

Joeli Bulu



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“Oh, that beautiful land!” exclaimed Bulu, “I want to live in that beautiful land.” Bulu was a young Tongan man, now about 23 years of age. He had just heard the missionary speak about heaven – a place where there is no sickness or sadness, a place to be in God’s presence forever. How different this was from the Tongan idea of an after-life.

“If the words I heard tonight are true,” he declared, “then these Christians are happy indeed. I will be a Christian too.”

It was a clear, starry night, lit with many stars. As Bulu looked up at the brightness of the heavens above, he realised how dark and gloomy the earth was by comparison. His heart longed with a great longing to reach that beautiful land, “I will be a Christian,” he said, “that I may live among the stars.”

Bulu began to seek for more knowledge of the Christian faith, but when his family heard of it they called the family together to deal with him. They also called in the family heathen priest.

“This Bulu is learning to be a Christian,” his father told the priest, “What should we do with him?”

Possessed by the evil spirit in him, the heathen priest shook all over at the mention of the Christian way. The evil spirit, through the priest shouted, “Why has he forsaken me? I have kept him; I have preserved him since he was a little boy. Now he wants to leave me!”

As the evil spirit had spoken in this way with such anger the family made up their minds, “We’ll punish Bulu! We’ll club him! He’ll die today!” They wanted to obey the priest.

Bulu was so afraid that he fled into the bush and stayed there praying for some days. At last he decided to return home, hoping the family would no longer be angry. But he didn’t forget what he’d heard about ‘the beautiful land’. For the next few years Bulu’s life was a conflict between wanting to live the Christian way and fear of his family.

One day, as he was walking through the village he noticed a missionary standing under a tree talking to a group of people on the edge of the village green. Curious to know what he was talking about he drew closer. The missionary told the story of the wheat and the weeds that grew together in the field. Bulu thought about the good wheat seed and the bad weed seed growing together and it seemed that God spoke to him and said, “Bulu, you think you have been among the wheat, but really you have been among the weeds. You think you have been good seed, but you are bad seed.”

Bulu knew that this was God speaking to him. He began to see how sinful his life had been. He began to understand the meaning of repentance. "O, God," he prayed, "I have done many wrong things. I'm sorry for all that wrong-doing. Please forgive me and help me to be good seed growing for you."

He forgot about the 'beautiful land' of the future and instead began to experience God's forgiveness in his life now. He put his faith in God and became a true follower of the Christian way for many years. He described his experience later, "I saw the way and I believed and lived. I was like a man fleeing for his life from an enemy behind me, groping along the wall of a house in the dark trying to find the door. Then suddenly, the door is opened in my face and I bounded in and was free."

From that time he was a changed man, choosing the name 'Joeli' as his Christian name. It was the 1830s, the time of the spiritual awakening in Tonga. The Tongans were spreading the Good News to the west along their trade routes and a year after Joeli Bulu's conversion he went to Fiji with a white missionary named Calvert. There he lived out his Christian faith for 40 years, planting churches wherever he went.

In the early days of his ministry, while working at Rewa in Fiji, he was attacked by a shark, which left scars on his body. He had been playing with a group of boys and a young chief, and then he went swimming in the river nearby where the boys were racing their toy canoes. Suddenly a shark bit him on the thigh, keeping a firm hold with its teeth. Desperately fighting back, Joeli forced it to let go his thigh, but it took hold of his arm. Mustering all his strength, Joeli pushed his hand down the shark's throat, lifted it out of the water, dragged it ashore and dropped it on the sand. Then he collapsed unconscious, but he survived the ordeal and lived many more years serving the Lord.

Joeli brought the Gospel to a village on Vanua Levu, the second largest Fijian island, north of Viti Levu. The villagers made life very difficult for him. They stole his pigs, killed his chickens and spoiled his food gardens. The culprits said, "When we've spoiled all the property of the Christians we're going to kill and eat them."

When Joeli heard of this he said, "I'll go and talk to them." His friends in the Christian village objected, "Don't go alone, let us all go," they cried. "No!" replied Joeli, "If everyone goes, nothing will be achieved. Let me go alone." He pleaded with them but they would not listen, even though they knew that cannibals had already wiped out 20 or 30 Christian villages on the island.

Joeli ordered the Christians, "Don't try to fight them. We'll keep the peace with them."

The Fijian method of warfare was to silently creep up and surround the village, and then suddenly sound the shell trumpet, gradually moving closer to build fear in the hearts of the villagers. In the early hours of the morning, just before dawn, Joeli and his faithful friends heard the sounds of attack coming in closer, causing them great fear. Joeli was calm. "Nobody must fight," he instructed them, "Everybody sit down on the grass."

They could hear the trumpeters getting closer and the noise of the enemy grew louder and louder. Suddenly there was a screaming war-cry from the enemy tribe as they burst in on the village to massacre the Christians. However, there they were, sitting peacefully on the grass in the centre of the village. They bounded up to the Christians, clubs and spears raised above their heads, ready to strike the defenseless people. But nothing happened!

They said later, "A power took possession of us and we couldn't use our clubs or spears. Our arms just couldn't move. What is this power that Joeli Bulu has over us?"

Later one of the tribesmen came forward carrying a special ceremonial whale's tooth, a token of peace for the Fijian people. "Joeli, you are a true man," he said, "We have stolen your pigs, we've killed your chickens, we've spoiled your gardens. We've treated you very badly. But you are a true man and your God is a true God. Take this whale's tooth as a sign of peace between us, and feel free to tell us about your God."

Joeli Bulu trained young men to be evangelists and teachers, multiplying the number of workers who would go and plant new churches in the interior and to the western side of Viti Levu. He also spent eight years on the island of Ono. Some of the evangelists he trained there were amongst those who went to New Britain (Papua New Guinea).

On one occasion Joeli borrowed a deep-sea canoe from the king to visit a distant island. They ran into a hurricane and the canoe was thrown about in the raging sea. The sail support was jerked from its place on the bow and fell into the sea. Tugging and straining, they got it back into place, but the men on board were beginning to despair of surviving this storm.

They let down the sail and allowed the canoe to run before the wind. They began to pray. "God, save us! Rescue us from this hurricane!"

"Lord of the waves and the storms, have mercy on us and help us!" cried Joeli. No sooner had he finished praying than the wind suddenly stopped and there was calm. They began to secure the canoe's fastenings where they had been parted.

"There's an island just over there." cried one of the men, "I saw it when the wind stopped." "Let's make for it, then," said Joeli with a tone of urgency in his voice.

As they drew near the reef surrounding the island a cable parted and they lost an anchor, but they managed to find their way through the reef and beach the canoe just as the hurricane wind began to blow again at full force from the opposite direction. There were trees completely over-turned, their roots reaching into the air. The houses in a village near the beach had been flattened. But Joeli recorded later that they were able to “sing praises to God for His wonderful goodness in rescuing them from the hurricane.”

In his later years, Joeli Bulu became a Bible teacher to King Cakobau and his extended family. He was a great help to Cakobau in learning about the Christian faith and the younger members of the family loved him dearly. In his last days they stayed beside him, fanning him and watching over him.

Joeli experienced many storms of life during his forty years serving the Lord in Fiji. It was the manner in which he faced and dealt with the storms, trusting God to direct and strengthen him that made him such a great man.

Adapted from: *Deep Sea Canoe*, Alan R Tippett, William Carey Library, Pasadena, California
To Live among the Stars, John Garret, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji