting in the Ministry of Health one day, waiting to see an official, when a passerby tossed a newspaper onto the seat next to me. I glanced over at it.

The word "Motilone" caught my eye. I looked more closely. An article reported that an epidemic of measles was affecting a large number of the Motilones. An oil company employee had discovered more than twenty dead—and deserted—in one of their communal homes. His description of their rotting bodies was detailed and chilling. Somewhere inside me a cord snapped. What was I fighting against? Why the resistance? These people were in need. I had studied tropical medicine; I might be able to help.

Within a week I was on a bus for Machiques, a town in the foothills of the Andes. My departure was not easy: visa problems had taken me clear to the president of the country. And it had been hard to leave my student friends. They were sure I was crazy.

Still, I felt cheerful. The bus was crowded, not only with people but also with livestock. I ended up carrying a large pig on my lap for most of the three-day trip. I was much more at ease than when I had left Caracas to go up the Orinoco, however. I now spoke Spanish quite well and enjoyed talking to the

other passengers. A fat, red-faced rancher's wife riding with me had heard of the Motilones, and I pumped her for information. She told me many colorful stories about people being wounded by their long, heavy arrows.

"Don't you go near them," she said, shaking a big finger. "They'll kill you."

I got the same advice from a number of people in Machiques. But I was confident—and excited at beginning a new adventure. I also vividly remembered my trip up the Orinoco. Those Indians had been so friendly, so wonderful to live with. In my mind, Indians were Indians. Getting along in the jungle shouldn't be too hard either. After all, I'd done it on the Orinoco.

I had saved enough money to buy supplies and decided to start off with a short visit, perhaps a week. The only transportation into the Andes from Machiques is on foot, so I bought a mule, a "real sure-footed" one, according to the man who sold it to me. The two of us set out early one morning on the trail I had been told to take.

The trail was easy to follow as it gradually climbed up into the Andes. I expected at any moment to meet a friendly Motilone Indian and be taken to his village.

I rode rather jauntily all day, pausing only to snack on some bread. As the sun got lower and the beautiful varied greens of the jungle got darker, I began to feel tired. Disappointed that I hadn't met any Indians and that I would have to spend the night outside, I kept pushing the mule along, hoping to come to an Indian village.

Suddenly I stopped. I had missed the trail. Ahead were only vines and creepers. I backtracked until I found the trail. But I didn't go very far on it. Within a hundred yards it disappeared again.

I went back. It was strange that I would take two wrong turns in a row. I hadn't had any trouble following it before. Perhaps it was just the difference in the light.

The trail no longer was well marked. It had become a thin, weedy path through the trees. When I picked it up again, I followed it carefully. But I

hadn't gone more than a few yards before I realized that there was no path at all!

I crisscrossed the area, pulling the tired and now stubborn mule after me through bushes and vines. There was no sign of a trail. It had vanished.

I stood and looked around me, my heart pounding. There was nothing on all sides but silent, dark trees and vines. They all looked alike.

I tried to remember my Boy Scout training. How did a Boy Scout figure out where he was? I couldn't recall.

I knew what I could do. I could wait until the sun rose the next morning and get my directions from it.

That thought relieved me. It was simple. Just wait until morning.

But in what direction had I been traveling? Where was Machiques from here? I thought I had been going east, but I wasn't sure.

It was now quite dark. I could see only the silhouettes of the trees. I had nothing to sleep in. I would have to lie down on the ground. At least it wasn't cold.

I tied up the mule, picked out a spot, and lay down. In the process of squirming back and forth to find a more comfortable position, I got a thorn stuck in my backside. I sat up in a hurry.

I was unhappy, tired, and depressed. Did I really know what I was doing? The jungle that had seemed so pleasant during the day began to seem dangerous. I heard scurrying, thrashing noises in the bushes. Strange, wailing screams bit into the air. I couldn't sleep.

I kept waiting for the sun to come up. The night seemed hours longer than it should have been. Once, when I was on the verge of drifting off to sleep, something landed on my face and immediately hopped off into the brush. Adrenaline pumped through my veins. I was wide-awake.

I watched the darkness turn into a gray, which gradually got lighter. When I could distinguish colors, I got up. I was stiff and had a horrible taste in my mouth.

I had a can of sardines left from my lunch and a candle to heat them with. The thought of food made me ravenously hungry, for I had neglected to eat the night before. I hurriedly rustled through my pack until I found the can.

But I had forgotten to pack a can opener.

I got out my knife and started to cut the can. My knife broke. From the little hole I had opened, I greedily sucked the olive juice. I had to eat! I couldn't go without food! I might starve.

I tried banging the can on a rock, but it didn't do any good. Finally I tossed it into the bushes.

I had wasted an hour. I still didn't have my bearings. Nor did I have any idea how to find the trail on which I had come in. But I didn't want to go back. The sun was coming up over a mountain in the distance. I decided that I would go in that direction. I started off, pulling my reluctant mule after me. Now that there was no path, it was slow going. The mule constantly got tangled in hanging vines and creepers. Some of the bushes had long thorns, and several of them stuck into my hands and legs. The cuts puffed up hideously after I pulled the thorns out. I began to feel feverish.

As I climbed higher into the mountains, the foliage thinned out, and beautiful iridescent blue butterflies flew everywhere. Flaming red parrots squawked at me. The air got cooler. My hunger had disappeared, but I felt weak. Bugs continued to bite me, as they had ever since I began the trip. Every exposed area of my body was covered with red welts.

That night I did sleep, although nightmares woke me several times. It was cold, and I didn't have warm clothes to cover me. When I got up in the morning, the first thing I did was retch. I looked at my hands and hardly recognized them. They were red and swollen, bit up like a piece of raw meat.