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CALLED

Cigarette packets carry Government health warnings, and in a more positive way the receiving of the Holy Spirit should also have its own warning. Far from being merely the calling card for membership of the happy, clappy Christian club, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, turned my life upside-down in the same radical way that Jesus turned over the tables of the money changers and turned out the robbers from His Father's temple. If you want the Holy Spirit to come, be prepared for change.

All of the changes were for the better. Over the years I had picked up the habit of swearing profusely. I asked the Lord to help me with this, and within weeks I no longer swore. I longed to share my experiences with others. I felt no embarrassment in doing so, and it seemed so natural to share my faith with people. In the early weeks of my conversion I spoke to literally hundreds of people about what had happened to me. Through my work I met elderly people, handicapped folk and working men. I learned much from them all and found that most people were interested in hearing about Jesus. My brother was overjoyed to hear of all that had happened and he used to invite me to stay with a Christian friend in Birmingham where again we were both very much encouraged. I loved reading the Bible and I became a regular member of St Paul's, Finchley where Alfred, the vicar, was a faithful listener and encourager.

Before long my brother sent me some information concerning a Christian group called Horizons who used to take groups of Christians to foreign lands. The idea of travel had always interested me, so I wrote away for information concerning their summer activities to North Africa. I received a very warm response to my letter and felt attracted to this group, although I had very little idea of what they were about. Along with my brother, Colin, we decided to spend a weekend with them at their base in South Wales, Llanelli.

The weekend was very special. There were a whole group of us, many who were later to form the nucleus of the future work of Horizons with lots of laughs and lots of enthusiasm for the work of the Gospel. One young man, Mark Lowe, was already working full-time for the group and he had a particular ministry through song. As he sung I clearly saw Jesus in the man. It was strange, but it seemed to be a confirmation of His presence within this group of young inexperienced pioneers. An older man called Rowland Evans led the group (about ten at the time). He did not say much, did not push himself forward, but a quiet authority seemed to come from him.

I arrived back in London convinced that I should be joining the group on a trip to Morocco. I was intrigued by the lifestyle of this group where trust in Jesus seemed to be so vital. They all lived by faith which meant counting on the Lord (and in real terms friends, family and church groups) rather than a regular salary to live on. Prayer and vision for the unreached peoples, (i.e. people groups who had no Christian tradition or heritage, totally outside of the scope of the Gospel) of the world seemed to animate them strongly. I was still, however, very much a learner, and I think I was more attracted by

the spirit of adventure than by any real grasp of missionary work. At the time I had not really understood that Horizons was in fact a new missionary work and had associated it more with a Christian holiday ministry.

As I was working for Barnet County Council I needed to finish my job in order to go to Morocco. I resigned and had a couple of days to make preparations and buy the relevant equipment necessary for the Morocco expedition. We would be sleeping outside, so I quickly bought a cheap sleeping bag and threw a few old clothes into a rucksack. The next day I turned up at *'The Good Shepherd Mission'* in 3 Colts Lane, Whitechapel, which was the rendezvous point of the thirty of us going. A very mixed bunch arrived.

After a cup of tea we all sat down in a circle and introduced ourselves. Rowland, who was leading the trip, asked everyone to give his or her reasons for going on the expedition. Various ones began to share. Several talked of a burden they were carrying for North Africa. I was still very unfamiliar with Christian jargon so I wondered if they would be carrying extra large rucksacks or something! Others mentioned that they may be called to the Muslim world. It then came to my turn to share. Wanting to be as honest as possible I simply confessed,

"Well, I'm looking to have a jolly good holiday!"

There was an embarrassed silence and then a number burst out laughing. When laughter stopped, Rowland looked over to me and said in his sober Welsh accent,

"It certainly won't be a holiday."

I felt really stupid, and yet at the same time convicted inside that this was indeed going to be much more than a holiday for me. It wasn't the last time either that I was to be convicted by the words of Rowland.

My hippie length hair was also out of place in the group, and probably unsuitable for creating a good image in Morocco, so I allowed one of the ladies on the team to cut it back to more acceptable proportions. As the locks fell to the floor I wondered what rite of passage was being enacted that would eventually thrust me into a completely new world and lifestyle.

