

Chapter 9

**Testing the Waters, Phase 1**  
**Tadmor, 1938 – 1942**

That summer I reached the magic number, 21 years old. “*Now what’s next, Lord?*” At the time, I had no idea what was going on – I did not even realize that this was a quality education situation, but there at Tadmor, from 1938 to 1941, the Lord provided for me an education far beyond my expectations. First of all, Watson and Mary Thornton took me into their home, just as though I were a part of their family. The impressive, two-story house stood on a hill in the center of the farm’s 430 acres. On one side the Meramec River (according to Ben Love, a Missouri State agent) provided the best ten-mile stretch of bass fishing anywhere in Missouri. The clear water of Benton Creek flowed across the bottomland and emptied into the Meramec. Some 210 acres were cleared and planted in corn, sorghum, wheat, hay and vegetable gardens. The 220 acres in the surrounding hills were covered with a huge variety of trees, including more than twenty varieties of oak, as well as hickory, red cedar, willow, walnut, maple, sassafras, and black gum, providing spectacular colors in the fall of the year. Tadmor certainly provided a delightful place for me to live and learn what God had in mind.

As I look back, I cannot even imagine how difficult it must have been for Watson and Mary Thornton to have me in their home as they raised the first five of their ten lovely children. At first they had neither electricity nor running water. They rarely had an opportunity to do anything as a family without me tagging along. Because of the chaotic conditions of growing up in a boarding school in China, with just a very short time with my parents in the winter months, I was – I realize now as I look back – a pathetic misfit, pitifully lacking in social graces of any kind. Yet, out of their love for the Lord, they provided an excellent training on which to build my life. Yes, I had certainly received an excellent high school education at Chefoo, followed by three years of superb Bible teaching at Prairie Bible

Institute, but before the Lord would trust me with a pastorate, He gave me a course of training in basic Christian living.

In addition to demonstrating a truly Christ-centered home, Watson introduced me to work on a farm, plowing and harvesting, putting up hay, milking cows, planting and maintaining a vegetable garden, looking after cattle and building fences, butchering hogs, and raising chickens. He showed me how to chop down trees and then cut some of the wood into manageable pieces for fuel in the long, cold winters, and split more of it into wood for the kitchen fire. We worked together in building roads, plowing fields, harvesting crops, cutting sorghum cane and producing molasses. It was a whole new world of which I had been totally ignorant. One of the men on the farm, Charlie Heuchan, introduced me to the problems and methods of building houses when money was scarce.

Watson demonstrated how a father should lead his family, teaching them the Word, and practicing his faith in his daily actions. He showed how faithfulness applied to the work of a pastor as he visited the sick and needy, and faithfully discharged his duties as the pastor of the tiny congregation at Asher Hollow, seven miles away. One rainy night I rode with him as he vainly tried six or seven times to drive his car up a steep hill through slippery mud, desperately anxious not to fail the folks who would be meeting at the schoolhouse. He demonstrated how a servant of the Lord will go into the highways and byways to help fellow Christians and point the lost to Christ. In our schoolhouse visitation program I remember riding with him when someone told him about the new Yearly School. We had never heard of Yearly, but Watson was determined to find it. He asked a man how to find the school. "Waal," he drawled, "Ye jes has ter foller them blazes on them trees." We drove through the woods, following a blazed trail. We had to look for the blaze-mark where someone years ago had chopped through the bark of oak trees to point the way to the school.

All this time I never realized the high privilege that was mine in learning from a faithful servant of the Lord. I had seen other “giants” in the Lord’s service, men and women who received the adulation of thousands, but here was a man who never had great recognition, but who loved the Lord deeply and served people faithfully.

Watson and his father, the Rev. Jesse B. Thornton, gave themselves to another aspect of Tadmor. They intended to use the grounds as a Bible Institute where young people could study God’s Word as they prepared to serve Him in other places. It was with this purpose that three other young people came down from St. Louis: Jess Kellerman, Harold Saladin and Bernadine Bailey.

Starting a Bible School became more difficult as World War II raged in Europe and then in the Pacific. Indeed, with the rationing of gas and other items, the future of the school looked doubtful. The school would probably have to close before it even had a good start, and then wait till conditions improved before it could really function in the way that the Thorntons envisaged.

