

Semesi Nau

from Tonga to The Solomons

Adapted from *Semesi Nau, The Story of My Life*, Autobiography with introduction by Allan K Davidson.

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The seventy young men who were students at the Tupou Wesleyan College of Tonga stood listening to the visiting speaker. There was a stunned silence as they tried to comprehend what he was telling them. “The Wesleyan Church is to be closed and everybody must join the Free Church of Tonga. The king has said that all you students must join the militia.”

It was 1886, fifty years since the first Christian missionaries arrived in Tonga. The Wesleyan Church had served the Tongan people well. The students asked themselves, “Why should there be a change now?”

“The Premier, Mr. Baker, is behind this,” some of the students whispered.

Mr. Baker had been a Methodist missionary and chairman of the Wesleyan Church in Tonga for nine years. He had been a friend and advisor to King Tupou in matters of government and had led the church to total self-sufficiency and independence from the Australian Church. Whilst these were significant achievements and goals, they created personality clashes and antagonism in the church and community. Mr. Baker had offended some important people, which led to his removal from his position in the church. A year later he returned to Tonga and was appointed Premier by the King. Together they led a break-away church known as the Free Church of Tonga. Now they were making every effort to coerce people into joining this new church. They even sent the militia into village communities to force people to leave the Wesleyan Church and join the Free Church of Tonga.

Mr. Baker's messenger continued, "You young men must all take an oath of loyalty to the militia and kiss the Bible, to show you will be true to your promise."

The students were beginning to realise what these orders would mean for them personally. They had seen what the militia had done in the villages, how they had driven some families out of their houses, others had been beaten with sticks, a number had been taken captive, tied up by the hands and feet and taken to prison. Some, out of fear, had turned their backs on the Wesleyan Church and joined the Free Church of Tonga.

The students talked together quietly. Then, finally, a twenty-year-old student named Semisi Nau spoke up. "This is a very serious matter you have brought to us, sir. We need time to think about it. God has called us into His service. That's why we're here at the Wesleyan College. If we join the militia, what will happen to this college? We don't want to see it closed down for want of students."

After considering Semisi's statement thoughtfully, a group of about twelve stood with Semisi Nau and expressed support for his view. "We don't believe God has called us to fight against our brothers. We have no wish to join the militia. We want to continue our studies here at the college."

Finally, Semisi was forced to sign the statement. Then the magistrate handed him the Bible which he was expected to kiss. Semisi hesitated such a long time that the magistrate became impatient and commanded that he be imprisoned.

The dissenters were marched off to prison and next day were tried before a magistrate. For some unexplained reason Semisi was set free and sent off home. But his freedom was short-lived. He hadn't even reached his home before two policemen grabbed him and, one on each arm, dragged him to Mr. Baker, the Free Church leader.

"I'll teach you not to disobey my orders," he thundered, "If you won't join the militia and turn from the Wesleyan Church you can go and join your friends in the prison at Nuku'alofa."

Three weeks later, still in prison, the students had another visit from Mr. Baker. "You fellows are to remain in prison for three years," he announced. "You," he said, pointing to Semisi, "will be deported with five of your friends. The rest will stay here at Nuku'alofa."

It was God's preservation of Semisi to send him away. A shocking event occurred at Nuku'alofa which resulted in six of his friends there being brutally shot. Had Semisi been at Nuku'alofa he, too, would undoubtedly have died. Semisi was put on board a ship bound for Fiji where he joined a number of other Tongans, including his parents, who had been deported for remaining true to the Wesleyan church.

This was another intervention of God, for Semisi's father, Joeli Nau, was in charge of a church near the mission's secondary and theological school at Navuloa in Fiji. Joeli and his wife went to visit Semisi. "We're proud of you for standing firm and not joining up with the militia," said his father. "It's no shame to go to prison for being obedient to God."

Semisi's father arranged for him to attend the school at Navuloa, where he completed three more years of study. Dr. Bromilow was principal of the school and the man who later pioneered the missionary work on Dobu, in the Papuan Islands.

One day Dr Bromilow preached on the life of Moses.

"While Moses stayed in the house of the Pharaoh where he had been brought up, he had the opportunity of possessing all the wealth and glory of Egypt," Dr Bromilow began. "But Moses chose to lead his people out of slavery into freedom. He knew his choice would bring him difficulties in life, but he knew that trusting God was better than all the treasures he might have enjoyed in Egypt. He lifted his eyes from the pomp and glory of earth and fixed his gaze on his God and Chief in heaven."

When Semisi heard these words his heart responded.

"Dr Bromilow's words fell into my heart like good seed that quickly began to do its work," he wrote later in his autobiography. "At first my heart was full of pain and heaviness through conviction of sin in my life. When I confessed that sin there came to my heart a word of peace spoken to me by the Holy Spirit, 'My son, I have cast away all your sin.' When I heard that a great joy filled my heart. That day is one I will never forget."

