

# "Man Proposes, God Disposes"

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*"In his heart a man plans his course,  
but the LORD determines his steps."*  
(Pr 16:9)

Young people are supposed to have dreams, and as a young man, I was no exception. With a mind for patriotism, I envisioned myself serving my nation; perhaps becoming president one day. The only problem was that my nation, South Vietnam, was in the throes of severe political turmoil: waging a war against the Communists from North Vietnam. That was life in South Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s.

I grew up in Central Vietnam in a family of eight. My family was non-religious, but we had a near-religious zeal for a better country. Years of French colonialism and an ongoing war with the North Communists inspired me to serve my country without relying on outside help, whether from US., or other Western Powers, or even from God. But God intervened.

While eating lunch one day from a street vendor in 1971, I found that my loaf of bread was wrapped in a discarded Gospel Tract on John 3:16. *"For God so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life"*.

My blind mind and heart to God in that time were horrified to find literature that taught divine-reliance with a story about God having "a son" with "a woman". "How could Vietnam modernize with dangerous ideas like this," I thought.

I decided to fight against that teaching which I perceived as "fancy tale", "untrue story" to help get rid of Christian teachings for my country, protecting our culture and tradition.

I took counsel from a friend of mine to go asking for truths but I went arguing with a Bishop and then a Pastor instead. The Bishop kept talking on Mari's virginity and the Pastor kept excerpting verses from the Bible while I had no idea of the nature of Bible! Although the Pastor gave me a New Testament but poor explanations from these men made me even the more confused and I thought I am correct and will eventually win the argument.

I shared that thought with the friend I've just mentioned and he did not agree with me about that, he suggested that I have to ask the American Missionary in town for a better understanding of Evangelical faith before taking any action against it.

Soon after, I decided to take my argument to that American Missionary. Right at the first opportunity with that Missionary I showed him the tract I had found on John 3:16 which I understood as a fancy tale. I also showed him the New Testament the Pastor gave me which I considered as a collection of tales and untrue stories. I did not let him talk but kept criticizing him of fooling our Vietnamese people with tales like that. "We don't need you Americans fool us with tales and untrue stories, what we have in our culture are enough!" I shout at him and kept on insisting that teachings like John 3:16 in no way good for the modernization of Vietnam.

The Missionary patiently listened to my argument. He seemed trying to understand what is going on in my blind mind and he did. He let me say and he did read the mind of an unsaved, patriotic student in his first year in college like me, I believe.

When the Missionary saw that I had said all what I wanted to say to him he graciously looked at me, offered me a cup of water to drink, and slowly and softly said: "Mr. Tan, I recognize that you're a fine young man, you love your country dearly and you don't want anyone to come to fool your people. I admire your strong desire for your country and people. However, please allow me to show you something quite new to you..."

He pointed his finger to a flock of ants moving on the floor and said: "Look at the ants there, which is the best way for you to communicate with them to help them avoid some danger that they are unknowingly heading toward..."

"No, sir. We don't need to do that! Those ants have the natural instinct to avoid dangers ahead." I shout out loud.

"But...", the Missionary patiently and softly spoke to me, "let's assume that they unknowingly heading toward some danger, and you know about that, and you love them enough to go telling them of the danger; do you think which way is the best way?"

His gracious manner toward me convinced me to think of his question and when he saw that I was thinking to find a good answer for him he continued:

"Well, may be the best way is to become one of them to speak to them about their danger in their own language. Do you agree with me about that?"

When he saw I nodded my head to show that I agree with him he began explain the message from John 3:16 for me. He said:

“The concept ‘Only Son’ in John 3:16 that you feel bothering about is not ‘a son’ that God had with ‘a woman’ as you thought but it’s God Himself. It’s God Himself who took the human form, became like us human to teach us on how to be delivered from the debt to Him, and to die to pay debt for us. . .”

He went on to preach about my need of salvation through Jesus Christ. After a few times of talking to him and arguing against him, however, I found myself becoming increasingly convinced of the truth of the message. Eventually, my opposition to the Gospel faded away and I submitted my life to Jesus. That was in the summer of 1971.

Although I was converted I still fear of informing my family about my conversion: my father would kill me if he knows that I’ve left the tradition of ancestors worship to follow Christ. That fear kept making me to delay from telling my family my new faith for the next two weeks.

On Friday of the third week at lunch time my father made a solemn and shocking announcement to the whole family: “From this Sunday on all of you should follow me to the Church to worship God with me! I’m now a Christian and my Church is the Baptist Church over there.”

Much to my surprise, my father had providentially received Christ the same week with me under completely unrelated circumstances. My mother was also found by the Lord after that event. God certainly had a plan for my family.

I thought I was the wise one, unaware that the wisdom of God is unfathomable. As the Bible says, “*In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.*” (Pr 16:9). Obviously man proposes but God disposes. I always thank God for His wisdom in turning my rebellion into a quest to find Him and save me from perishing.

I found hope that day, but my newfound faith was not firm enough in me those days. As the Communists took over Vietnam in 1975, anti-US sentiment was on the rise. Since Christianity was considered a Western religion, many Vietnamese Christians were under suspicion as potential dissidents. For my family, this meant exile.

Because of our faith, my family was exiled to a region in the mountainous jungles of Vietnam. The family’s only possessions were the clothes on our backs, and, as soon as we

arrived, we were left to fend for ourselves. We built a shelter out of trees, vines and mud, learned to use the root of manioc (cassava) for food, and attempted to find work at local farms. Each night, the government officials convened a propaganda meeting, indoctrinating us with Communist Dogma because we were seen as “troublemakers.”

Life in the jungle was hard for my family. My nine year old sister died from manioc poisoning because, in her extreme hunger, she ate too much at one time. My father died in 1982 as a result of malnutrition and general mistreatment. My wife whom I married before the exile escaped the jungles in 1981 and I left the area in 1987. However, my siblings had to remain there until 1989, and my mother was the last one to escape the exile in 1992.

In the midst of a tortuous exile, I became bitter. I began hating all those who escaped to foreign countries, hating the Communists, and hating God for letting all of this happen. One night in 1977, prior to my father’s death, I awoke in the middle of the night and heard my father quietly praying in the corner of our tent. As I moved closer, I noticed that my father was pleading with God for his embittered son (namely me).

Immediately after my father finished his prayer, I asked him in a rude way, “How can you pray? Communists have taken over; the Christian leaders have left the country. God is not here anymore.” My father calmly replied, “Son, because of that, we need to pray. We have no choice but to pray.” I was broken. God had not abandoned me, I had abandoned God. That day brought renewed hope as well as a commitment to Christian service.

*“In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.”* (Pr 16:9). Forty years later, I still serve God in full-time ministry as you see me speaking to you today. Life after the exile has not been easy. I have been observed, questioned, physically attacked, and forced to live separately from my wife for almost nine years. Thank God, we are now reunited.

During those difficult days after 1975, to be a Christian is to be a criminal, and to be a Pastor is to be a double criminal. But despite the hardships, I remain committed to go alongside leaders with training, coaching, consulting, and counseling; protecting sound doctrine; and assisting the growing Vietnamese underground Church.

*“In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.”* (Pr 16:9). I always thank God for forgiving me in such a way, and for using me for His glory until today!