

# **THE DEATH OF MANUEL VASQUEZ**

## The Death of Manuel Vasquez

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Greg Baxter sat dejectedly in the driver's seat of the Land-Rover, parked in the shade of some coconut palm trees to avoid the intense heat of the Filipino sun. Even though it was only mid-morning, his *barong* was soaked. It was an inner debate that caused his perspiring, the same debate that had kept him awake most of the previous night. What was he going to say to Agnes Vasquez? Even now her family members were but a hundred feet away in her simple bamboo and thatch house, preparing her husband's body for the funeral. Greg, having the only vehicle in the area, had readily agreed to take Manuel's body to the cemetery. Manuel had died of tuberculosis despite Greg's prayer for healing. He had died a Christian, led to the Lord by Greg himself just a few days before his death. Agnes had refused to become a Christian at that time. She had instead made Manuel's healing the prerequisite for her own turning to Christ. Now Manuel was dead, and in a few minutes the family would place his body in the Land-Rover. What was Greg to say to Agnes and the rest of the family?

As he waited, Greg thought back over the past few months. Fresh out of seminary, he and his wife, Betty, and their year-old son had arrived in the Philippines, just eight months before. They had been assigned by their mission board to teach in Evangel Theological College, the mission's training school for national pastors and church workers. They had spent the first two months in Cebu City at their mission's headquarters. Here they adjusted to the climate and culture, underwent language study, and prepared for their move to E.T.C. The school, located in a rather remote area of the island and three hours' drive from Cebu City, was under total national administration. Greg and

Betty would be the only missionaries on campus. They arrived at E.T.C. early in March, arranged their living quarters in faculty housing, and continued in intensive language study, aided by one of the Filipino faculty members.

It was during this time that they met Agnes Vasquez. One morning in late March, when Greg was at a meeting, Agnes knocked at the door of their house, selling papaya. Betty used this opportunity to practice her Cebuano, and quickly a friendship developed between them. During that first rather stilted conversation, the women discovered that they were both the same age and had been married the same number of years. Agnes, however, had two small children and was expecting her third in September. From that morning on, Betty often invited Agnes to the house for language practice during the mid-morning break. Since the Vasquezes lived just outside the E.T.C. campus, on the other side of a sugarcane field, it was convenient for Agnes to stop by regularly.

Despite the women's friendship, neither Betty nor Greg was invited to the Vasquezes' house. They discovered early on that this was because Agnes's husband, Manuel, was bedridden with an advanced case of tuberculosis. Twice Greg drove Manuel in the Land-Rover to the clinic ten miles away for X-rays and examinations. Each time, the doctor's prognosis was discouraging: Manuel was dying. Greg used the opportunities that these trips provided to explain the gospel to Manuel. Greg did give him a *Good News New Testament* in Cebuano, and Manuel agreed to read it during his long hours in bed.

June came quickly, and Greg and Betty were thrown headlong into the many activities of E.T.C. Greg had to teach four classes, and Betty had two of her own. As a result, their time with the Vasquezes was greatly reduced, though Betty tried to have Agnes over to the house at least once a week.

One morning in late July, after Agnes had visited their house, Betty found Greg and told him that Manuel was having violent coughing spells. Agnes had asked if Greg would again take Manuel to the clinic for more medicine. Greg immediately dropped what he was doing and rushed Manuel to the clinic. There the doctor gave Manuel some medication for temporary relief but told him that death was close at hand. At most he had but a few weeks to live, and there was nothing more the clinic could do. It was best for him just to go home and try to remain as comfortable as possible.

During the drive back to E.T.C., Manuel told Greg that he had been reading the Bible Greg had given him. He also said that he wished to become a follower of Christ before he died. Filled with joy, Greg pulled the Land-Rover over to the side of the bumpy road. Then and there

Greg led Manuel in a prayer for salvation. Upon arriving back home, Manuel greeted Agnes with the words, "I will soon die, but then I will go to heaven. I have become a Christian." Agnes looked hard at Greg but did not speak. Once the two of them had gotten Manuel back into his bed, she brought Greg outside the house to talk.

"As you know," she began, "Manuel and I have two small children, and I am now big with a third child. Manuel will die soon, but he cannot! How will I and the children live on without him? I am desperate. So now I will make an agreement with God, with you as my witness. If God will heal Manuel and allow him to live, I, too, will become a Christian. But if he dies, I will turn my back on God forever."

Agnes's words, and the earnest look on her face convinced Greg of the sincerity of what she said. He tried, with his limited Cebuano, to explain to her that God could not be bargained with, that perhaps it was God's will for Manuel to die at such a time as this, and that, regardless, she herself needed to become a Christian. His words were in vain. Agnes refused. She ended the conversation with the words, "Will you not pray to God for my husband's healing?" Greg replied that he would seriously consider it and would pray about whether or not he should make that request of God.

Through discussions that day and the next with Betty and the other members of the E.T.C. faculty, and through his own prayer and Bible study, Greg became convinced that Manuel should be prayed for according to the model found in the Epistle of James. They all came to the consensus that Manuel's healing would be a form of "power encounter." It might convince both Agnes and others living in the area of the truth of Christianity. The following day, after fasting and prayer, Greg and two other faculty members went to the Vasquezes' house and explained to Manuel and Agnes what they were going to do. Manuel was greatly encouraged by their words. After the prayer he seemed better already. As they were leaving, Agnes reminded them of her "arrangement" with God. Again, they tried to explain to her the same things Greg had a few days before.

Three days later Manuel died. Greg and Betty heard Agnes's loud wail carry over the sugarcane field. They knew instinctively what had happened and they both began to cry. After composing themselves and saying a short prayer for Agnes and her children, they ran up the dirt road to the Vasquezes' house. By now, other neighbors had also arrived, and a crowd had gathered at the entrance. Inside, Agnes was being comforted by her older sister, Alice, who had arrived from the village the day after their prayer for Manuel's healing. When Greg and Betty came into the house, Alice motioned for Greg to leave. He left Betty there and went outside to wait for her. After a few minutes Betty

came out and explained to Greg that Agnes could not bear to see him right now. Since the prayer for Manuel had failed, Agnes was blaming God and, indirectly, Greg. Not knowing how to respond, Greg returned home. Betty remained to help out as best she could.

The rest of that day was a terrible one for Greg. In between his classes, he spent the time in prayer and Bible reading. The same questions kept repeating themselves over and over in his mind: Should they have prayed for Manuel's healing? Why had God not answered the prayer? Why had Greg come to the mission field at all? What would he say to Agnes? Despite his fervent prayers, no easy answers came. Discussions with the other faculty members did not prove helpful either.

That evening, Betty tried to give Greg further information about Agnes's reluctance to see him. Betty related how she had unsuccessfully tried to explain things to Agnes, who still blamed God and Greg because the prayer for Manuel's healing had failed. Both Greg and Betty expressed their bewilderment at Agnes's reaction. When Greg shared with Betty his questions, together they sought the Lord in prayer. Still no answers came. They went to bed discouraged.

Now it was morning and Greg sat in the Land-Rover, waiting to take Manuel's body to the cemetery. Various responses to Agnes continued to fill his head. The funeral procession moved toward him from the house, carrying the wooden box that contained Manuel's body. Greg got out quickly and opened the tailgate. The box was placed on the floor of the vehicle. Agnes was helped into the passenger's side by Alice, who then sat beside her. Greg got in on the driver's side and closed the door. He turned to Agnes. The widow's eyes, red and swollen from crying and lack of sleep, looked up into his. Greg looked at her, and said . . . .