Dr. Bromilow encouraged Semisi to do further study at Navuloa, the secondary and theological college in Fiji, giving him opportunity to preach in the nearby churches, then after six months he was sent back to Tonga and returned to Tupou Wesleyan College.

There Dr Moulton, the college principal spoke with him, "Semisi, what do you plan to do with your life? You're a young man; you have some college training. What are your plans?"

"I only know that God has called me to work for Him. I don't know where he wants me to go, but I'll go wherever He sends me," was Semisi's reply.

After some further training he was sent to take charge of a school at Niuafou about three hundred miles north of Tongatabu, where he stayed for two years and then returned to Tupou College.

During this time the dispute between the Wesleyan Church and the Free Church of Tonga continued to divide the community. Dr. George Brown was sent from Australia to help solve their problems and eventually Mr. Baker was required to leave Tonga. King Tupou realised he had been wrong in the way he had supported the Free Church of Tonga and he returned to the Wesleyan Church. The two churches finally united in 1924 under the leadership of King Tupou 2, becoming the Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga.

This was also the time when the newly formed New Guinea Mission was calling for recruits from the island churches in the South Pacific. Dr. George Brown was planning to lead the first trip into the uncharted islands of Papua New Guinea. The message went out to all the Tongan mission stations asking for volunteers to join the pioneering party of teachers.

"I'd love to go out with them and teach these islanders about God the Creator and Jesus His Son," thought Semisi.

He went to the college principal; Dr. Moulton. "Please would you recommend me to go with the missionary party to New Guinea?" he pleaded.

The principal replied, "Semisi, you're a good man and a good teacher. But before you go out on a mission like this you need to have a wife to be your helper and companion."

When Semisi heard this decision he responded positively. "I believe God has called me to serve Him, so if I have to be married I'll ask Him to find me a wife."

He knelt down and prayed, "Father, please send someone to me who, when she knows that You want me to go away to a foreign land, will not refuse, but will be glad to do what You want."

It wasn't too long after this that Semisi met Matelita Tuliakiono. "As soon as I saw Matelita I loved her." he wrote later. "I told her that I wanted to marry her and take care of her."

Matelita replied, "Yes, I'm willing to marry you."

"There's just one thing, Matelita," Semisi added. "Would you be willing to go with me some day, away from Tonga to a foreign land, if God called me?"

"Yes, I'd be willing to go with you. Wherever God calls you I will go with you," she promised.

This reply reassured Semisi that Matelita was the one God had chosen to be his wife and not long after that they were married.

Their first appointment was to Foloha in the Tongatabu group where Semisi set up a new school. In spite of intervention from men of the Free Church of Tonga, who tried to close the school and imprison the students, the school thrived for nearly two years. Then his relatives in Vavau sent a message asking him to return home to them. Although his greatest desire was to continue teaching at Foloha, Semisi, Matelita and their two daughters moved back to Vavau where they lived in comfort, surrounded by friends and relatives, with plenty of food gardens to supply their needs. But Semisi was not at rest.

One day he said to Matelita, "You know, Jesus was surrounded with all the joys of heaven, but He came down to this earth and was born of Mary. The people abused Him; they put Him to death on a cross. But He rose again and now He is in heaven sitting at God's right hand."

"What's on your mind, Semisi?" Matelita asked.

"I keep thinking that I want to follow Jesus. Like Him, I don't want my mind to be fixed on earthly things, or on my friends, or family. I want to go on, grow in my Christian life, and know that at the end there will be great rewards in heaven. I don't want to stay here being comfortable. I'm afraid I'll forget that God has called me to serve Him somewhere. I must find where He wants me to be."

Matelita waited, wondering what was coming next, but sensing that a change was imminent.

Semisi went on, "I want you to pack up and go to Nuku'alofa," he said. "Wait for me there, I'll follow later."

He waited another six months before he went to Tonga to join Matelita. Then followed a difficult and dark time in their lives. The younger of their two little girls became ill and died. They mourned her loss for eight months, then they had another baby girl. Their joy was short-lived, as that baby, too was taken from them. They went through another time of grieving until a baby boy was born. Sadly, he only lived for eleven months and then died.

In writing about this time Semisi recorded in his autobiography, "The loss of my children was like three storms in my life when my vessel was threatened with ship-wreck. Though it was a time of great difficulty and darkness I still had God's peace in my heart and kept on praying that He would come and help me."

In 1902 Dr. George Brown again visited Tonga looking for trained teachers and pastors who were willing to join a team going to Papua New Guinea to extend the Christian work in the islands of New Britain and New Ireland. The people there were still living in spiritual darkness. Dr Moulton, the Tupou College Principal, spoke to his visitor, "There is a young man here in Nuku'alofa who very much wants to serve as a missionary. His name is Semisi Nau. Would you like me to speak with him?"

When he met with Semisi Dr. Moulton asked a direct question, "Well, Semisi, are you ready to take the Light to some dark island far away?"

"Dr. Moulton," he replied, "if it is only to chop wood or carry water in the service of God I want to go, whether the way be difficult or easy. If I live or die, I have given all my life to God."

"What about your wife, Semisi? Is she willing to leave her homeland and go to a foreign place? It's important that she is in agreement with you in this matter."

"Matelita is away visiting her family just now, but I can send a message to her to come and see you."

It was two days before Matelita arrived at the college. During that time Semisi prayed unceasingly that God would open up the way for him and his wife to join the missionary team together. When Dr. Moulton spoke with Matelita he explained the conditions of their going, how they would possibly never see their family and friends again, once they left Tonga. The people where they were sent would most likely not accept them to begin with, and they would experience much antagonism and hardship.

"Now, tell me, Matelita," he asked, "are you willing to lay down your life with Semisi and face these difficulties with him?"

Matelita's face lit up as she responded, "I know that Jesus loves me and has brought me from death to life. My only wish now is to do what He asks me to do and to follow in His will. I have taken up my cross and am willing to go wherever you decide to send me."

When Semisi heard her response he thanked God for answering his prayers so wonderfully. Now they had to prepare for their departure to a new place of service in a strange land. It was 1905 before all arrangements were complete. After a farewell from the Tongan Church in Nuku'alofa they set sail first for Suva then on to Sydney.

Finally the ship arrived in Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour). The sights and sounds of the busy metropolis of Sydney were a totally new experience to the visitors from their tiny island home. There was so much activity all around them. Stately sailing ships and smaller boats shuttled up and down the harbour; crowds of people, horses, carts, bicycles and other traffic passed in a continuous stream over the bridge ahead of them. But the bridge was so low. How was the ship going to pass under it? It would have to stop or surely it would crash into the bridge. But it kept going forward. Semisi and Matelita held their breath, waiting for a disaster.

Then suddenly all the traffic stopped, the centre section of the bridge was raised up and the ship passed safely through to the wharf where it docked and they finally stepped out on to Australian soil.

Now there were more wonders to take in, trams and trains making their noisy way along metal tracks, bright lights in buildings and along streets, at night reflected in the waters of the harbour.

By the end of the day Semisi and Matelita found their minds reeling as they tried to adjust to all the new experiences they encountered. Semisi went to sleep thinking, "How wonderful is the wisdom of the white man."

But with the morning light there came other thoughts. .
"Yes, man made all these great things, the trains, trams, big houses, but God is the only one who could give man the life and the ability to do this. God is still the greatest."

The telephone was another device they saw for the first time. Semisi was amazed at the idea of being able to communicate with friends and relatives at a long distance.

"How wonderful," he thought, "if a man is sick here in Sydney, his father is away in Brisbane, his brothers and sisters are in Melbourne, he can go to the telephone and in a few minutes all the family has heard the news. Even if someone is in a distant place like Fiji they can know in a few hours."

Semisi thought about this for a time, then spoke his thoughts aloud to Matelita, "If I were a white man I would be able to use the telephone to speak to our people at home in Tonga. If one of us got sick when we are in the Solomon Islands we could soon let them know our need for prayer."

But God spoke to Semisi's heart even as he was expressing these thoughts "Semisi, you have a telephone in the Solomon Islands, you have one here in Sydney. Wherever you go you will have My telephone. When you are in any kind of trouble you can pray and send a message to God. The message will be carried to your Heavenly Father in a moment, and the answer will come back to you in the form of comfort to your heart. When you are sick you can send a message and He will send back strength and healing. If you meet with difficulty when you try to raise the flag for Jesus in some dark place where the people don't want a missionary, you can go and speak on your telephone and God will answer by helping you through the difficulties."

This thought brought both Semisi and Matelita much joy and comfort as they went on their way to the Solomon Islands. There

were five other Tongan and Fijian teachers at Roviana, the head station of the Methodist Mission in the Solomons, when they arrived. They enjoyed meeting and working with them, learning the local language, putting up school buildings, teaching the local young men to read and write.

After two years, Mr. Goldie, the senior missionary of the area, asked Semisi, "You have settled in well here, Semisi. Would you like to go to Luaniua? There is no Christian work there yet, but the British Commissioner has asked us if we could place teachers there. The government officers know that the villagers are more at peace when the Christian missions are there. It would be a hard place to work, but you are strong, and your God is greater and stronger. Would you and Matelita go there?"

"Where is Luaniua? What is it like there?" asked Semisi.

