

Ruatoka and Tungane



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In the year 1871, James Chalmers and other members of the London Missionary Society at Rarotonga met to plan a new venture. They had heard the call of God to send out a team of trained islander teachers to bring the Christian message to the people of British New Guinea. They met to select the team from among their graduates from the Institution. Mr. Murray and Mr. Wyatt Gill who were to lead the team joined them.

“I believe Ruatoka should be included,” said James Chalmers, the Principal of the missionary training school. “He’s a good man. He was an excellent student in the mission school on Mangaia. He has also done well here.”

“All that is true, James, but he has been very ill lately. He actually had a complete breakdown in health. I don’t think he would be strong enough physically to stand up to the hard life of a pioneer missionary. He would have to cope with different food, malaria and all the other tropical diseases. It’s a different climate. He is a good man, but I doubt if he would survive life in a strange country. It would be a waste of a good life to send him out.”

Nevertheless, Ruatoka and his wife, Tungane, were chosen to go with the team.

“I’ll improve in health, Tungane. If God wants me to go to British New Guinea, He will make me well,” Ruatoka said.

Sometimes he had doubts and wondered if his health might fail again, but he did continue to improve and was ready to join the other four couples. When the ship left Rarotonga they went first to Samoa where they picked up Piri and Maki, then proceeded to Lifu in the Loyalty Islands to take Mataika and his wife on board before going to Port Moresby.

The mission teachers were placed in villages around the south coast of British New Guinea, east and west from Port Moresby, but Ruatoka and Tungane stayed in the town. In the early years the teachers experienced very difficult times. Sometimes they were short of food. There was the constant battle with malaria and other tropical diseases. At night they would hear the sounds of village people stalking around their houses and they would lie awake, afraid to fall asleep in case they were attacked.

When teachers became ill with fever they would be brought in to Port Moresby where Ruatoka and Tungane cared for them and encouraged them. Sadly, sometimes a teacher did not recover and Ruatoka gave him a Christian burial.

However as the years passed by and people began to accept the Christian message, they saw changes in the lives of those who believed in the Creator God and His Son Jesus Christ.

Ruatoka and Tungane soon learned the language and began to understand the culture of the people. Then, when new teachers came from Rarotonga, before they went out to the coastal village where they were to serve, they spent their first weeks in New Guinea with Ruatoka in Port Moresby. Ruatoka's helped them learn the local language and the culture.

One day, in 1878, Ruatoka noticed a small group of white strangers in the town. "I wonder what those men want?" he said, "they don't look like traders. And they're carrying digging tools."

"They're looking for gold," replied another missionary. "They've heard that there's gold in the mountains behind Port Moresby. They want to get in and find it first, because it's worth a lot of money. It's sure to bring in a lot more gold-seekers."

Sure enough, each time a ship arrived in the port, there were more prospectors trekking in to the mountains, joining the growing number already there. They set up a camp in the mountains near the gold deposit, and made Port Moresby their headquarters.

Ruatoka and Tungane built up a friendship with them. Whenever one became ill or was hurt they took care of him until he recovered. They were for ever caring for the gold prospectors, whatever their needs.

One day a village man came to Ruatoka.

"I heard that some of the inland tribal villagers are planning to attack the prospectors' camp," he told him.

"We'll have to stop that," replied Ruatoka. "Thank you for telling me, my friend."

He visited the prospectors in their camp. "Just be careful," he warned. "I've heard that some of the mountain villages are planning to attack you."

"Yes," commented one of the gold-diggers, "We've noticed a number of them sneaking around the camp at night. We've had a feeling they were planning something."

"I'll go and talk with them and try to persuade them not to attack," said Ruatoka, "We'll send some men with you," offered the prospectors, who promptly gathered a group of men armed with guns to join Ruatoka.

"No, we don't need guns, men," Ruatoka objected, "That will only make things worse."

Ruatoka chose a few of his friends and set off unarmed for the village of Moumiri where the attacking tribes had planned to gather. When they arrived at Moumiri they found several tribes had assembled there, all in a war-like frame of mind. The situation looked very threatening.

"You missionary, you get out of this village or we'll kill you," they warned.

“Why do you want to kill me?” Ruatoka asked, standing his ground. “What have I done to you?”

He reasoned with them, preached to them, prayed for them, until in the end they went back to their villages without any weapons being used. After this incident, with Ruatoka’s intervention, the prospectors had no more difficulties.

One day, late in the afternoon, two village men came to Ruatoka, “We found a man lying beside the track to the gold-diggers’ camp. He was staying in the camp for a while but became ill. He was on his way to Port Moresby, but was too sick. We left him lying beside the track.”

“Why didn’t you carry him in to the town?” Ruatoka asked them. “You know I would help anyone who is in trouble.”

“The man was nearly dead,” replied the villagers, “if he died while we were carrying him his spirit would haunt us for ever. So we left him there, but we thought we would tell you.”

“Will you come back with me and show me where he is?” asked Ruatoka.

But the men refused to go, out of fear that the man would die. Although it was now almost dark, Ruatoka took a long piece of cloth, a small lantern and a bottle of water and started out in search of the man. About five miles out he heard low moaning in the long grass. Following the sound he finally located the sick man, close to death and quite unconscious. After giving him a little water, he fastened the cloth around the man, took the two ends in his hands, bent down and managed to lift him on to his back. Then he began the return journey, crossing a range of hills and finally arriving back at his home as dawn was breaking. Carefully, he lay the sick man down on their bed and left Tungane to care for him, while Ruatoka lay down to recover from a most exhausting journey.

Next to the mission property where Ruatoka had his home and his church, there lived a German trader. He wanted to make money out of the gold-diggers. He built a store near the track that led to the prospectors’ camp, so that when the prospectors struck gold they would come in to town and spend their money at his store. It just happened that the store was also near the grounds of the church and Ruatoka’s home.

When the store was completed the German was very pleased with the result.

“Now, I really need a cook-house behind the store,” he decided.

There was a Scotsman who was a builder living in the town, so the German employed him to build the cook-house near the store.

The following Sunday, at the time of the worship service in the church, there was the noise of loud hammering as the Scotsman banged nails into the iron roof of the new cook-house. It was very distracting for Ruatoka and the congregation in

the nearby church. Finally Ruatoka could not stand it any more so sent the congregation home. He then found an English Bible.

Marching up to the new cook-house, he read in English the fourth commandment: "Keep the Sabbath holy." He stood directly underneath the surprised Scotsman, looked up at him, and ordered, "You come down!"

The builder ignored him.

"You heard me. Come down at once!" he repeated.

The Scotsman did not move, but swore angrily.

"What are you saying, you white fellows?" he began "You sent missionaries to my land and our people changed for good. One thing we learned was to respect the Sabbath. Before, my people would have eaten you, but not now. I came to New Guinea and I taught the people not to work on the Sabbath, yet you, a white man, are working and disturbing those who want to worship God. Why are you doing this? Come down at once!"

The Scotsman did not move and Ruatoka made as if to climb the ladder and help him down. The German store owner was nearby, watching. When he saw the powerful Ruatoka move towards the builder he called out, "Rua, my friend, stop!" Then to the Scotsman, "You'd better come down at once, you fool. Can't you see that this is our friend the teacher, and he is right and we are wrong?"

Ruatoka was determined to make his point. When the Scotsman was back down on the ground, Ruatoka held the Bible in front of him. Pointing to the fourth commandment he said firmly, "Now, you read that verse out loud."

Reluctantly the builder did as he was told.

Ruatoka had the final say, "Now, God has spoken to you. Put down your hammer and don't do any more work on the Sabbath."

There was quiet for the rest of the day.

Like Piri, Ruatoka often went on trips with the missionary James Chalmers, encouraging the teachers in the coastal villages and ever searching for more distant places to evangelise. One time when Ruatoka was away Tungane was left in charge of the work in their Port Moresby church. She conducted the worship service on the Sunday and did the Bible teaching just as her husband would do. In the afternoon she spoke about the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, changing them to love Jesus and obey Him.

It was very late that night, almost midnight, when there was an urgent knock at the door of Tungane's house. Her girls were awakened and they recognised the voice of a man who had been in the Bible class that afternoon.

“Open the door and let me in!” he pleaded. He sounded as if he were in great distress. Tungane called, “Come back in the morning, it’s too late now. We’re all in bed.”

“No, it can’t wait till morning,” came the reply. Tungane lit a lantern and let him in.

“What is it?” she asked.

“I don’t know what it is, but I think it must be the Spirit you spoke of working in my heart. I’m afraid to lie down and go to sleep in case I die, for I know I’m bad.”

So there and then Tungane told him of Jesus, how He took the punishment for our sins. The man prayed a prayer of thanks to Jesus for dying on the cross for him. Tungane prayed for him then said, “Go home now and sleep. You can come back in the morning.”

“Please pray for me once more,” he begged. “Tell me again about Jesus.”

Finally he went home, but before daylight he was back on the door step wanting to hear more about Jesus and His love. He became a changed man after he accepted Jesus into his life. He was the first New Guinean from that mission to be baptised.

Ruatoka, the young student in Rarotonga who was almost left out of the mission team due to poor health, became a powerful teacher in British New Guinea. He remained there for the rest of his life. He outlived all the other members of that team, spending nearly thirty years serving there. He was highly respected by government officials as well as the community in general, a great ambassador for Christ.

Adapted from: *James Chalmers, His Autobiography and Letters*, Richard Lovett

The Religious Tract Society. London