We arose early the next day and set off in two old Ford Transit minibuses known as HKK and DBL after their last letters on the number plates. We could not go very fast so it took ages to get to the Ferry Port. I had almost had enough after 3 hours so I was beginning to dread the 3-day non-stop drive which was ahead of us through France, Spain and into Morocco!

We made the ferry, and whilst we were relaxing in the lounge of the boat, Rowland called us together for a meeting. He began to explain about the situation for Christians in Islamic countries like Morocco and Algeria.

"Many undergo severe persecution from friends, family and society if they turn to Christ. They may well lose their jobs, their friends, and in some extreme cases their very life, being poisoned or knifed."

He looked up and challenged us,

"Your message of Jesus has to be more than words. What would you do if that believer came to you with his problems? Could you say? 'Here, have my job for your lost one. I'll come and live with you and be your friend'. And ultimately, could you say, 'Here, give me the poison, I'm willing to die in your place!'"

We were all strangely silent afterwards. My 'holiday' idea was dying a death and I wondered what I had got myself into. If we had not been in the middle of the Channel, I would probably have gone home.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian, who died for his faith in a concentration camp, said,

"When Christ calls a man, He bids him, 'Come and die.'"

At the very beginning of my Christian adventure I was beginning to overhear this solemn, yet strangely enticing invitation.

It was not easy being in such close confinement with so many people. The Christian veneer of niceness soon wore off after the first thousand kilometres of cramped conditions, and despite the prayer and holy words, each one was confronted with the reality of the other. Try maintaining close fellowship with a travelling companion who has not washed or changed his socks for four days!

As we travelled from Algeciras via the Straits of Gibraltar to Ceuta, the gateway to Africa, excitement was beginning to mount. Tangiers greeted us with its mosques, markets, and calls to prayer…. and mosquitoes! Everything was so new and different. I felt strangely vulnerable in the midst of such a society. As we walked the streets praying, or played football on the beaches, we were able to make friends and naturally share our faith in Christ.

Over the next three weeks we travelled further south where we were able to help in the establishment of a future work. Rowland taught and modelled prayer. He also introduced the practice of biblical meditation to help each of us hear God for himself. Those lessons of prayer and meditation have served me in good stead ever since. I was still a very young Christian and found much of the expedition difficult. I got frustrated with the other folks and would go off with my brother, Colin, to criticise and judge everything and everyone! Most of the group went down with some stomach bug (commonly known as 'the lergy'), and it was a common sight to see folk nipping off into the bush, shovel in one hand, Izal loo roll in the other. I did wonder whether the choice of the greaseproof, harsh, Izal paper had more to do with trying to create a sense of monastic hardship than simple economic realities! I later counted my blessings when I

learned that the Muslims have to be content with using a stone! (A rounded one I hasten to add). One particular shy guy would walk miles to find a secluded spot, but inevitably ended up perched on the top of a distant hill in full view of everyone! We nicknamed him *'the Izal man'*.

At one point the team divided into mini-expedition groups. Our group had decided to climb up Mount Toubkal and pray. It sounded very exciting but I do not think any of us had quite grasped the reality that Mount Toubkal is about as high as Mont Blanc and quite a difficult trek. My brother, Colin, was with me in the group. So armed with my cheap sleeping bag, sun hat and a pair of plimsolls, I set off. It really was a long hard climb, and yet there were magnificent views. After climbing all day in the heat we were only about halfway up. We would need to camp out on the mountain. It had been so hot during the day but now, as night fell, it became quite cold and a roaring wind began to blow. In an effort to survive the cold I proposed that my brother and I join our sleeping bags together in order to sleep together and so generate more warmth. The idea was good in theory but what I had not planned on was the fact that my brother had another way of generating warmth! As we were neatly nestled together, like sardines in a tin, the top of the sleeping bag closed over us, I realised that my brother had stomach problems. The wind was blowing outside, but another less generous wind was also very much blowing inside. I was getting ratty.

"Look, Colin," I said, "if you do that again I'll punch you on the nose!"

He shouted back at me complaining that my elbow was in his ear. We were still young Christians so our language had not quite the sanctified edge expected from those on apostolic journeys. Finally, I had had enough, and landed a punch at him. He punched back and we ended up having a fight. It was all over in five minutes. As twins we'd had twenty-three years practice of fighting together so it was no big deal and we settled back to finally sleep. However, the next morning the rest of the team was a bit worried.

