

PATHWAYS TO THE POWER OF GOD

To meet Peter Igarobae today, you would never imagine the dramatic events that revolutionised his life just over 20 years ago. He is a gentle, gracious and quietly spoken Papua New Guinean in his late forties. There is a twinkle in his eyes and a permanent smile on his lips. That he was once a rebel against both deity and humanity now seems impossible to believe.

When he was in his late teens, Peter had the terrible experience of seeing his eight year-old sister die through sorcery. He was determined that such a thing would never happen to any other member of his family and decided to do something about it.

But he knew that if he engaged in sorcery himself, there would be a huge price to pay—almost certainly physical deformity and premature death. It is common knowledge in Papua New Guinea that those who are involved in witchcraft are usually disfigured in some way—they have a facial tic, a blind eye, a twisted limb or something similar. They usually live short lives. They love to exercise their power, but it comes at a cost.

Sometimes, they defy the power and presence of God—for example, by attending a Christian meeting or standing in a prayer line and trying to obstruct divine healing. On more than one occasion, the reverse has occurred. Their power has been frustrated and they have been converted! When this happens, their ailments are usually healed overnight. One man said he felt as if ants were crawling all over him and then out of his body as he was set free. Another who was covered with scales saw his skin made clean once again.

At other times, they simply retreat. One day in a village, Australian CRC missionary Barry Silverback saw in a vision the face of a man who was involved in sorcery. Later he saw this same man enter the meeting place. He challenged him about his witchcraft but he denied it. However, some of the young people had seen him stuffing his charms and other tools of trade under his arm before he came in. When Silverback confronted him again, he became frightened and left!

A ‘Cosmic Force’

Peter Igarobae was an Anglican but did not know the Lord. He used to dress in a leather jacket and jeans and had grown his hair long. He smoked and drank. Meanwhile, he was studying geology at university and was later to become the first PNG graduate in that field.

In his quest for some answer to his little sister’s death, he began to research para psychology and sorcery. He interviewed witches and observed their practices. Ultimately, he came to believe there was a ‘cosmic force’ that was higher and greater than the power of sorcery but without the negative effects.

One day, he and Barry Silverback were discussing religion. Silverback said, ‘About this “cosmic force.” I know Him. Would you like to meet Him?’ He began to share the gospel with Peter but at that point they were interrupted and the moment passed.

But Peter and a friend went to a meeting at Bethel Centre, Port Moresby, where David Cartledge, a visiting Australian pastor, was preaching. He remembers being amazed at the way Cartledge ran up and down the platform and was concerned that if he didn't stop for a drink he would collapse from exhaustion! Then Cartledge began to walk down the aisle and touch people and they fell to the floor. When that happened, Peter and his friend decided it was time to leave. But Cartledge followed them and chased them down the street! He called, 'You can run away from me but you can't run away from God.' Peter wouldn't go back to the church again.

Unnerved

However, on 22 February 1976, when he was 24 years old, Peter's 'sister in law' (his cousin's wife) invited him to another meeting at Bethel. Culturally he could not refuse this invitation and was obliged to go. When Barry Silverback preached, Peter was unnerved. He was sure he was talking specifically about him.

Towards the end of the message, a strange thing happened. Because of his background, Peter was sensitive to movements and actions around him, even if he couldn't see them. Now he felt someone behind him pointing a finger at him. He turned but there was no one. He was convinced he had not been mistaken. He decided that if it happened again, he would turn so quickly he would catch the person.

Again, he felt the finger pointing at him, this time at the back of his head. He swung around sharply but there was still no one there. Shaken, he decided it was time to leave. Somehow he became disorientated and found himself walking towards the platform at the front instead of the door at the back! He finished up in a line of people who were waiting for laying on of hands.

Silverback was praying for another person but saw Peter and, while he was still praying, put his hand on his head. ('I wanted to make sure he didn't leave!' said Silverback later.) Then with his hand still there, he prayed with the person on the other side of Peter. Finally he prayed for Peter. The effect was astonishing. The Spirit of God fell on him. Within moments he was speaking in tongues.

