



Boxes from the Sky

July 24, 1982

Jo Shetler brushed aside her dark hair and shaded her eyes against the strong sun as she looked up into the clear sky. The planes had been arriving all day in this remote valley in the Philippines, bringing visitors and food for the celebrations. She spied another small plane as it crested the tops of the mountains and circled to land on the airstrip the Balangao people had built years before. She waved her arms excitedly. Maybe this plane had the boxes.

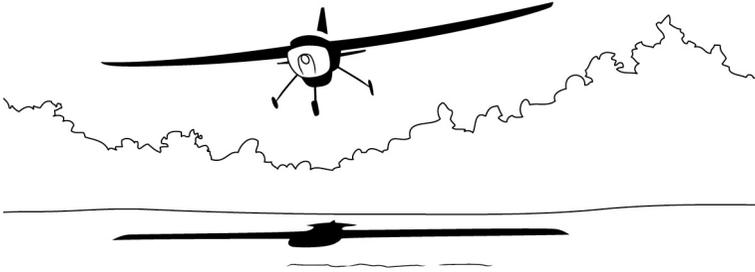
‘Juami!’

Jo turned when she heard her Balangao name and saw Tekla, dressed in a colourful striped skirt and white blouse, coming toward her. Tekla had become a dear friend over the years that Jo had lived in this tropical valley among Tekla’s people.

‘How many more are coming?’ Tekla asked as the plane began its descent.

‘There’ll be eighty Americans at least,’ Jo replied with a smile. ‘And who knows how many hundreds of Balangaos from all the villages.’

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Tekla's brown face lit up with laughter. 'It will be a wonderful party.' Then she turned aside to direct some lost American visitors to the home they would be staying in.

All around them stood wooden houses on four foot stilts, each with a bamboo ladder reaching from the ground to the front door. Thatched roofs topped the bamboo houses and pens full of chickens and pigs occupied the spaces underneath. The village itself was set in the bottom of the deep valley surrounded by terraced rice fields carved out of the mountain sides.

The small plane came to a stop, and Jo went out toward it. The pilot jumped out, waved at her, and then opened the side doors to let his passengers out.

'Good flight, Bob?' Jo asked as she came up behind him.

'Yep,' he replied, assisting an older gentleman down the few steps. 'And,' he added, 'I brought the boxes!'

'May I see them? Now?' Jo asked impatiently

'Only if you promise not to open them until the dedication begins,' Bob teased.



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He climbed into the back of the plane and handed out several medium sized wooden boxes one at a time to Jo, who carefully set them down on the ground. Both pilot and missionary stood and looked at the ordinary crates, thinking of the extraordinary things they carried inside of them.

‘Congratulations, Jo. This has been a long time coming and you must be very pleased,’ Bob said softly.

Jo just nodded, suddenly feeling a surge of tears rising up in her eyes. After a moment she managed, ‘Let’s take them to my house until it’s time. Oh, I can’t wait to see Ama’s face when he sees them.’ Then to hide the tears she bent down to pick up a crate and led the way for Bob and a few recruits to follow her to her house on stilts.

As the procession wound itself through the crowds of people, one figure came sprinting up to them from the far side of the village. He stopped in front of Jo, breathing hard.

‘Is this them?’ Doming asked.

Jo smiled down at her twenty-year-old adopted brother. Like many of his people, he was only five feet tall. Jo handed him her box. He held it with care, his eyes shining.

‘But you can’t open it yet,’ she said. ‘Not till the ceremony. And not until Ama sees them first.’

Doming nodded and gave her a look of understanding. Ama was Doming’s father and Jo’s adopted father. By rights he should see the contents first.

It was late afternoon when everyone had finally arrived. All the baggage the Americans had brought was stowed in their hosts’ houses. The canopies of quilts and palm branches had been set up to shade the seats cut out of the hillside. The aroma of cooking pork filled the air, promising a wonderful feast after the dedication ceremony.