"Are you okay?"

they asked. Fistfights were not the 'done' thing on prayer expeditions!

We finally reached the top and were able to spend time praying and proclaiming Christ's Lordship over Morocco from the highest point in the land. As the expedition went on it was as if the worst parts of me were expressing themselves, but, in spite of that, I was also discovering a seed of God's grace, which was beginning to sprout and fill me with the beginnings of Christ's love and compassion for people.

One evening we found ourselves celebrating a Moroccan wedding in a little village. I looked around at the beautiful girls who were singing and dancing. They were about twelve-years-old. Usually, when you look into the eyes of a twelve-year-old child you see a kind of inner light of innocence which you hope the world has not yet succeeded in smothering. However, as I looked into the eyes, all I could see was a kind of darkness. Islam held them in its cold grip. What hope did this loveless religion bring to them? I was deeply challenged inside of me. Who could bring the light of Jesus to

such sad eyes? I could feel a struggle going on inside of me. Could God really be asking me, ordinary, rebellious me, to be available to serve Him? I had never before contemplated missionary work and felt daunted even with the thought of it. It was a different world! But now this world was becoming my reality.

On the long journey back I had time to think and chat it over with the others. Some had found the discipline of the trip and the no frills leadership a bit hard to take and tried to discourage me. However, something was nagging away inside which would not leave me in peace.

When we arrived in France, I thought I may well have resisted the niggle and would soon be home back in the old routine which was guaranteed to deaden the challenging inner voice which was so uncomfortable. However, I wasn't counting on breaking down in Poitiers! Poitiers is well known as the place where Charles Martel fought a decisive battle which pushed Islam back out of Europe. It is less known as the place where God decided to meet with me and call me to His service.

Our minibus started emitting masses of white smoke just on the motorway outskirts of Poitiers and we managed to pull in at a garage. A number of folks crushed into the second bus to continue the journey home whilst five of us volunteered to wait with the bus until the vital spare part could be delivered from Wales. As you might imagine, there is not a lot of stimulating activity going on at most *autoroute* garages, so I had lots of time on my hands to be able to pray and read the Bible.

Early one morning, as the sun was rising, I was meditating on Paul's words in II Corinthians 2 vs. 14-16:

> *"But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?"*

As I read, the words seemed to be writing themselves on my very heart and I felt strange warmth, as the Holy Spirit himself seemed to be re-breathing those same words to me now. God was calling me to follow Jesus in triumphant procession. He was asking me to be the 'perfume of God' in this world. I could feel my heart beating as I sensed that this was indeed God speaking and calling me. I felt so unequal to the task, and yet faith was dispelling the fear and I so wanted to say yes. Later that morning I went to see Rowland to tell him my experience and ask if he would be willing to take on somebody as 'green' as myself within their mission Horizons. Rowland said he would pray about it but gave me the necessary encouragement I needed to press on.

"Please phone us up in a couple of weeks time and we'll let you know whether you can come,"

he said.

The desire to serve God did not fade away as I settled back into life in London. Alfred Sawyer, my vicar, was very positive about a move into mission with Horizons and I was overjoyed when Rowland and the others in the Horizons team in Llanelli said that they were willing to take me on. I gave in my notice on the flat I was renting, managed to get all my possessions into one big blue sack and made my way to Paddington Station to take a train to Wales, and a whole new life. No salary, no job security, just an overriding conviction that God would honour His word and His call.

At the same time my brother Colin received his own call to invest his life within the *'Icthus'* movement of churches in South East London and he joined their training programme.

I dropped in on my Dad and Mother before leaving. Dad had been a bit worried about both his boys giving up the possibility of lucrative careers for the instability of Christian work. However, before leaving, his worry changed to a quiet satisfaction as he told me for the first time how he had prayed as a young boy in the Dr Barnardo's home all those many years back.

"I think I'm beginning to understand now," he said. "Rather than letting you die and take you to himself all those many years ago, God has given me the privilege of looking after you, but is now taking you back again to Himself. Not in death though, but in a consecrated life. Yes, I think I'm beginning to understand! Well, I never! I thought God had forgotten!"

God doesn't forget our intercessory prayers. As I was on the train, heading back to the land of Wales where the prayer had begun all those many years ago, I felt such a peace and joy knowing that I was walking steadfastly into my own personal destiny, a joyful victim of intercession's love.