Meanwhile the Lord’s plan for Bernadine and me to share a life together seemed to be falling into place. Even though Bernadine was not yet completely convinced, her mother was. In fact, two years before Bernadine came to Tadmor her mother arranged for Pastor Thornton, Watson’s father, to pick up my dirty clothes when he went down to Tadmor each week. Margaret would wash them and send them back the next week with the Pastor. Now, in that spring of 1941, Bernadine and I made a life-changing decision, to give ourselves to each other in marriage. *This is a terribly important step. Is it the Lord’s will for us right now?* I was fully aware that Mother felt I was making a mistake, that at twenty four years of age, I was not old enough to make this important change in my life. Little did either of us have any idea how that decision would alter our lives. We did not yet have much of an idea as to just how or when this could come to pass.

We soon saw that with the conditions brought on by World War II we would have to close up the embryonic school at Tadmor and return to St. Louis. The Army tried to draft me but when the doctors examined me they rejected me. The Chefoo experience had left me unfit to serve my country in the armed forces. I found various jobs related to the war effort, both in factories as well as in building. In some ways things were improving for us, but at the same time I kept thinking, *Is this really what God called me to do?*

Some months earlier, in the fall of 1940, Mr. C. J. Mellis, a member of Hope Church, invited me to join a group of nine men in a joint venture, building 38 five-room homes in Jennings, a suburb north of St. Louis. He would finance the project, while the ten of us would provide the labor. We would receive \$25.00 per week until the project was completed, and then divide the profits and any deeds of trust. I jumped at the opportunity, and spent a full year gaining valuable experience in almost every aspect of building small homes, from laying out the lots to finishing the concrete floor in the basement. Because of the war, our group was compelled to disband late in the fall of 1941, but not before Bernadine and I had set our wedding date, October 11, 1941.

We secured an upstairs flat of three rooms on Highland Avenue. We found it difficult to purchase furniture and do everything necessary to establish a home, when my income was \$25.00 per week. We bought a bedroom set at Sears on credit, but the day before the wedding it had not been delivered. In panic we called the store and found they had not delivered it because my credit was not established. Bernadine's mother came to the rescue, signing for us, and they finally delivered the set on the Saturday morning just before the wedding.

Meanwhile, I was working on the job that morning. Mr. Mellis could not bring himself to allow any of his men to take off on a Saturday morning. That was unthinkable! Finally, at 10:00 that morning

one of the men complained, and suggested to Mr. Mellis that I should be permitted to take off on my wedding day. Reluctantly, he gave permission for me to leave at ten o'clock.

Promptly at 3:00 PM Pastor Thornton led Cliff, Wanda and me from the vestibule into the sanctuary of Hope Church, where we stood at the head of the aisle, waiting. A surprisingly large crowd sat silently in the pews while David Thornton played the organ. As the music changed to The Wedding March my heart started racing at the sight of my beautiful bride, Bernadine, slowly advancing down the aisle, leaning on her father's arm. Lucille Lemuth, whom we had known from Tadmor, sang our wedding hymn to the familiar tune of I've Found A Friend. She sang the words I had written specially for the occasion:

Our loving Father and our God,  
We thank Thee for Thy mercy;  
For Thou hast led the paths we've trod  
That one we now might be.  
'Tis in Thyself that we are one,  
Thy love to us is given.  
That love shall stand till life is done  
And we can love in Heaven.

As a wedding gift Mr. and Mrs. Art Siegal, leaders in the church, loaned us the use of their grand Packard automobile, with the services of their chauffeur. Foolishly we were so class-conscious and so uncomfortable with such luxury that we had the chauffeur drive us to the photographer, and then to Bernadine's parents' home, and let him take the Packard home.

Just before the wedding Bernadine's aunt and uncle visited our apartment and were shocked to see we did not have a kitchen stove. We planned to get by with a little hot plate. Uncle Charlie drove straight to their home in Clinton, Illinois, 150 miles away, missing the wedding ceremony. He loaded up an extra stove they had, and came back to the Bailey home with it. From there we drove to our flat on Highland Avenue, and I carried Bernadine over the threshold and up the stairs into our three-room apartment. Right behind us Uncle Charlie, with the help of Bernadine's father, carried the stove upstairs.

I was very much aware off the fact that the sum total of our financial assets at this point consisted of the twenty dollars in my pocket.

Clearly the wedding marked a definite turning point. No longer was I alone. I knew God had a plan for my life, am now all my thinking would focus not on “me” but on “us.” As I look back on that day sixty-three years ago, I marvel again at how our Lord has led all the way, supplied every need, and brought us through every situation.

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