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by John Lindner

In May 1951 Bob Finley climbed to the top of a mountain in northern India and saw before him the great panorama of the Himalayas. Beyond those snow-capped peaks lay the Hindu kingdom of Nepal where no missionary had ever been allowed.

He knelt and prayed, "Lord, grant that in my lifetime I might see a people gathered for Your name beyond those mountains."

Prem trekking up a mountainside to meet with the saints in Lami Gara.

Possibly at that very hour, a disciple of Bakht Singh was preaching on the street in Darjeeling District in northern India. His text was, "It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment." (Hebrews 9:27)

A soldier of Nepali ancestry in the Indian Army heard the message, so strange to his Hindu ears. Fearful of the judgment, he returned to ask the preacher how he could avoid it, and the preacher led him to Christ. That soldier was Prem Pradhan.

The next thing the preacher told Prem was that he should read the New Testament through six times before he read the Old Testament. He didn't realize what a blessing this would prove to be a few years later.

Born of Hindu parents in 1924, Prem had been educated in the (Hindu) Rama Krishna Mission School in Calcutta. He had served in the British Air Force in World War II and had been shot down in the Middle East. Wounded in the leg by ground fire, while parachuting to safety, Prem narrowly escaped amputation and always walked with a limp. After the war he became the commander of a tank regiment in the Indian army.

After his conversion, Prem used his military leave to accompany other Christian brothers on preaching and witnessing trips into his native Nepal. He thought he could continue doing that until he retired, but God had another plan. Less than three years after he was converted, God called him to resign his post and serve Him full time.

At first, Prem resisted the call of God. "Not me, Lord," Prem objected like Moses of old, "I have a lame leg."

"Isn't it strange of God," he said to me once, "that He called a cripple to preach the gospel in the Himalaya Mountains?"

But God was not satisfied with "vacation service." He wanted Prem full time. After resisting God's call for three months, Prem resigned his army position and went as an apostle to his native land.

"For that," Prem told me, "He gave me three years without a convert - one year for every month I resisted Him."

A break came when he prayed for a woman who had been paralyzed six years. She left her bed and began praising God. Many, including the local Buddhist lama, turned to Christ as a result of that testimony.

Prem baptized his converts openly, disdaining the concept of "secret" believers. "Jesus suffered for us openly," he said. "We should be willing to suffer for Him."

The believers were soon arrested in 1962 and given a year's jail sentence for changing their religion. Prem was given a six-year sentence for baptizing them, i.e. causing them to change their religion. The Buddhist lama was murdered.

Prisoner for Christ

At that time the Nepalese prisons were dungeons of death: no ventilation in summer; no heat in winter; no sanitation facilities; crawling with insects. Prisoners were given one cup of rice per day, and expected to cook it themselves over their own little fires. Without help from relatives, many died.

An opportunist for Christ, Prem decided to hold "inside-the-prison" Bible institute. With nothing to do, most of the prisoners gladly listened. By the end of the first year, many of the prisoners had accepted the Lord.

Then the believers were released and the guards decided to finish off Prem, the leader of this strange new "cult." They put him in a chamber where they used to throw dead bodies until relatives retrieved them, and chained his hands and feet.

The room was so small, Prem could neither stand up nor lie down full length. Lice ate away his underwear. Jailers predicted he would not last a week. But other prisoners slipped food under his door to keep him alive.

As many as 250 children attended Prem's school in Kathmandu before it was brutally shut down in 1972, and Prem was thrown in jail.

Prem told me that when he closed his eyes, he could see the pages of his Nepali New Testament that he had read so many times. After three months, a new guard came on duty. One day he heard Prem praying.

"Who are you talking to?" the guard asked.

"Jesus," Prem replied.

"I'm on guard here. How did He get in there?"

"Well, He's here."

The guard opened the door and shined his flashlight around. "I don't see Jesus," he said.

"You won't find Him that way," Prem said. "Let me tell you how you can find Him." The guard squatted on the floor, and Prem led him to the Lord. Shortly after that the guard used his influence to get Prem out of the dead-body chamber.

Jailers were now afraid of this man who had survived their torture chamber, and sent him to another prison. There Prem led others to the Lord. He was transferred again, and the same thing happened again. And again.

By the time Prem was released from prison, he had won to the Lord and disciplined men from 12 tribes. When they got out, they went as living witnesses back to their people. The missionary work in Nepal was multiplying.

Between 1960 and 1975 Prem spent 10 out of 15 years in a total of 14 different prisons. But he was determined that the churches in Nepal would never be an underground movement.

Treacherous missionary journeys

There were no roads in the early days, so Prem often followed the rivers into the valleys to preach the gospel in mountain-side villages. He told me he crossed one river 16 times to reach Chorka. Flash floods in the mountains could transform these innocent looking streams into torrents of death.

"One sister drowned here last year," he told me as we waded barefoot across a clear, foot-deep river on the way to Lami Gara.

