

Chapter 19

**Southwest Bible Church Mission, 1981-89**

While still pastoring Carlsbad Bible Church, we sensed the Lord pointing to fields around us where there seemed to be a need for Bible Churches. We do not mean to imply that the existing churches were not doing *a good job*, but we believe that *the best way* to serve the Lord is by systematically teaching the whole Bible. This is the goal of the Bible Church. Although many fine pastors in other churches present excellent topical messages, and effectively point sinners to Christ, the Bible Church aims to present the whole Word of God clearly.

In May of 1981, I was invited to join the Southwest Bible Church Mission, an organization seeking to plant Bible Churches throughout the Great Southwest. The General Director of the mission, Henry Hawkins, spent many years with his wife, Cecile, on the mission field in South Africa. For three years we continued to serve Carlsbad Bible Church, and at the same time worked with the SBCM trying to start churches in other cities in New Mexico. We understood clearly that we would indeed face real battles but had no idea how vicious the warfare would be. I should have known long ago, but gradually it became obvious to me that the work of planting churches could not be done on a part-time basis. In March, 1984, I wrote to our praying friends,

Although we have been thrilled at seeing some lives changed completely, yet . . . we feel much like the disciples who said, "Lord, we have toiled all night and have caught nothing!" Slowly I came to the realization that if I wanted to see Bible Churches planted in this State, I would have to devote my full time and energy to the task.

Let me quote from a letter dated August 1, that same year.

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The Lord has been laying on our hearts a larger field, the whole State of New Mexico, where so many towns and cities have no Bible Church with a strong Bible-teaching ministry. . . . Accordingly, on Sunday, July 22, 1984, I read my letter of resignation as pastor of Carlsbad Bible Church, effective as soon as God supplies His man for this

place. . . . For two years, while pastoring this church I have also worked with the Southwest Bible Church Mission. Now I plan to serve under the SBCM full time.

After considerable preparatory work in the Fall, we hope to be ready the first of the year to place two couples in two cities, where they will organize Bible Classes with the goal of becoming Bible Churches. It is our goal to see one church being established, during each of the coming three years, in one of the ten "Hub-Centers" (cities of 10,000 or more) in this State. . . . It would then be up to each of these new Bible Churches to plant "daughter-churches" in the smaller communities around them.

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How did that work out? In August I wrote a short article about it, from which I quote:

*Satanic Opposition.*

Scene 1. Roswell, NM, May 11, 1982

For the fifth time in five weeks since starting a new Bible Class in Roswell, we go to meet with the folks, but tonight we find that no one will be coming to our class. So, after running some errands, Bernadine and I head back toward Carlsbad, 70 semi-desert miles to the south. Hitting the highway at 55 miles per hour, we see an oil-field truck coming toward us, apparently at 55 mph or faster. We are rushing at each other at a minimum of 110 miles per hour. Just as we approach I see a red chunk of two by four lumber slip from the top of his load. I swerve a little, but there is neither time nor place to dodge. The chunk bounces on the pavement just in front of our little Ford Fairmont, then slams against something underneath the car with such force that the windshield shatters. Cautiously slowing to a stop, I find that the object had smashed the heavy transverse member under the front axle, about the only point where such an impact would not have made driving impossible. I walk back to retrieve the chunk of wood for insurance reasons, but am astonished to find not a piece of wood, but a 60-pound cast iron tractor weight! Lugging this monstrous missile back to the car, I suddenly gain a new insight as to the ferocity of our enemy who would go to such lengths to prevent a Bible Church from being started in Roswell.

One second earlier, and that lethal projectile would have shot right through our windshield, and instant death would have been certain. If it had struck a wheel (60 pounds of cast iron, traveling at approximately 150 feet per second) it would have been disaster. As never before, I glimpsed the awesome fury of our foe, and also the marvelous protection of our loving Lord. His angel made sure that the deadly missile missed the radiator, engine, oil-pan, transmission, drive shaft, universal joint and gas tank, but allowed it to strike hard enough to warn us of the fierceness of the warfare we can expect.

Scene 2, Hobbs, NM, June 10, 1982.

After several weeks of careful preparation we are ready for the Planning Meeting at the Sizzler Steakhouse, where we hope to meet a number of folks we contacted during the past weeks. We expect a good turn-out tonight as we lay plans for initiating a Bible Class that will grow into Hobbs Bible Church, the first church of its kind in this busy oil town. Then the storm hits. What a storm! Old-timers cannot remember anything like this. Ten minutes before the meeting is scheduled to start at 7:00 PM, the first of *three tornados* smashes into the city. I am reminded that our enemy is the "Prince of the Power of the Air." The heavy sign atop the huge steel posts in front of the restaurant tosses like a straw in the wind. We praise the Lord for the fearless five who brave the elements to attend this important meeting, but again, we are painfully aware of our powerful foe who seeks to destroy the baby church before it is born.

