

## Introduction

# **This Missionary**

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### **Why is this missionary hiding from the tribal people?**

There's this missionary I know; your typical Bible-totin', pencil-chompin', coffee-chuggin' missionary. On a good day he is possessed of average looks, average talents, and average intellect; an unremarkable run-of-the-mill kind of person. Sometimes, though, he suspects he maybe isn't so typical. When people tell him, "Wow! I bet you really love those tribal people!" he wonders what odds they might be willing to offer. Love the tribal people? Well, maybe off and on. If he can love them on his own terms then yeah, maybe.

He certainly loves giving them the chance to hear and understand God's Word in their own language, but all too often he doesn't really want to get inserted into their lives too deeply. Sometimes he avoids them, complains about them, wishes he were somewhere else, and then goes about preparing Bible lessons that teach that God is love. Yuck! What kind of a missionary is that? That's what I want to know.

"But surely," you protest, "surely this missionary friend of yours isn't all that bad. After all, he was willing to leave his own family and friends and country, and go off to live in the jungle to help those tribal people."

To address that, allow me to recount an experience this missionary had. After a day's work, he had just settled into his office to enjoy a good book when he heard the murmur of approaching voices. He held his breath, hoping the tribal people would pass by, but no such luck. They came to the door and called his name, and he chose not to answer. Maybe they would conclude he was away. They called several more times, insistently, and then made their way around the mud-and-thatch house to the office window.

The missionary silently rose from the hammock and furtively eased out of the office, sidling into the adjoining bedroom. The would-be visitors looked in the office window and called out his name a few more times, frustration mounting in their voices.

Why were they being so persistent? Could it be they had seen me enter... I mean, seen the missionary enter into his house? Did they know he was there? The missionary remained silent, scarcely daring to breathe.

And then one of the determined visitors started slowly toward the bedroom window, effectively cornering the missionary. The situation was getting desperate. There was little recourse. It would be distasteful, but the missionary knew exactly what had to be done.

Drawing a deep breath, he frantically launched himself across the room, coming to rest beneath the window. A shadow fell across the floor as the caller loomed up at the window, but even though mere inches separated this missionary from the tribal man, he was safely out of the line of sight, safe from the embarrassment of being discovered. He wasn't about to be outmaneuvered at this point.

Pressed up against the cold mud wall, hiding from the people he was there to serve, this missionary realized he had not only succeeded in remaining undetected, but he had also succeeded in being both ridiculous and selfish in the process.

And what of the woman God gave this missionary? Why was she discovered one day hunkered down under the kitchen sink while several cute village children peered through the window, persistently calling her name? Could it be something in the drinking water?

Such are these missionaries. What is God to do with people like these? Beats me. But I suspect that God is OK with it – at least he isn't too surprised at their shortcomings. After all, God is great, and these missionaries aren't. God has always loved the Wilo people, and these missionaries haven't. God sees the whole picture while these missionaries obsess only with their own small space in it.

Thankfully, God is big enough to use people like these missionaries. He seems to enjoy taking human weakness and using it to bring honor and glory to himself. In that regard, this missionary was the perfect candidate.

## Chapter 1

# “No” is Not an Option

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**Going wild-pig hunting because I just  
couldn't say no**

A group of people, some armed with shotguns, stampeded past my window, kicking up a cloud of dust in the dry-season heat. I stepped outside and waylaid a straggler.

“Hey! Where are you going?” I asked.

He screeched to a halt and hurriedly explained something about firewood.

“Firewood?” I asked. I had no idea why so many people would get this excited about firewood. Maybe there was a firewood clearance sale going on, which would explain the rush, and the shotguns.

Impatiently, like a child dancing on his tiptoes while desperately awaiting his turn at the bathroom, the straggler said, in Spanish, “Wild pigs!” Then he repeated the word in Wilo, which still sounded a lot like “firewood” to me.

“Do you want to come?” he asked, probably just wanting to end the conversation and catch up to the main group. At least that’s what I deduced from the vaguely disappointed expression that flitted across his face when I said yes.

He wasn’t the only one disappointed; so was I. Galloping through the briars and brambles of a jungle that had suddenly

come alive with wild pigs, frantic dogs, shotguns, tribal hunters, and overall chaos wasn't very appealing to me on this fine day.