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Jo stood looking out over the hundreds of faces, white and brown, as they settled themselves on the seats under the canopies. She listened to their excited chatter in both Balangao and English, and waved or nodded as many looked her way. How she loved the people that God had allowed her to serve for the past twenty years. People like Tekla who had refused to sacrifice to the spirits long before she had heard about Jesus, knowing that she needed to worship the true God. Or little old Forsan, the spirit medium, who, until her conversion, everyone used to call when they needed to appease the evil spirits. Or Andrea, who had been amazed that Jesus could command the evil spirits to leave and they would go. If Jesus was powerful enough to free her, then he was the one she wanted to follow. And dear Ama, Jo's adopted father. Jo gave him a special smile as he made his way toward her through the crowds. Ama had taken her under his wing when she first arrived. He told her she needed someone to look after her since she was a woman and his people were head hunters. Jo was sure he was wrong, but quickly realised he was right. People wouldn't listen to her, but they would listen to her 'father.' He told her the customs of his people, helped her with the language and even insisted she join his family, her family, for dinner each day. Ama didn't understand the gospel though, and it took many years before he was convinced it was safe to reject the spirit worship of his people to serve God. Now he was an evangelist to the other villages in the area.

Ama stood beside Jo, coming up to just past her shoulder. Dressed in a short sleeved white shirt and dark trousers, Ama held up his arms to quiet the crowd. As the chatter slowly ceased a number of other Balangoa grouped themselves around Jo and Ama. These were all the people who had helped Jo with the translation work. Ama had a programme organised and he stepped up to the microphone to begin.

Custom demanded that all visitors must be introduced, and their host families too. Then, after a number of speeches and songs,



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it finally came time to open the boxes piled nearby. Jo opened the first one, reached in and pulled out a black bound book. Everyone grew silent, so that the only sounds were the humid winds rustling the palm branches and the songbirds of the forests calling and chiming their music. Turning to Ama, she held it out to him, the first copy of the New Testament in his own language. Jo couldn't stop grinning as Ama took it carefully with both hands and held up for all to see.

'This is what we've been waiting for!' he called out, tears leaking out of his eyes. 'And now we will celebrate! Balangao style!'

The crowd erupted into cheering and clapping, and some starting to sing and play gongs. Laughing and crying, Jo reached into the box again and gave out a book to each one who had helped with the translation work over the years. Each accepted his or her copy with care, opening the pages and reading with wonder the stories of Jesus in their own language.

That was just the beginning of a celebration that lasted for two days. Each village that came to the celebration had prepared its own special presentation. Some had written songs to commemorate the coming of God's Word to their valley, others told stories about how they had come to believe and the struggles they had against the spirit world. Jo listened in wonder to those stories. These people had more struggles than she had realised and she praised God for his saving grace and strength among the Balangao people.

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Have you ever thrown a party when you received a Bible as a gift or gone to purchase one at the store? Probably not. While we value God's Word very much, we have so many Bibles all around us that we don't get as excited as the Balangao people did. They were seeing their Bibles for the first time. We, on the other hand, can

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buy Bibles at any bookstore. We can choose ones with different coloured covers; decide if we want one with pictures or notes, or neither. We can buy inexpensive soft cover ones or very expensive leather ones. Many different versions are available, all in English. The King James Version uses older English words and phrases, like reading a Shakespeare play. There are modern versions, like the New International Version, that read more like the books we get from the library. We can also download the Bible onto our mobile phones or iPad. With so many choices why would we get excited just to get a new Bible?

We are very blessed indeed in our country to have God's Word so easily available to us. But it hasn't always been that way, nor is the Bible available in every place in the world. Like the Balangao people in the Philippines, people long ago did not have many copies of God's Word, or even copies of it in their own language. What Jo Shetler did for the Balangao people, many people in history have done for us. Let's find out who they were and how we got our Bible.

