

September/October 2024

MISSIONS

South Asia
Indescribable Joy
in the Jungle

Poland
A Prison Ministry That
Answered Prayers

Niger
Music Lessons Proclaim
the Gospel

Albania
Training for the
Developing Church





THINKING IT THROUGH

BY JURGEN SCHULZ

The Unstoppable Seed

It has been said, “If you don’t follow the news, you are uninformed. If you follow it, you are misinformed.” In a confusing world of misinformation and fake news, the parables of Matthew 13 unlock the true meaning of this age. They help us see the real issues at play and offer heaven’s perspective on what is happening on planet Earth.

The first parable tells of a farmer who goes through his field lavishly tossing handfuls of seed in every direction. Some seeds land on the road, some on rocky ground, and some among thorns. “But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” (Matthew 13:8) In only one place does the seed germinate and grow, and there, a remarkable harvest takes place.

So what is happening in our world?

1. A worldwide agricultural project is underway.

The King has chosen this planet to do some farming. His kingdom comes not as an invading army but as a tiny seed. He scatters supernatural seeds into the hearts of men and women everywhere.

Each human heart is like a barren piece of land. Without this divine seed, nothing but rocks and thorns exists. If the seed comes in, however, new life and beauty spring forth. The seed unleashes God’s redemptive power in human lives.

God’s work in history centers on the seed.

2. An aggressive sabotage operation is underway.

After the King scatters the life-giving seed, strong opposition comes into play. The parable draws attention to the forces that obstruct the seed, or faith: hard spots that exclude it, birds that devour it, stones that hinder it, thorns that choke it, and the sun that scorches it.

An enemy does all he can to stop the heaven-sent seed from taking hold because it poses the only threat to his kingdom. Nothing else can set people free; therefore, the enemy

opposes the seed. He hardens people’s hearts through sin. He confuses them with false narratives and poisons their minds with lies. He fills their lives with rocks and thorns so the seed can’t get in.

These efforts are not only farming; they are also warfare—a battle raging over men’s and women’s hearts.

3. A remarkable harvest is underway.

In biblical times, a farmer’s average yield would have been less than tenfold. A return of thirty- or sixtyfold would have ranked as a bumper crop. And a hundredfold harvest? Astonishing. Despite opposition, God’s seed keeps getting into human hearts. All over the world, the seed takes root, and new life springs forth.

We are often told that we live in a post-Christian age. That may be true as a cultural phenomenon. Christianity has indeed ceased to be the core idea at the heart of Western civilization. But more Christians live in the world today than at any other time in history.

On a global scale, Christianity is booming. China and many parts of Asia, Africa, and Latin America are experiencing explosive growth. A remarkable spiritual harvest is taking place.

The seed of the Gospel is unstoppable. It will not be thwarted. The gates of hell may do what they can, but the

seed continues to bear fruit all over the world. Ultimately, the earth will be filled with God’s glory as the waters cover the sea. History will end with the seed’s final triumph. Every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord.

So let’s keep scattering the seed. Let’s keep telling people about a God who loves them and a Christ who died for them. This seed is powerful, and when it is sown, there is no telling how God will work. ■

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Jurgen Schulz serves in Bolivia.

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COVER PHOTO: Children in India—©Lightstock.com



“Lord, Send Me to . . . PRISON!”

HOW THE LORD ANSWERED TWO MEN’S PRAYERS

BY TOM STANCZAK



“Quit talking about Jesus like that if you ever want to leave this prison,” they told him.”

LUKASZ’S PERSPECTIVE

“When Tom told us that he was looking for volunteers to serve in the prison, I applied straightaway. I thought it would be nice to do something for others—to preach God’s Word among people who may have never heard it. Over time, it turned out this service was for me too. I had to face my fears (including closed rooms), laziness, and my busy work schedule (I’m often up from 3:00 a.m. till late at night). Sometimes, God puts us in situations where we think we are doing something for others when, in fact, it is a path we must go down to see the Holy Spirit’s work in seemingly spiritually empty places.”

