

Taufa'ahau



When Nathaniel Turner began his missionary work on the Tongan island of Ha'abai in 1830, he looked for a local man who could help him learn the Tongan language. He needed a good man who could help him translate the scriptures as well as speak the language. He chose Vi, a young man of chiefly rank.

Turner began work on translating the Gospel of Matthew. Vi listened enthusiastically to the stories about Jesus as they worked together on the translation, and heard the preaching in the worship service on Sundays.

"I want to turn from the old ways we have followed for so long," he thought, "we fight amongst ourselves, we are always unhappy because we are afraid of the gods we serve. People get drunk on the liquor the trading ships bring in, and that makes us fight all the more. This Christian way Mr. Turner talks about sounds much better for us. I must learn more about it."

Vi joined a Bible class run by Nathaniel, and soon he was baptised. Vi took the Christian name Peter and went on to become the first Tongan to become a church minister.

Peter found such peace and joy in following the Christian way. "I want all my friends and family to follow this way. We would all be so much happier," he declared.

Whenever he had an opportunity he talked with them about Jesus, and one by one they joined him in worship with the missionaries. It was around this time that Taufu'ahau, another man of high chiefly rank, and a relative of Peter Vi, began to show interest in learning about the Christian way.

"I want Christian missionaries on my island, Ha'abai, like they have on Ata," he declared. (Ata is an island in the south of the group.)

Taufu'ahau spoke to the missionary, Mr. Thomas, "Please won't you come to Ha'abai and teach the people of my island?" he pleaded.

"I'm sorry," he replied, "I have been appointed to Ata by the mission board and must stay where they place me. I suggest you have Peter Vi stay with you and become your instructor."

Peter agreed to this arrangement and began to teach Taufu'ahau first to read, then to learn about the Christian way. One day Taufu'ahau began to think about the old gods he used to serve, and the priestess on his island who served the gods. "I wonder who is greater, the priestess who serves the old gods, or the Creator God of the Christians? If God is the greatest, then He should be stronger than the priestess. I'm going to test her, to see how strong she really is."

He went to his garden and cut a banana stalk, not a very big one, not too hard, but just right for what he wanted to do. He walked up to the priestess and hit her, not too hard, with his 'club' made from banana stalk. She fell to the ground, surprised at the sudden attack, but she did not fight back or react in any way. The onlookers were amazed. "Why doesn't the priestess strike Taufu'ahau down?" they wondered. "Surely, if she has power over him she should show it by putting him in his place." But she did nothing, and Taufu'ahau was encouraged.

"I'll test the priestess in another way," he thought. While he was sailing in his canoe with Peter Vi and a friend, he noticed a shark following them. Believing it to be the god he had offended when he hit the priestess, he tried to spear it, but the shark escaped. Peter and his friend were pushed overboard to retrieve the spear and bring it to shore. This they did without coming to any harm from the shark. Taufu'ahau was even more impressed and determined to become a believer.

"Yes!" he cried, "The Christian God is the greatest! I will follow Him!"

Some of the people still loyal to the heathen priestess were angry with Taufu'ahau, "You had no right to strike down our priestess. We'll kill you for that," they threatened.

They plotted to kill him, but someone discovered the plot, warned Taufau, and his life was spared. The young chief demonstrated an understanding of the Christian way of forgiveness by standing up in a public place to say, "You people who tried to kill me, I want you to know that I don't feel angry with you, I forgive you. I won't hold it against you."

Some people were surprised at this change in Taufau's character. "He doesn't fight back any more," they said amongst themselves. "The Christians' God is changing him."

Full of zeal, Taufau'ahau attacked the gods and burned their shrines around the island. This brought down the anger of the unbelievers on him once again. Finau, the chief of the nearby island of Vavau and a relative of Taufau'ahau, was visiting Ha'abai. Taufau celebrated his visit by preparing a great feast. During the feast a group of the heathen chiefs who were angry with Taufau'ahau for getting rid of their idols and burning their shrines, poisoned the food served specially to Taufau'ahau. He became desperately ill.

"Let's call the missionaries," said one of his friends, a Christian chief, "they will be able to help him."

The missionaries came quickly to help. They treated Taufau to get rid of the poison from his body. While they treated him, a large group of Christian friends prayed for him throughout the night. By morning Taufau had recovered and Finau returned home to Vavau.

"I'm amazed that your God could heal you so quickly," he commented to Taufau. "I see also that the Christian way of life is changing you and all the Christian believers," he added thoughtfully.

Not long after this visit Taufau'ahau crossed the waters in his canoe to the island of Vavau to visit Finau. Taufau'ahau spoke to him about his faith in God.

"I know how being a Christian has changed my life. The Christian God is the greatest. My brother, you would have peace and joy in your heart all the time if you believed in Him. The old gods didn't make us happy, did they?"

Finau had to agree with Taufau, "No, they didn't," he said, "but how can I prove that the Christian God is the greatest?"

Finau thought for a minute, then he went off to the shrines where the sacred objects and idols were kept. Gathering them all together, he stood them up in front of him and spoke strongly to them, "I've brought you here to prove you," he said, "I'll tell you beforehand what I'm going to do, so you will have no excuse. I'm going to burn you. If you are true gods you will escape! If you don't escape I'll know you aren't true."

None of the idols moved, so Finau ordered his men to burn the gods and the shrines where they had been housed. It was wet weather at the time, which dampened the wood so that it was four days before they were totally burned. During those four days the islanders sat around watching in fear and trembling, expecting that the gods would pay them back for the way they had been treated. But no act of revenge came, and at last the people knew that the gods had no power over them any more.