"There is a large circle of coral islands, a coral atoll, called Ontong Java, a long way north of the Solomons Islands. It's very isolated, so life there would be difficult. But God loves the people there just like He loves us. And He wants all people to hear about Him. Are you willing to go there?" asked Mr. Goldie.

Semisi was willing to go wherever the mission authorities sent him and together they planned and prepared for the move. All sorts of events occurred to delay the process, but at last Semisi, Bulona, a Samoan teacher and their wives and children with Mr. Goldie leading them, set off in the mission ship, *George Brown*. They sailed to the isolated island of Luaniua on the southern point of Ontong Java atoll.

When they dropped anchor, a small party of men appeared on the shore, led by a man named Bobu, who worked as interpreter for a trader working in the area. They paddled out to the ship in a canoe and came aboard to ask what was the purpose of the visit.

"We come from the Christian mission and would like to tell the people about our Creator God and His Son, Jesus. If you would like to hear about Him we are willing to leave two teachers with you to live among you and teach you." explained Mr. Goldie. "Would you take us to your chief so that we can ask him?"

Mr. Goldie went ashore with Bobu who led him to the trader's house where the trader and the chief were waiting. Mr Goldie explained his purpose, but the chief responded very negatively, "We have our own gods. We don't want a missionary here. I won't have one on the place."

Mr. Goldie returned to the ship and reported the decision to Semisi. "The chief says he doesn't want a missionary, Semisi, what are your thoughts on the matter?"

Semisi was anxious to stay at Luaniua and fulfill the call of Jesus to 'Go into all the world'. He remembered the stories of the martyrs, Stephen, Paul, Peter, hundreds of others who counted their lives as nothing in order to obey that command.

"I'll stay here and wait," he decided, "the chief must change his mind if we wait long enough."

Semisi turned to his wife, "What do you think, Matelita? Are you willing to stay?"

“Yes, Semisi, even if it means death, we should not go away.”

Mr Goldie considered the matter for a while. “You will have to stay in the whale boat away from the shore, until the Luaniu people allow you to land. You can have a spare sail from the *George Brown* to rig up for shelter. You and Bulona with your wives and children will be too many people for one small boat. It would be better for the two men to stay and their wives and children to come back to Roviana with me on the ship, the *George Brown*.”

There was a further problem to face, “Bobu says there is no water on this place,” Mr Goldie said. “The people drink coconut milk. It would be better for you and Bulona to find another island not far away where there is a spring. You need to be near a water supply to have water for drinking and cooking your food. You could settle there and try to land on Luaniu later.”

But Semisi could not be moved. “This is where God has led us so we can trust Him to take care of our needs for food and water.”

He was remembering the words of Paul in Romans 8:38-39. ‘Nothing, not death nor famine, or anything else would separate him from the love of God.’

Mr Goldie saw that Semisi’s mind was set on staying so they prepared supplies for the two men. Plenty of food and biscuits were stowed in the ship’s small boat, with as much water as they could spare. Semisi and Bulona climbed into the boat, surrounded by weeping wives and children. The Samoan and Fijian teachers who formed the crew wept as they farewelled their brothers. Mr Goldie

prayed a final prayer for the two brave men who were willing to lay down their lives for the lost islanders who were now lined up menacingly on the shore.

The ship’s launch towed the boat as close to the shore as it could go, then returned to the *George Brown*. “It seems that this boat is going to be our home for a time, Bulona,” Semisi remarked grimly. “Let down the anchor here, not too close to the shore. We’ll wait and see what the village people do.”

The villagers had lined up all along the beach, blocking any approach the boat might have had to the shore. When Bulona dropped anchor, the chief sent two of his men out to the boat to pull it up. They threw the anchor back into the boat. Pushing the boat out to sea, the men shouted, “You go away. Don’t come to this place! We don’t want you. We don’t want any missionary here. Go away! Don’t you dare come back to our beach. If you do, we’ll kill you both!”

“Throw the anchor over again, Bulona!” cried Semisi.

“No, I’m afraid they’ll kill us,” replied Bulona.

So Semisi threw the anchor back into the water. Again the two village men dived down, pulled up the anchor and tossed it back into the boat. Again Semisi dropped the anchor back into the water, and again the men dived down, pulled it up and threw it back into the boat. They did this over and over again until finally the village men grew exhausted and swam to the shore.

Semisi and Bulona stayed in the boat, unable to land on the Luaniu shore as there were people lined up watching constantly that no-one

either landed or went out to the boat. Days passed. The last of their water was gone, and they grew weaker and thirstier by the hour. Yet their confidence in God's goodness remained. Whatever happened, death or life, with water or without, in poverty or riches, they trusted God in the situation.

Then, one night, they heard the sound of paddling in the water.

"They're coming to kill us," was their first thought.