So why didn't I just say no? I would have liked to, but the Wilos just wouldn't take no for an answer. More accurately, I didn't know how to say “no” in their language. This was a substantial frustration to me. Saying “yes” was very easy; *ha-oh* was one of the first words I had learned in Wilo. But search though I might, I hadn't been able to find a word for “no”.

The Spanish word for “no” is *no*. That's pretty simple. Why was the Wilo language being so difficult? I had even asked some of the Wilos who spoke a bit of Spanish how to say *no* in their language. They had given it some thought and then, somewhat perplexed, admitted they didn't know.

They didn't know? How could they not know? There's “yes”, and there's “no”. You can't have one without the other. It's not fair to not have a word for “no”.

These were my thoughts as I galloped through the briars and brambles. We weren't seeing any wild pigs, but there was plenty of adrenaline-inducing activity nonetheless, such as when we slammed into a low-hanging bees' nest and then frantically attempted to outrun their counter-offensive. And I was reminded I wasn't in Kansas anymore when one of the Wilos later brought my attention to something on the side of the trail, something I had almost stepped in.

“*Yawi idebawo*,” he informed me.

“Is that right?” I said. That's just great. I knew that *yawi* was the word for “jaguar”; looking down, I could guess what *idebawo* might mean. Call me crazy, but I'm of the opinion that the only kinds of *idebawo* a person should have to avoid getting on their shoe are the pigeon or dog varieties. If stepping in jaguar *idebawo* is a hazard in your life, then you probably took a wrong turn somewhere.

The wild pigs stayed away, but so did the *yawi*, so I wasn't too disappointed. It wouldn't be until much later, after months of investigative language learning, that our missionary team would finally be convinced that in fact the Wilo language really did not have a word for "no". There was, however, a way to communicate the idea of "not". This was done by putting a negation suffix on the word in question, as well as conjugating it with a pronoun and verb tense. That's how the Wilos say "no".

I found it rather cumbersome to use initially, because it required the ability to put together small sentences. For instance, when someone would ask, "Dah-wee, are you studying?" I had to respond with, "I'm studying-not." "Dah-wee, are you eating?" "I'm eating-not." "Dah-wee, do you want to go hunt wild pigs?" "Wild pig hunting I want to go-not." Now *that* would have been a practical thing to know how to say a few months earlier!

## Chapter 2

# The Snake Bite

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### **An encounter with a venomous snake gives insight into tribal culture**

I studied French when I was in junior high. Or maybe I should just say that I attended French class. It was pretty nice. Amenities included textbooks that provided invaluable help to those interested in actually learning, and study helps on audio cassette that we were able to listen to. The school library featured books that were geared toward helping people learn to speak French. We even had a teacher who spoke both French and English and was therefore able to correct us and instruct us in the proper pronunciation of words, and in charting the grammar. It was as though the red carpet of learning had been rolled out for us and servants lined the way, ready to attend to our every language-learning need.

That kind of red-carpet treatment was distressingly absent now. Where was I to begin learning a language that was completely unknown to the outside world? How was I to gain traction in this process when the language had no written form to it? To whom could I turn to learn the meaning of all the strange sounds I was hearing the Wilos speak? Much to my dismay, after conducting a little research, I reached the conclusion that the answer was not to be found in my hammock. Every day, I had to put on my shoes

and go outside. My classroom awaited me.

On this particular morning, the ever-present gathering of children outside my house parted like the Red Sea as I stepped through the doorway into the glaring morning sunlight. It wasn't long ago that most of these little ones would have scattered at my exit, but now they remained nearby, though apprehensively watching my every move. When they saw that I was not going to morph into some terrible monster, and that my intent was to walk toward the nearby village houses, they boisterously fell in behind me.

Feeling uncomfortably like the Pied Piper, I arrived at the house of Odowiya and found him and Snail on the porch, talking about their plans for the day.

In the little time that I had known him, I could always count on Odowiya to be of good humor. He had a knack for making me feel comfortable by taking my blunders and ignorance in his stride.

This morning, I was distressed to see a different side of him. With a scowl on his face, and without so much as saying hello, he directed his gaze toward me and commenced a loud tirade. My heart skipped a beat. Had I unwittingly offended him? Was it rude to show up unannounced in the morning? Had I interrupted an important ritual?