"That is amazing," they all said, "those idols we worshipped are not powerful at all."

They talked about the event everywhere they went and right throughout the Tongan islands it became well known that Finau had defied the old gods and proved God the Creator to be the greatest.

"We want to know more about this God who is more powerful than our gods we've worshipped all our lives," they said. "We'll go to the missionaries and the Tongan teachers and ask them about this."

As a result, many people embraced Christianity as a group, but the real, personal, inner change that happens when someone knows he is a sinner and asks Jesus, Son of God, to rule his life, was not common. This was to change dramatically.

In 1834, on the island of Vavau, a local preacher named Isaiah Vovole was preaching to his village. Isaiah Vovole spoke to his people about God's love for them. "God loves us all, even when we do wrong things that hurt Him. He has loved us through all the years before the missionaries came to tell us about Him. His heart is longing for each of us to come into His Kingdom and love and serve Him with our whole hearts. But you refuse to come to Him. Won't you turn and come to Him?"

There was the sound of sobbing amongst the people. They began to cry out to God for forgiveness. "Forgive me Lord Jesus, I'm sorry I have sinned against You."

"Lord God I want You to make me clean. Forgive my sins, please Lord."

"Thank You Lord Jesus that You have always loved me, even when I didn't know You."

The sound of crying and prayers of repentance soon drowned out the sound of the preacher's voice. But that was not important now, God was doing His work in the people's lives and there was no need of more preaching at that time.

When God had moved in their hearts and they had a sense that God had forgiven them, the people burst into joyful praise as they knew they had new life from God. Nightfall came and people were still praying and crying for forgiveness. The village people went home for the night, but there was little sleep; they were waiting for the morning when they would gather again to pray and praise their new-found God. From village to village the news spread as God worked in the lives of people all over the island of Vavau. Everyone was stirred, some villages holding as many as six prayer meetings a day, some in churches, some in homes. Schools were closed; priority was for everyone to attend the prayer meetings where God was sovereignly working.

Taufa'ahau in Ha'abai heard about the exciting events that were happening, but he hadn't been in church to witness them first hand. He had taken a second wife the previous year, which was not acceptable for a Christian.

The missionaries had been praying constantly for him to return to his Christian faith, so Nathaniel Turner was pleased when Taufa'ahau came to see him. He asked Nathaniel, "I've heard people speak about amazing things happening to the people when they come together to worship God. What do these events mean? Are they evil or good? Why are the people crying and singing, and worshipping God all the time?"

"My friend," replied Nathaniel, "After Jesus rose from the dead, and went back to heaven, He sent His Holy Spirit to the disciples He had left on earth. When the Holy Spirit came people began to feel guilty and ashamed of their wrong-doing. They cried out for God to forgive them, and when they were forgiven they began to praise God. Thus is the same as what has been happening right here on Vavau, just like on the day of Pentecost in the book of Acts."

"It's amazing that God's Holy Spirit would visit us on this little island," said Taufa'ahau. "God has been visiting other places as well," Nathaniel went on, "In England in recent years there were great meetings where George Whitfield, John Wesley and Charles Wesley preached The Holy Spirit moved on the people there in the same way. There were wonderful revivals of Christian faith all over England and Wales."

“May I come and see these things for myself?” asked Taufa’ahau. Nathaniel gladly went with him to a church at Feletoa. Taufa was surprised to see up to two hundred people lying on the floor, weeping before God.

The sound of weeping could be heard coming from other villages nearby, followed by the sounds of joy and praise to God that followed prayers of repentance. Taufa’ahau was overcome by the Spirit of God; sometimes he knelt, sometimes he stood unsteadily. His wife also was challenged by Spirit of God. In the middle of the night Taufa sent a message to Nathaniel Turner, “Please will you come and help us. We feel so ashamed of ourselves for all the wrong things we have done. We are so unhappy. Please come.”

The missionaries were overjoyed to receive the message. They had been praying for Taufa’ahau for some time, and now they could see the answer to their prayers. They prayed with Taufa’ahau, encouraging him to allow God to work in his life. At a prayer meeting shortly afterwards he fell on his knees, trembling and wailing, asking forgiveness of God. This was a truly life-changing experience. He received instruction from the missionaries and ten weeks later he became a local preacher.

The move of the Holy Spirit spread to Ha’abai, central Tonga, where there were two thousand conversions in a few days. Over all the islands people were deeply convicted of their sin, then followed repentance and joyous praise as they knew God had forgiven their sin. Over a period of six years, about 9,000 people became Christians in Tonga.

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Taufa’ahau, now King George of Tonga, visited Christian churches in Australia as well as Fiji and was received with honour wherever he went. His descendants have continued the royal line as faithful Christians leading their nation with Christian values and Christian example.

The seven white missionaries who were in Tonga at the time of the spiritual awakening were from the Methodist Missionary Society. At their church conference in Tonga in 1835 the people expressed their desire to send missionaries to their neighbouring islands.

“Since we became Christians our people have all been at peace. We don’t fight and kill each other any more. We should go to our brothers and sisters in Fiji and Samoa. They would become peaceful places too if they would believe the Christian message.”

Of the seven white missionaries at that conference, two were to lead a party of Tongans to Fiji and one would go with a group to Samoa. This generous missionary spirit has continued in the Tongan church and Tonga has always been well represented in church and missionary activity throughout the Pacific Islands to this day.

Adapted from:

Evangelical Awakenings in the South Seas, J. Edwin Orr, Bethany Fellowship Inc. Minneapolis, Minnesota
To Live Among the Stars, John Garrett, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific, Suva, Fiji

The March of Methodism, Cyril J. Davey, Epworth Press, London