"We're nearly dead already," said Semisi, "it won't matter if they kill us. We'll be in Heaven with Jesus then."

But a lone village man appeared in the water beside the boat. Semisi and Bulona saw him as 'a messenger of Jehovah'. He silently unloaded coconuts and fish into the boat, then climbed up to speak quietly with Semisi and Bulona. He told them his name was Maai.

"I took my canoe out in the other direction, around that point over there," he explained, "then I swam around here, carrying the coconuts and fish over my shoulders. It was a long way, but I didn't want the people on the beach to know I was going to help you. I don't want to see you die of hunger or thirst."

Semisi and Bulona were amazed at the way God had answered their prayers and provided them with food and drink in their extreme need. They thanked Maai for his gifts and his courage in bringing them out to the men, and then Maai silently slipped over the side of the boat and returned in his roundabout way back to the shore.

They survived for eight days on the first supply Maai brought. One night, when their supplies had run out, Bobu, the translator, visited

them. He brought water, cooked turtle and taro for the two determined men in the boat. Bobu was from a high-ranking family, which was an encouragement to the men.

"God is turning the hearts of the people to accept us, Bulona," Semisi commented. "It takes time, but God will do it."

Maai and Bobu faithfully supplied the two men with food and drink for three months. It was inevitable that one day the chiefs would find out what they were doing. They were very angry with these two men who had disobeyed their orders, but the men defended their actions. "These are good men in the boat. They don't want to harm us. We are going to keep on helping them with food and drink."

One day Bobu came to the boat with a supply of food. This time he brought a boy named Aukoloa. "He doesn't want to go back to Luaniua," Bobu explained, "he wants to learn about your God. Please may he stay with you?"

Semisi and Bulona were over-joyed that, even if they couldn't set foot on Luaniua, God was still making it possible to teach some village people about Him. A little time later Bobu brought another young lad, named Uaku who also asked to stay on the boat and learn the Christian way. Bobu and Maai continued to provide food and drink for all four of them on the boat.

Aukoloa and Uaku were familiar with the coastline and guided Semisi and Bulona to possible landing spots, but wherever they tried to land the villagers arrived before them and drove them away from the shore. The men patiently waited and prayed, knowing that one day

God would open the way, break down the hardness of the Luanian hearts and bring the people to Himself.

During this waiting time Semisi noticed one day that worms were getting into the wooden hull of the boat. "The boat needs painting, Bulona," said Semisi, "we need to pray that God will provide a way to get it done."

Soon after this a trader, Mr Hare, came to the island. Semisi asked him, "Can you tell me where we could get this boat painted, please sir?"

Mr Hare was most helpful, "I can paint it for you, but you'll have to go somewhere else if you can't land here. I can direct you to an island where I can do it for you."

Not only did Mr Hare paint the boat, he gave them a generous supply of food and water. The chiefs on Luaniua were angry with Mr Hare for helping Semisi and Bulona, ordering the villagers not to sell him any more coconuts. This did not deter him, and the two men knew God was continuing to open up the way before them. Mr Hare provided them with more supplies as they returned to Luaniua. The villagers would still not allow them to land, so Semisi began to think of another way to reach them.

"Is there any other place not too far away where there are people living?" Semisi asked Uaku and Aukoloa. "It would need to be a place where the people are not connected at all with the people of Luaniua."

Uaku replied, "There is an island called Belau. The chief there is not connected in any way with the Luaniua people. It's a couple of days' journey that way," he said as he nodded his head to the north.

"We'll go to Belau and see if we can stay in a village there," the teachers decided.

Bobu joined them as they set out the next day. When they were in sight of Belau Semisi said, "We'll anchor a fair distance away and wait to see what the people will do. If they don't come after we've waited a while we'll go closer in to the shore. They did this, but the closer they got to land, the more fearful Bobu and the boys from Luaniua became.

"Why are you so afraid?" Semisi asked them.

"The people of Belau and Luaniua are not friendly towards each other. We're afraid they will kill us if we land on their shore," they explained.

"Don't be afraid," Semisi spoke encouragingly to them. "Our God has protected us and provided food and water for us these last three months when we had to stay in this boat all the time. He will keep you safe now. Bulona and I will land first and go to meet the chief. You stay in the boat and wait until we see him and get permission to land."

As they walked up the beach a man who understood a little English met them.

"Who are you and where have you come from?" he asked.

"We're the two missionaries who have been at Luaniua, waiting to land. We've come to speak with the chief." Semisi explained.

Taking Semisi by the hand, the man led the two visitors to the chief's house. The chief, Banavalu, was seated on mats on the floor, surrounded by a number of his people.

"Where have these men come from?" he asked their guide.

"These are the two missionaries who have been at Luanuia for the past three months waiting for the chiefs to allow them to land." the guide replied.

"Tell them I would like to hear what they have to say," ordered the chief.

"We've come to ask your permission to allow us to stay on your island and to teach you and your people about the great Creator God and His Son, Jesus. May we have your permission to stay in your village to do this?"

Semisi was beginning to feel quite elated that at last they were seeing the way open up for them to begin to teach the people of this area.

"I do want the Lotu." replied Banavalu. "I want you to stay here and teach us about your God."

"We have two boys from Luaniuia in our boat," Semisi went on. "Will they be allowed to join us here in your village?"

"Tell them it will be all right for them to come. We're going to follow the Christian way now so we won't do anything to harm them." the chief assured them.

The first day they were at Belau Banavalu said to Semisi, "I'm going to get the men to build you a house to live in."

"Please," Semisi answered, "if you build a house, first build one where we can all worship God. You can build one for me later."

Next day the chief asked Semisi, "How big should the house for God be?"

Semisi explained what was needed and the chief organised the working parties. Men were sent off into the bush to find posts and timber, the women's job was to gather and prepare leaves for thatching. By the end of the day everyone had worked so hard that all the materials were ready and next morning they began building amidst much excitement and enthusiasm.

In two days, the building was completed and Semisi led a service of thanksgiving in it, praising God for the way they had been welcomed at Belau and received so much help to build the house of worship.

The chief, Banavalu, and his people were eager to hear the Gospel message, welcoming the missionaries with much love and hospitality. All was going so well that after two weeks Semisi said to Bulona, "Would you stay and take care of the work here for a while? I'm going back to Luaniuia to try again to land there. The work is going well here, so just continue teaching the people and be very careful not to do anything to make them angry."

So Semisi took Bobu and the two Luaniuia boys with a few from Belau and set off in the boat for another attempt to land on Luaniuia. On

the way there they met up with a government boat, the *Upolo* with the governor from Gizo on board.

“We heard you were having trouble landing on Luaniua and had been living on your boat for some time,” he said. “I’ll send a message to the chiefs there that they are to allow you to land. Now, Semisi, come on board and see over my ship.”

Semisi was duly impressed with the workings of the ship and even more impressed when the captain gave him a large tin of biscuits.

They arrived at Luaniua but made no attempt to land for two weeks. There was opposition from some white traders in the area as well as from the chiefs. Finally Bobu said to Semisi, “I’ll tell you what we should do. Later on tonight when it’s dark I’ll go to the chief and tell him that you want to see him. I’ll come back and tell you what he says.”

That night Bobu did as he had suggested. The chief listened to Bobu who returned to Semisi with the message, “The chief says he would like to see you.”

Bobu came with Semisi to help interpret the conversation. They had also brought gifts of tobacco and beads for the chief. Semisi was careful not to over-stress his desire to introduce the Christian message, and talked mostly about general topics, believing that eventually the chief would speak about it himself.

After talking with the chief for some time they returned to their boat. They hadn’t been back long before a woman came to them with

some fish and coconuts, a present from the chief, sent with his love. As a return present they sent back with the woman some tins of meat and other food for the chief.

Next morning a man came out to them with a message that the chief would like them to visit him that evening. At last the doors were opening for the Gospel to be taught in Luaniua! Semisi and his friends were excited to see God work in their situation.

On this visit Semisi did not hold back. He said to the chief, “What we have come to bring to you and your people is the Christian message. It has enlightened my homeland of Tonga, and it will enlighten your land too. It will uplift the chiefs and your people. Jesus Christ is the root of all life. People pray to other spirits but they don’t hear them. Jehovah and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are three gods but only one spirit. If you pray to them and ask them for life they will give it. If you want light they will give it to you. If you want to be uplifted they will do that for you also.”

Semisi had placed some big questions before the chief. Was this what he wanted? The chief could think of nothing else. For three days, night and day, Semisi’s words went round and round in his head until he reached a decision. He sent a messenger to Semisi asking him to come and see him again.

“Semisi,” he said, “I want a missionary. I want you to come and live here to teach us. Tomorrow you can land on the beach and come and live in my house until we can build you another one.”

Semisi and Bobu were elated and praised God with all their hearts. But Luaniua was a place full of sickness. Every day, ever since they arrived there and were living in the boat off-shore, they heard the wailing of those who were mourning the death of loved ones. The influenza epidemic decimated the population. Every day there were 30 to 40 deaths from the disease. The people prayed to their spirits asking them to give health to their bodies and growth to their food crops, but still every day people died. Their gods did not help them.

Soon after Semisi settled in the village he became ill, to the point of death. He was just waiting until God took him to Heaven, when he began thinking of the islanders who had not yet heard about Jesus.

He began to pray, "O God, You have sent this terrible sickness on me. There are so many people here in these islands who have not yet heard the Name of Jesus. You sent me here to bring them the Gospel. Let me stay here and finish the work you gave me to do."

In his weakness he was unable to walk, but he continued to pray as he lay seriously ill.

One day he called Bobu and Aukoloa. "I want you to take me in the boat to Belau to see Bulona. Weak as he was, Semisi was carried down the beach to the boat and made as comfortable as possible.

He prayed, "God, my foot is lifted up ready to step into heaven, but still I say, 'Your will be done'. The village people in Belau gave Semisi some bush medicine which quickly began to do its work and he improved rapidly.

When he was well enough Semisi returned to Luaniua and continued the work of teaching and preaching for two years. Every Sunday they saw more people coming to worship God. Through the week there were many attending school to learn to read and write. The missionaries praised God daily as the people learned about Him and lived in peace with each other.

Then a white missionary was sent to work at Luaniua. Semisi's loving, caring approach to teaching the people was in sharp contrast to Mr Shackell's heavy-handed methods. When some village men refused to do what the missionary had ordered he went to the temple where their gods were kept, and attacked one with an axe. He broke with their local traditions, deliberately angered the chiefs, and generally created problems for Semisi who watched sadly as the people fell away from church attendance on Sunday and school sessions during the week. There was anger against the missionaries and unrest in the villages.

A party of senior white missionaries arrived with instructions for Semisi to come back to Roviana to work, leaving the white missionary at Luaniua. The village people and the chiefs all pleaded with Semisi not to leave them. He was the one who had brought the Gospel to them and they depended on him to continue teaching them the Christian way of living.

"I'm very sorry, my friends," Semisi said sadly, "I don't want to leave you because I love you all, but I must do as the head missionaries direct and they have said I must return to Roviana to work." With a heavy heart Semisi packed his possessions ready to leave in the morning.

That night the chief came and sat down in Semisi's house, but he spoke not a word. He stayed there all night, until it came time in the morning for his things to be carried down to the boat. Then he burst into loud crying, following his departing friends to the beach, and even wading out into deep water after the whale boat as it paddled out to the ship. The whole population of the nearby villages followed with the chief, crying loudly at the loss of their beloved teacher.

The return to Roviana meant moving into two new regions to build schools, churches and a congregation of believers in Jesus. It seems that Semisi was a pioneer, glad to have the challenge of a new group of people to teach about Jesus their Saviour. When a work was started and going along steadily, he was taken from it to begin again somewhere new.

Semisi had been away from Luaniua more than a year when the white missionary, Mr Shackell, arrived on a government launch at Roviana, accompanied by all the islander mission teachers.

Mr Woodford, the British High Commissioner for the area, had heard about the unrest on Luaniua and paid a visit there. The chief lodged a series of complaints about the behaviour of Mr Shackell. The situation was so serious that Woodford ordered all the mission staff to be withdrawn from the island.

"There has been trouble at Luaniua," Mr Shackell explained, "the people are arguing among themselves and the church is all undone. The governor removed me from the place and brought me here to Roviana."

Mr Goldie discussed the matter with other leaders and decided that Semisi should go back to Luaniua with Mr Goldie to try and bring peace to the people.

"What do you think about that, Semisi?" he asked.

"If we send a minister away from a place every time a chief gets angry and complains to the governor, it won't help the church at all," Semisi replied. "I believe Mr Shackell should go back to Luaniua and work through their problems with the people."

"Yes, I agree with you Semisi," replied Mr Goldie, "but Dr Brown has come here to help us, and he's returning to Sydney for a Mission Board meeting, so we're going to send Mr Shackell to Sydney with him. The Mission Board will have to make a decision about Mr Shackell and the Luaniua situation."

Semisi and his party met Dr Brown as they set out for Luaniua. "Oh, Semisi," said the doctor as they shook hands, "The chief, Kaebea, in Luaniua paid the government officer a visit last week. He offered sixty pounds to him if he would make sure that no more missionaries were sent to his island. He said he didn't want the Christian teaching to come back to Luaniua."

"What did the government officer do about that?" asked Semisi.

"He just told him to put the money back in his basket and not to let him see it again." replied Dr Brown. "He said that you would be coming to stay with them for a year and he didn't want to see anyone make trouble for the missionaries or the church. The government

officers know it's a good thing to have the Christian teaching in the villages. It always brings peace to the communities."

So Semisi, with Matelita and Akosita their daughter, returned to Luaniua. As was to be expected they were welcomed by the Luaniua community and showered with gifts of food from every family. The chief visited Semisi and his family in the evening with baskets full of food, including a special gift for Matelita. Clearly the Luaniua people, from the chief down, were glad to see their old friends back among them.