Scene 3, One year later, Summer, 1983. (*During this year we have two families taking the leadership of these two embryonic churches.*)

After these and several other vicious skirmishes with our relentless enemy, he succeeds in discouraging both the young couple in Roswell and the veteran church-planter in Hobbs. Both of them throw in the towel and call it quits, totally discouraged, feeling they have accomplished nothing and are utter failures.

Making the transition from pastor to church planter involved more than a year as we waited for God's man to take on the responsibility of the pastorate here in Carlsbad. In March, 1985, Charles and Edith Moore assumed the leadership of Carlsbad Bible Church, releasing me to spend my full time with SBCM.

For more than a year, I drove eighty miles every week to Alamogordo. The road starts off here in the desert, but climbs up through a perfectly gorgeous valley to a pass nearly 9,000 feet high at Cloudcroft, then plunges down through a twisting, winding route to Alamogordo. The ride was beautiful except in snowy weather. One snowy morning I left Alamogordo early in the morning to come home. I wondered how I would be able to climb the mountain, but the Lord arranged it so that I just "happened" to be right behind a snowplow that led me all the way up to the pass. I marveled at God's gracious care.

Another time I drove home just after dark in perfectly beautiful weather and came over the pass, heading down towards Artesia. As I drove, I saw a bright glow in the eastern sky. I wondered if there might be an oil well on fire. Then, as I came down onto the plain a brilliant moon broke over the horizon. Several miles west of Artesia I watched as the moon, just a couple of nights past full, stood over Artesia. For a moment the twinkling lights of the town looked like a million-dollar necklace hanging from the moon.

Every time I made the trip I had to keep my eyes open for deer on the road, and I enjoyed watching the wild turkeys and other wildlife. All this beauty came from the hand of God as an encouragement to His often-discouraged servant. How good God is!

I found it deeply satisfying to watch as the Lord worked in the hearts of the folks we worked with. Even though I lived 150 miles from them, we found a warm loving relationship in that group. We had various experiences some funny, some sad. One Sunday morning as I arrived in Alamogordo I locked the car-keys in the car and could not open the door to reach for my Bible or my notes, and had to teach the class using a borrowed Bible. Another time in foul wintry weather I managed to reach the pass at the top of the mountain between Artesia and Alamogordo, but as I started down the steep mountain road with its six degree slope, I had some kind of car trouble. I cannot recall just what my problem was. All I remember is that the motor had stopped and I could not get it started again. I had stopped at the little village of High Rolls where I found a mechanic. However, he could not help me at the moment because he was on his way to church. So I found a telephone, and called one of the families at the church in Alamogordo, telling them where I was and explaining that I could not be there in time. Then I went and fiddled with the engine, and somehow it started. I thanked the Lord, and headed down the mountain and drove to the home where we were to meet. When I arrived there the place was empty. I could not find anyone. After standing there a few minutes I decided to give up and headed back home. Soon after I reached home the phone rang and friends in Alamogordo explained that when I told them I could not come, the whole group got in their cars and drove up to High Rolls intending to help me, and thinking we could at least get together in the local restaurant, even if I could not go to them. If the pastor could not come to the church the church would go to the pastor. So while I was driving down the mountain, their caravan came up and we passed without seeing each other.

The day came when we had the thrill of turning the Bible Class over to a young man who had just graduated from a Bible College. He had recently spent almost a month with Dr. Leonard Smith, the president of Southwest Bible Church Mission, and we were excited about the prospects of the new church taking off under the name of Cielo Vista, a name that meant “A View of Heaven.”

Soon after the discouragements in Roswell and Hobbs, I drove to Alamogordo to visit the pastor of the infant church. As I walked into his living room I found him sitting in his comfortable recliner, a fat cigar clamped between his teeth and a half-full liquor bottle on the shelf by his head. Quite bluntly he let me know he told me he did not agree with the Mission and would no longer serve with us.

Three attempts at starting churches in three towns, Roswell, Hobbs, and now Alamogordo. Three attempts and three failures! But now it will be that much more difficult. Was all that effort wasted? I could not help thinking of Adoniram Judson (1788-1855) who went to India in 1812, and from there to Burma. He had to go to the king to get permission to establish a mission station. The first convert was baptized in 1819. In 1824 when war broke out between Britain and Burma, Judson was imprisoned as a spy, suffering for two long years in filthy jails. He remained faithful and lived to see a solid church established. God allowed that great man to suffer terribly. As I thought of Judson, I could not think of complaining about the little problems we had to face. As for the results, it will be only in heaven that we meet some people who would not be there were it not for faithful servants of the Lord. Yes, results seemed to be discouraging, but wait! We have not reached the last chapter.

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