

## My Old Friend Uncle Supee

I recently received word from a friend in Northeast Thailand that my old friend Uncle Supee had passed away. Uncle Supee was a respected village elder who lived in the rural Northeastern Thailand village of *Nah-nai* (or, Inner-field Village) where we spent our first eight years in church-planting ministry. I took this picture of Uncle Supee last year when I returned there for a visit.

Uncle Supee (pronounced Sue-pea) was one of my close friends. In fact, he was one of the very first people I met upon visiting the village in the summer of 1974, before getting permission to build our home and move into the village where we first ministered among the people of Northeast Thailand. The village of *NaaNai* is one of many in the general vicinity where the *Nyaw* people-group reside.

Uncle Supee was a fairly conservative old gentleman who appreciated correctness and maintained high standards in all that he did, be it building a house, working his fields, making a knife handle, or weaving a basket; it was done right or not at all. He was also highly respected among the other villagers, and held the social position of Village Elder. Uncle Supee was also a man of high moral and ethical standards. I can still hear him describe in disgust that which someone had done that didn't seem right to him. His typical response, translated means: *"It's not good, I don't like it."*

As a close neighbor, I spent much time visiting with Uncle Supee, and had numerous opportunities to share the truths of God's Word with him. He always listened, if for no other reason than out of respect for me. As to his understanding, whenever he saw someone visiting me from the vantage point of his porch, he would often saunter over, climb our stairs, and listen quietly or join in. If when the conversation turned towards spiritual things, which it usually did under my guidance, Uncle Supee would sometimes step in and take over for me, explaining the Gospel as a native speaker, as well as I could or better.

In later years, Uncle Supee developed cataract problems. It finally got to the point where the both of his eyes were almost completely clouded over, greatly impeding his ability to function. I tried to arrange an operation for him, but it didn't work out. Nevertheless, I could have tried harder.

I was also close to Uncle Supee's brother-in-law, Headman Giam, who helped tutor me in the intricacies of the complicated, seven-toned *Nyaw* language, related to the Isan language. I remember the time when Headman Giam, who had recently been elected to the position of Village Headman, called a special meeting just so that I could explain the Gospel to the men of the village. *"I know you have brought an important message, but I still don't understand it very well. However, I want to give you an opportunity to explain it to the others,"* were Giam's exact words. Last year, when I returned for a visit, I looked Giam up to pay a visit as well. Upon calling out his name in front of his house, one of Giam's neighbors exclaimed, *"Your too late, Ron; your friend died two months ago!"* I was shocked! Giam, my old friend... Dead? My heart sank. I felt numbed and saddened as I walked away.

Now, Uncle Supee is gone as well. Gone where, I wondered? Of all the times I'd witnessed to and prayed for these two men, to the best of my knowledge, I don't believe they ever accepted God's free gift of forgiveness and eternal life, offered by their Creator who loved them and paid for their sins. Were they rigidly set against the Gospel? Not really, once they truly understood it. However, having grown up in a Buddhist culture, they had an ingrained presumption that the Gospel message was the foreigner's "religious system," meant for the foreigner to practice, and not for them. With that, along with socio-cultural pressure to conform, very few receive Christ. May God have mercy on their souls.

What's the key to successfully reaching the twenty-one million Bible-less masses of Northeast Thailand? ...people like Uncle Supee and Giam, and their families? Not unlike you and me, these also are those for whom Christ also lived, died and rose again. I am convinced that it's God's life-giving Word, translated *accurately* into their own spoken or heart language that can make a difference. For this reason, we are both heavyhearted; yet joyfully labor to bring the Gospel Light of Eternal Hope in an understandable medium to these lost ones. Your partnership and continued support is an integral part of that. **On behalf of the Isan people, thank you for your love and commitment to Him.**



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Health Problem Update: During a recent doctor's checkup, I was made aware of some potentially serious health issues (an enlarged and irregular prostate). Biopsies were taken and the results came back on Dec 17th. Praise the Lord! My urology specialist read me the report: *"Although PSA readings are somewhat elevated, all lab tests are consistent with no cancerous or pre-cancerous prostate tissue."* Praise the Lord! I will now be able to return to Thailand as planned, to print and distribute new Isan scripture books. Pray that I will not be delayed by further health-related complications that will keep me from the task He has assigned for me to do, i.e., finish translating the Isan New Testament, and continue church planting work both here and in Thailand.