Other of his adventures were even more death defying. Hiking through the forests, he used to climb up into the trees to sleep 18 feet above ground - above the jumping height of tigers. Once monsoon rains had made the rivers uncrossable, and he was stranded three nights in the forest without food. Too weak to climb a tree, he slept on the ground.

"God will protect us in the name of the Lord Jesus," he told a Hindu who was stranded with him.

In the morning they saw huge tiger paw prints in the dirt completely circling the place they had slept. The Hindu became a believer.

Terrible persecutions

Probably the greatest work Prem did was to start schools for the training of young people. The first school he started was in Lazimpat, a section of Kathmandu. With funds sent by Christian Aid, Prem built a three-story building, gathered a teaching staff, and started teaching up to 250 children. From the top floor, one could look into the back yard of the king's palace.

But some of the foreign "missionaries," who had signed an agreement with the government that they would not evangelize or plant churches, grew jealous of Prem's boldness and success, and resented the fact that he kept Nepali believers away from them. One of them secretly told the police that Prem was a terrorist.

Without warning, in 1972 police raided the school, killed one teacher, and beat the others. Prem was imprisoned; the teachers fled; the children were scattered.

Prem's sentence was for 20,000 days - 54 years. Bob Finley learned about it and visited him in prison in 1973. Later, Prem learned that he could be released if he paid a ransom of 20,000 rupees - a rupee per day, then the equivalent of \$2000. He pinned a letter to the inside of the dress of a tiny tot who was visiting her mother imprisoned with Prem. The girl was small enough to slip between the bars.

The message was relayed to Bob Finley. He shared it with a group of believers in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and they raised the amount. The money was smuggled into Nepal by two teenage girls and brought to the prison. The ransom was paid, and Prem was finally released.

Teaching generations

In 1980 Prem began another school - this time on his farm in Sarlai District, a day's journey by bus from Kathmandu. Prem reserved for me the honor of laying the first brick, and Christian Aid backed the enterprise. By 1984, 1000 pupils were enrolled in New Life School. Most walk miles from the surrounding areas.

About 300 are children brought to Prem's farm from the mountains where there are no schools. They stay in boys' and girls' hostels built with funds provided by Christian Aid so they can attend Prem's school.

Believers built houses to meet in since it was illegal to build churches. The missionary lived upstairs, and the believers gathered downstairs.

1924 Born of Hindu parents, June 6

1942 Graduated from Rama Krishna (Hindu) Mission School

WWII Shot down in Middle East; leg injured by ground fire.

1948 Commander of tank regiment, India Army

1951 Converted by street preacher in India

1954 Went as apostle to his own country of Nepal

1960 Sentenced to six years in prison

1971 Started school in Kathmandu

1972 Sentenced to 20,000 days in prison

1980 Began school at his farm

1994 Began a third school across the border in India

1998 Home with the Lord, November 15

Prem spent a total of 10 years in 14 Nepali prisons. He is shown during his first imprisonment in 1962.

When Prem came to America in 1970, Dr. Finley took him to many churches to tell his story, and they sent support for Prem's ministry for many years.

In 1986 the King of Nepal awarded Prem the Social Service Medal of Honor for his humanitarian and educational work - perhaps as an act of atonement for the 1972 persecution.

That, perhaps, was symbolic of a gradual turnaround in Nepal's attitude toward Christians. Though it is still technically illegal to change one's religion or to proselytize, Christians in most areas now have constitutional freedom to worship their Lord. In response to a pro-democracy movement in 1990, all political and religious prisoners were released. But local persecution still prevails in Hindu villages.

One of those trained by Prem is Sundar Thapa. I met him, then a high school student, when I visited Kathmandu in 1980. He went on to get advanced theological degrees in Korea and America and now heads Evangelical Christian Fellowship. He and his 175 co-workers have planted over 120 churches - 36 by Sundar himself. His wife, Sareeta, a top national nursing scholar, went on to earn her M.Th. in America and helps direct Nepal Bible College, the first indigenous Bible school in Nepal.

Sundar is one of a multitude who owe their education to Prem. Throughout this mountain nation are thousands of men and women who have come to Christ through his witness, or through the witness of those disciplined or influenced by him. Scores of tribes have been touched by the gospel either by him or by those brought to the Lord through his witness. Hundreds of churches and many of the 500,000 believers in Nepal today can trace at least part of their spiritual roots to the witness of this lame soldier for Christ.

There are now many assemblies of believers scattered across the mountains of Nepal that trace their spiritual roots to this old soldier of the cross. I went with Prem to some of these places in 1980 and took the opening photo of Prem trekking up a mountainside to meet with the saints in Lami Gara. Some had walked three hours to meet with us in the freshly built mud-walled building with leaf roof. I can still see Prem giving the Bible teaching by oil lamp.

Today Prem's body lies in a grave at the entrance to New Life School, a silent witness to the Resurrection in this Hindu kingdom, but his spirit is with the Saviour he loved and served.