They had only been back a week when disaster struck. A messenger came from the chief, "Semisi, there is a dreadful disease killing our people. Today ten people have died, yesterday five, and the first day two died. It's a terrible sickness. It starts with a bad pain in the stomach, and in a few hours the person is dead."

There seemed to be no medicine for this disease but day after day as Semisi listened to the cries of families who had lost a loved one, he prayed.

"O God, Luaniua is a dark place. The chief has allowed us back here but he doesn't want us to teach the Christian message. God! Is this your judgment on them for rejecting you?"

Semisi prayed day after day for God to intervene, but the disease was so highly infectious

That in the next month 147 people had died and Semisi was getting desperate.

He prayed, "Lord God, You sent me here to teach these people about You so that they could be forgiven and have a new life in You. But soon there will be no-one left to preach to, they will all have died of this awful disease. Please, God, spare some of the people for me to teach about You."

He continued to pray this prayer and gradually the sickness abated until there were no more cases reported. Akosita had been ill with the disease and for a time they did not know whether she would live or die. They prayed desperately for her and she partly recovered but seemed to be still very weak.

Mr Goldie arrived to visit the missionaries and see at first hand how they had fared during the epidemic. Semisi took the opportunity to ask him about Akosita.

"We're concerned about Ako, Mr Goldie," he said, "could I bring her back to your station when you return, for Mrs Goldie to treat her? She's not been well since she had that sickness."

It was arranged that Matelita would go with Akosita to Roviana but at the last minute Semisi injured his hand and needed treatment, so Matelita stayed at Luaniua to carry on the work and Semisi took Akosita to Roviana. There Mrs Goldie attended to them both and they recovered. Meantime Matelita successfully led the work on that remote island. The chief provided her with food for the three months that Semisi was away, but still remained antagonistic to the Christian message.

Semisi was becoming restless. He had spent eight years in the Solomons, much of the time in very adverse circumstances and he

was weary. Added to that, his daughter Akosita was nearing marriageable age and he wanted to take her back to Tonga to find a husband. He spoke to Mr Goldie about his situation.

“There is still unrest at Luaniua,” said Mr Goldie, “although the Belau people are growing in their Christian faith. We need you at Luaniua, Semisi; you’re the one the people listen to there.”

“I love the people there, too,” responded Semisi, “but I’m very anxious to take Akosita back home to Tonga. Also Matelita and I need a rest. We’ve both worked hard these eight years.”

After another four months Semisi, Matelita and Akosita were boarding the ship that would take them home to Tonga. Mr Goldie was there to farewell them. He took Semisi’s hand as he said, “Semisi, you’re going back to Tonga. I suppose you’ll forget all about the Solomon Islands.”

Semisi was shaken by these words, for the island people amongst whom he had lived were very dear to him.

“When I am well again, if God wills it, I will return.”

After nearly two years visiting all the islands of Tonga, stirring up enthusiasm for Christian missions, Semisi and Matelita were ready to return to the Solomons. They were appointed to return to Luaniua where they found a core group of faithful Christians who had continued to worship God. However, there was difficulty with traders who saw the mission as a threat to their supplies of copra. The chief was still not willing to return to learning the Christian way.

Bulona, who was left in charge during Semisi’s absence, had problems with the villagers who opposed the mission, so he returned to Belau, leaving Luaniua unsupervised. The chief, Keabea, had died and there was disagreement as to who should succeed him.

The people welcomed Semisi and Matelita warmly on their return to Luaniua. Gradually the troubles settled, in large part due to the wise guidance of the two Tongans. The church began to grow again. When they had a church celebration in Luaniua, the church from Belau led by their Christian king, joined them for the first time. Truly peace had come to these islands.

Semisi and Matelita continued their ministry at Luaniua for another four years, loved and respected by everyone. Their lives were such an example of devotion to God and love for the people. When the time came for them to return to Tonga they left behind a strong foundation for an on-going church.

Unfortunately, the Mission Board went through a difficult time financially and was unable to appoint another missionary to Ontong Java. The population was declining and eventually the work that Semisi Nau had begun under such difficult circumstances was abandoned. But good seed had been sown in the peoples’ hearts and God doesn’t allow that seed to die. The Anglican Melanesian Mission accepted the charge of the islands of Ontong Java in the 1920s.

Semisi and Matelita returned to Tonga in 1919, and Semisi was appointed to the place where he taught in his younger days, at Niuafou’ou, then lived out their final years on Utulau, Tongatabu.

There are many tributes to Semisi from those who knew him. John Goldie wrote of him: “He was a grand old man and did a great work in the Solomons. I suppose that more direct conversions to Christ were due to him than to any of us. The story of his splendid work at Luaniua, Ontong Java, is equal to anything in the world; or to anything in the history of missionary enterprise. He loved greatly and was beloved by us all.”