I soon realized, much to my relief, that his gaze and words were not directed at me, but at my entourage. The children immediately retreated. I wondered if perhaps he had woken up on the wrong side of the hammock that morning, but as soon as his voice of reprimand ceased reverberating through the neighborhood, his expression immediately reverted back to its normal friendly self. Like most of the adults in the village, he tended to go out of his way to make sure that the children weren't pestering the newly arrived missionary.



If I had been more like Christ, perhaps I would have said, “Suffer the children to come unto me.” Even had I been inclined to, I wouldn’t have known how to say something like that, so I kept my mouth shut and sat down beside Odowiya. The scolded children hovered just outside the danger zone, pretending they had lost interest.

With an animated but confusing combination of Spanish and Wilo, illustrated with hand gestures, Odowiya told me that he and Snail were heading out to the jungle to cut down some poles for Snail’s new house. Did I want to come along?

“*Ha-oh*,” I replied. I already knew from experience that Odowiya was a regular Energizer Bunny when it came to walking through the jungle, his bare feet nimbly propelling him over rocks and roots, across makeshift bridges and over fallen trees. I wasn’t too excited about the prospect of being led on yet another death march by this man. Nevertheless, I took comfort in the tenuous assumption that someone named Snail would walk a little slower.

Several hours later, sweat beading my forehead, I still hadn’t figured out why someone who walks so fast for so long would be named Snail. He was leading the way, with Odowiya and me walking single file behind him. The two of them were carrying on a lively discussion as we went along.

Listening carefully to them, I was pleased to note that the many long hours of language study were finally paying dividends: this kind of conversation no longer sounded like a flock of agitated ducks boisterously passing overhead. Now it sounded like a strange unintelligible language passing over my head. Progress, I thought morosely, comes in many different shapes, sizes, and flavors.

I nevertheless continued trying to catch a word or two of what they were saying. I was walking with notebook and pencil in hand, writing down any sounds I was able to hear clearly enough. The Wilo people had no alphabet for their language, so for the

time being I wrote using a phonetic alphabet. Eventually our team would be able to develop an alphabet for the Wilo language, but we would have to progress much further in our understanding of the language before we could focus on that. For now, I was going generic.

Preoccupied with pencil and paper, I didn't notice when Snail and Odowiya pulled away from me, but when I looked up, they were gone. I hurried to the next bend in the trail, and to my relief they were standing together, waiting for me. They said something, pointing in the general vicinity of my feet.

It has been my experience that, in the jungle, rarely is it desirable to have anything of consequence on the trail near one's feet. I immediately braked my forward momentum and looked down. A cursory glance revealed nothing. I took a cautious step forward and that's when I saw what they were pointing at. Coiled up among the leaves that carpeted the trail was a venomous snake.

It didn't look upset. In fact, it looked like it was enjoying some morning shut-eye, which was fortunate for Snail and Odowiya; they had been so engrossed in their conversation that they had both stepped right over it. Odowiya though, had caught a glimpse of the snake as he passed over, so they had decided to wait for me to catch up so they could point it out to me and inform me that it was called *anko'da*. That was nice of them.

They told me that I should carefully step around it, which didn't sound like a very good idea to me; just looking at a snake gives me the heebie-jeebies. If a snake were going to kill me, I preferred that it not be because I was politely trying to not disturb its little nap.

When he saw my hesitation, Odowiya picked up a stick and with one deft stroke killed the snake. He squatted down beside it, and with his machete he cut off the tip of the tail. Flashing a

mischievous smile, he then popped the severed portion into his mouth and swallowed it like a pill. He and Snail exchanged a chuckle and continued on down the trail.

I was perplexed by what had just transpired, but at the same time relieved on two counts: not only had the snake been removed from the trail, but Odowiya hadn't offered any of it to me.

It was disturbing, however, to realize how little I understood about what was happening around me. Why had they initially not wanted to kill the snake? Was it taboo to harm a snake that was not aggressive? Did they perhaps think the snake was an ancestor? A protector of the trail? What was the purpose in cutting off the tip of the tail and eating it? I didn't doubt there was significance to what Odowiya had done, but I had no idea what it might be.

Many months after that incident, armed with a better grasp of how to formulate questions in the Wilo language, I reminded Odowiya about it. "Why did you cut off the tail and swallow it?" I asked.

"It didn't bite me," he answered. "I ate the tail so that the next time I step close to a snake, that one won't bite me either."

Maybe I should have considered taking a bite out of that *anko'da*, myself.