Some of the church staff took him to the back room and he prayed and poured out his heart to God. Two hours later, he left there a changed man. But he had no counselling so he didn't know what had really happened to him. No one actually told him he'd been born again and filled with the Holy Spirit.

Over the next few days, he was ill at ease about that meeting. He finally came to the conclusion his cousin's wife had told Silverback all about him. So he was angry and didn't go back for eight weeks. But as a result of what had happened he began to change. His girl friends left him because he was different. He also found himself doing unexpected things. He cut his hair, for example, but didn't know why.

Hospital Emptied

At this point, his Anglican priest asked him to go to Oro province to visit some people in Popondetta and pray with them. When he arrived, he visited a relative who was in the local hospital. In the same ward, was a patient who was desperately sick. He had undergone surgery and there were tubes protruding from his body. His wife who was with him was in great distress, weeping continuously.

Peter's heart went out to them both. He walked over to the bed and asked the woman, 'Can I pray for your husband?'

'Are you a priest?' she replied.

'No,' he answered.

'Are you a theological student?'

'No.'

She looked at him uncertainly and then said, 'Well, anyway, please pray.'

So he knelt, made the sign of the cross and then realised he didn't know what to do next. So he said, 'Let's try again.' This time he made the sign of the cross and put his hand on the man's head. The patient grabbed it and guided it to different parts of his body. Peter's mind objected to what was happening but the man kept on moving his hand over his skin, especially on the affected parts. The result was dramatic: the man was healed.

Excited and encouraged by this, and still filled with a sense of astonishment, Peter went to seven other wards and prayed for all the patients. By the time he had finished, he had lost his voice. The hospital was virtually emptied. Silverback later commented, 'I've seen hospitals emptied several times by PNG people.'

In the village, as the priest had requested, Peter prayed with an Anglican believer. He, too, was healed. This man gave him a New Testament and told him he should read the passages about Jesus healing before he prayed for more people. All this was completely new to him.

Word got out about what had happened and people began to bring all their sick. One woman was in a desperate condition. She was dishevelled and dirty and so mentally disturbed she crawled around under the village huts with the dogs and pigs, eating scraps and even animal dung.

Again, Peter made the sign of the cross, knelt, put his hand on her head and just kept saying the name of Jesus. The woman's face changed dramatically. Suddenly, two village dogs which were snuffling around them yelped, leaped into the air, whirled around several times and took off for the bush. Peter knew nothing about deliverance from demons but the lady was set free. In fact, Peter still didn't even know he was born again. After that, the woman lived a normal life for nearly twenty years until her death from old age.

Minister of the Gospel

One day Australian missionary Merrilyn Teague met Peter at the university. 'We have really missed you,' she said. Peter didn't know who she was but she knew him, having seen him at the meeting at Bethel.

'Why haven't you come back again?' she asked.

'My sister-in-law didn't invite me,' he replied.

Then Peter began to tell Merrilyn what had happened at Oro Province, expecting her to be amazed. But as he related the events, she just kept on smiling as if she knew exactly what he was talking about. She showed him from the Book of Acts how such things occurred in the early Church.

When Peter heard this, he began to remember Sunday School lessons he had attended at the Salvation Army when he was a child. As Merylyn explained, he couldn't believe it. He said, 'No.' She said, 'Yes!' Suddenly, it all seemed to add up. Then and there in the University campus he began to jump and dance and shout, 'Hallelujah!'

Since that time, Peter has grown as a Christian and a minister of the gospel. Today he is pastoring a fine assembly of 300 people in Lae. He is national chairman of the CRC in Papua New Guinea.

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About Dr Barry Chant

Barry Chant is Senior Pastor of the Wesley International Congregation in Sydney, Australia. He is a regular speaker at church services, seminars, conferences and conventions. Hundreds of thousands of his books have been sold around the world. He has degrees in arts, theology and ministry, a diploma in education and a PhD in history. He was the initiator and former president of Tabor College, Australia.

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