In our 26 years of ministry in Poland, we have held evangelistic Bible studies with many people—whether very educated, illiterate, orphaned, homeless, or well to do. God is no respecter of persons, so why should we be? Over the last 10 years, I have had a desire deep in my heart to take the Gospel into the prison too. So, one day, I began asking God to open the right doors.

During this time, He was also working in the heart of an inmate in Wrocław. After many years in prison, Sobek (name changed for privacy) started to open himself up to Jehovah’s Witnesses, but the Lord protected him. Later, his girlfriend recommended he read the Bible, and he got saved. He shared his newfound joy with everyone, so much so that the prison workers grew uncomfortable. “Quit talking about Jesus like that if you ever want to leave this prison,” they told him. Instead of being scared, Sobek prayed, with great determination, that someone from the outside would come to study the Bible with him.

This past summer, God answered our prayers! I got a call from a pastor who had learned of Sobek and wondered if I would be willing to help. I asked our assembly for prayer, and Lukasz, a new believer, immediately wanted to join me. After months of red tape, we received the required permission.



At our first meeting, in November 2023, only Sobek and one other man joined. But, the next week, nine attended, and soon after, 15–20 inmates were gathering every Saturday afternoon to study the Gospel of John. Over the last few months, we have regularly had up to 15 inmates, mostly seekers from Roman Catholic backgrounds.

The power of words

At each Bible study, we reserve time for prayer and testimonies. A man told us the following story: One week, his wife called to say she wanted a divorce. Shaken by the news, he smuggled in a sharp object and planned to end his life at midnight on the upcoming Friday. That evening, in his cell, he picked up his Bible and opened it to a random passage. What he read hit him hard: "Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today,' lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin." (Hebrews 3:12–13) The man knew the Lord was speaking to him.

A few days after he had shared this testimony and we had prayed for him, his wife called—she had changed her mind about the divorce. We praise God for sparing this man's life through the power of His Word!

Another time, the men had a surprise for Lukasz and me. One inmate, a transfer from an American prison, had taught the group "Amazing Grace" in English. What a joy it was to hear the men sing wholeheartedly and without accompaniment! (The prison prohibits instruments and devices.) Since then, singing has been a regular part of our meetings. It makes me think of how Paul and Silas, when they were in prison, sang hymns to God and He strengthened them.

Tools for further growth

Besides the weekly Bible studies, we promote the Emmaus correspondence courses so the work may continue even if we are not there. Three inmates have been working on their diplomas. Sobek is so convinced of the courses' value that he has used his own money to purchase sets to distribute in the high-security ward.

Sobek may call me a couple of times per week for discipleship. Recently, he asked if I would officiate his wedding when he is released in about four years. He also wants to be baptized.

God's faithful protection

We have had a few other interesting experiences. During our second or third time in the prison, the guards forgot to let us out, so we sat there for an extra two hours until they remembered. What an uncomfortable experience to be locked in that room with men we really didn't know yet—some of whom had been convicted of murder.

Another time, a fight broke out after one man made fun of something another prisoner said. The offended inmate threw

his hardcover Bible and pen at the other. Thankfully, we diffused the situation, and eventually, the men apologized to each other.

Once, while letting us in, a guard said she didn't understand why we would lock ourselves in a room with these men—she would be afraid. Actually, shortly before we began our meetings, an inmate murdered a visiting psychologist.

Although Anne, my wife, can't visit the prison with us, she participates in this ministry by grading the Emmaus courses. She also made our songbooks. We are so thankful that the Lord has "sent us to prison" and that Lukasz is willing to serve too.

Thank you for praying and for your interest in our ministry and lives. Truly, through your prayers and valued partnership in the Gospel, God has sent us to a Polish prison together. ■



AN INMATE'S FEEDBACK

One man, when asked what effect the Emmaus course *The Story of the King* had on his behavior, said, "With all my heart and soul, I would like to grow in faith in God and in love for Jesus Christ throughout my life. In my behavior, I am more calm, balanced, and controlled by the Holy Spirit."



Tom and Anne Stanczak are commended from Bethany Chapel in Wheaton, Illinois.

Opposite page (bottom): Lukasz and Tom lead the prison ministry. Above: The Emmaus courses are invaluable help for daily Bible study, even in prison.

Laying Biblical Foundations

ASSISTING THE ALBANIAN CHURCH
THROUGH TRAINING

BY DANIELE P. PASQUALE



The last 30 years have been an exciting time for Albania and for God's kingdom in the region: from virtual isolation to global interaction, from forced atheism to diverse pluralism, from brutal dictatorship to hopeful democracy, and from a handful of believers to a growing, active church. Italy contributed significantly to the cause of the Gospel in Albania due to its geographical proximity. Motivated by an evangelistic enthusiasm, Italian assemblies sent missionaries who planted several local churches.

Help from Italy

One of these Italian-planted churches is in Shkodër, where, in 1991, right after the fall of Communism, local men and women heard the Gospel for the first time. As in many other cities and villages in Albania, hunger for the message of the Bible was great, and many people came to a living faith in Christ Jesus. Help also came from churches in the UK, and by the end of the 1990s, when the Italian founding missionary Tommaso D'Andrea left Shkodër, the assembly was firmly established, and elders had been recognized.

Meanwhile, the Italian Evangelical Bible Institute (IBEI) had been training new believers for the ministry at a national level—especially through Fares Marzone, principal of IBEI and president of Opera Missionaria Evangelica dei Fratelli Italiana, an Italian missions service organization; the late Ron Diprose, a New Zealander and IBEI's academic dean; and Salvatore Corcelli, the first Italian missionary to Albania. In cooperation with other assembly workers, IBEI held an initial training program in Albania's capital, Tirana, in the 1996–97 academic year. Then, a second year was added in 1998.

Later, the idea to start an IBEI extension school in Albania was born within the Albanian church eldership and the school's leadership. The aim was to allow believers in a fast-changing society to be equipped without forgoing family life, secular work, and local church involvement. The mode of delivery was already well-developed and tested by IBEI in Italy: For every subject, a teacher would go to a local church and hold intensive sessions of classes over two weekends. Students would gather from surrounding churches to attend the interactive lectures, learning from the teacher and fellow students. After attending 10 weekends of lectures per year, covering five subjects, students would receive IBEI's Certificate of Theology in four years of study.

The leaders slightly adapted this model for Albania and translated the lectures from Italian into Albanian. After some discussion with local leadership and the consideration of several issues, it was decided that the assembly in Shkodër would host the program. The church had just completed an impressive building project and had all the requirements for a functional and comfortable extension school. Moreover, the coordinator and other volunteers had put great effort into translating learning resources that would complement the classroom lectures.

A desire for maturity

In 2014, 20 believers from Shkodër, Lezhë, Tirana, and as far away as Vlorë enrolled and began their training. All of them were already involved in ministry in their local churches and had a similar goal:

Since the first days of my conversion to follow Christ, I have had a great desire to read and to study the Word of God. I also had the same strong desire to help Christian young people know the Scriptures and our God better through His Word. I devoted myself to this ministry for many years, but I noticed I had a few significant deficiencies, especially in biblical foundation: I had some doctrinal foundations but without strong conviction or critical thinking about them. I noticed I was not maturing anymore, and it was the same for my fellow youth group members. As soon as I was informed about the extension school in Shkodër, I applied without hesitation because it was exactly what I was looking for.

—Edi, an elder in the Lezhë assembly

I needed to deepen my knowledge in certain biblical subjects, which was important for my ministry of the Word in my church. I did not have the luxury of taking time off work to attend the residential school in Rome. The extension school in Shkodër was ideal for my situation.

—Gentian, an elder in the Vlorë assembly

Positive Results

This pursuit of spiritual maturity not only affected the students but also the Albanian church:

The first group has shown good results and all are involved in Christian ministry within their churches. The newly recognized church elders in Lezhë have both benefited from the training.

—Colin, a missionary and elder in Shkodër

I was strongly encouraged by my husband, Edvin, and we both enrolled at the same time. It was our desire to understand more from the Bible and get to know the Lord better. When I graduated, I said something that had resonated within me for many years: “The more I know about God, the more I love Him.” I am also involved with the youth ministry in our local church, and having a better knowledge of God’s Word has helped me to disciple and mentor the youth. Occasionally, I speak at our women’s meeting, and the studies have helped me prepare and deliver better messages.

—Alma, a believer from the Shkodër assembly

The Bible school helped immensely in three main ways: It completely changed my mindset; corrected my biblical understanding of God, the church, and myself; and helped me build good biblical, doctrinal foundations. Now, they are my own convictions and beliefs and not those of others. All this has greatly transformed my ministry of the Word in the church.

—Edi, Lezhë assembly

As a teacher, I visited Shkodër several times and enjoyed not only the classroom interaction but also the fellowship with other believers in various churches. They were hungry to learn and warm in their hospitality. In 2018, the graduation ceremony for this first class was held. It was a time of celebration to the Lord for His help and grace during the process.



Given the length of the IBEI program, many students' life situations change, and we experience a significant dropout rate in Italy. However, in Albania, it was comparably low for this first class. The graduating students had persevered with joy and determination and expressed gratitude and appreciation at the ceremony.

Due to this encouraging feedback, the leadership decided to immediately start a new cycle with about 20 students who came from as far as Gjirokastër, a city in southern Albania, and Kosovo, a neighboring country. Like the students from the first class, these believers desired to grow in their faith so they could more effectively contribute to their churches:

The reason I decided to enroll at the school was to grow more in knowledge of and relationship with God and to serve Him in the local church in various ways. While studying and increasingly knowing more of the Word, I grew in my relationship with God. After the first year, I saw a difference: I was able to better study the Bible, to preach at the church, to help with church maintenance, and to lead the youth ministry.

—Blison, a believer from Tirana

I wanted to know more and more about the Word of God, and I needed Him to transform me by giving me the necessary wisdom to face life's challenges. It also motivated me to take on new tasks in the church, such as summer camps for children and evangelization of the teachers of the city.

—Diana, a believer from Shkodër

A renewed program

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted the training, and some students dropped out. However, this break allowed for a fresh start and improvement in the educational experience using virtual learning. A new coordinator was appointed: Edi. He organizes various aspects of the program with the help of alumni Edvin and Elida.

“ITALY CONTRIBUTED SIGNIFICANTLY TO THE CAUSE OF THE GOSPEL IN ALBANIA DUE TO ITS GEOGRAPHICAL PROXIMITY.”

Triggered by heavier use of online communication and the need for more flexible training for new students in Tirana, we recently launched a part-time online program in Albanian since we already had enough translated material to start. Now, building on the experience and learning resources from the extension school, we are translating some courses and Christian books, more of which are becoming available in the country. We hope to have more students in the next academic year.

Praise the Lord for His work in this country. Pray for the growth of the Albanian church, for IBEI as it provides training, and for the evangelistic and missionary efforts among the unreached people of this region. ■

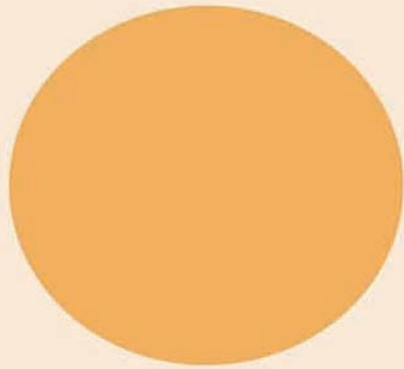


Daniele Pasquale and his wife, Marti, are commended from Littleton Bible Chapel in Colorado. Daniele serves as the principal of IBEI in Italy.

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Above (L-R): The 2018 graduates of IBEI's extension school in Shkodër, Albania, are ready for a lifetime of ministry; These 2019 students minister in their home churches while also studying.



I Cannot Tell

By W. Y. Fullerton

I CANNOT TELL HOW HE WILL WIN THE NATIONS,
HOW HE WILL CLAIM HIS EARTHLY HERITAGE,
HOW SATISFY THE NEEDS AND ASPIRATIONS
OF EAST AND WEST, OF SINNER AND OF SAGE.
BUT THIS I KNOW, ALL FLESH SHALL SEE HIS GLORY
AND HE SHALL REAP THE HARVEST HE HAS SOWN
AND SOME GLAD DAY HIS SUN WILL SHINE IN SPLendor
WHEN HE, THE SAVIOR, SAVIOR OF THE WORLD, IS KNOWN.

