

RON & CHERYL MYERS



Going Into All the World
With the Gospel
of Jesus Christ

God's Word For Isan

"God's Word, Accurately Replicated In the Heart
Language of Any People, Is Truly Powerful!"



Church Planting • Bible Translation • Evangelism • Teaching Materials • Rural Development



Ron & Cheryl Myers

GOD'S WORD FOR ISAN NEWSLETTER

February, 2016

"IN WHAT OR WHOM DO YOU PLACE YOUR TRUST?"

Misplaced Faith – Part II

By Ron Myers

Greetings Again in Jesus Name,

In my January communiqué, *Misplaced Faith - Part One*, I wrote to you about one of the things the Thai place their hopes in, i.e., striking it rich by hitting a lottery jackpot. The Thai aren't unique in this of course; for example, just look around here at home. However, the whole Thai society has taken it to the extreme, with myriads of vendors, traversing streets and sidewalks with their lottery-ticket cases as they enter public places of business; offering any-and-all a chance to "make it big," and the vendor making a commission.

Today, I'd like to introduce you to another aspect of misplaced hope in the "Land of a Thousand Smiles." Not just things, like playing the lottery, but the underlying core that their lives revolve around. Whether it's the destitute and struggling peasant class; the working middle class; the business class; the civil servant class; the military class; and even the superabundant elite class... there isn't really much difference, except for external appearances.

All live under the same general hope-fear relationship with the unseen realm of spirits that surrounds them, interacting in a cause and effect relationship, for bad or good; harm or protection. The technical term is *Animism*, and pretty-much everyone lives by these *Animistic* practices. Following are some examples of the ways this is manifested in real life; even asking and receiving winning lottery numbers from the spirit world.

Spirit Recognition Rituals: You might have seen a *Muay Thai* fight on TV. The Thai fighters wear headpieces and flower leis as they silently recite ritualistic prayers. This is done before the fight for protection and good luck; they then bow in four directions, showing veneration for their spirit guide. Upper-arm bands that have received an incantation are worn as part of their protection. In doing so, they are calling on their revered overseeing spirit to grant them safety and victory during the fight. This reflects the ancient practice Thai soldiers do before entering battle with their enemies. (*Western fighters don't realize the spirit realm aspect of these things that they're fooling with when they mimic Muay Thai fighters' prefight traditions.*)

Territorial Spirit Shrines and Posts: The most plenteous and tangible evidence of belief in a spirit world are spirit shrines, edifices that dot the whole Thai landscape. Purported to provide a residence for *territorial owner spirits* or *landlord spirits* who have allowed humans to occupy their land, these are erected as a type of peace offering for spirits to reside in (as opposed to wandering freely and causing misfortune). The average spirit shrine is constructed of cement, poured into molds in three sections: base, pillar, and edifice, which resembles an ornate birdhouse affixed atop the pillar. Sometimes a makeshift ladder is propped up against the little entranceway to ease the coming and going of the unseen spirit residents.

In addition to typical spirit shrines, all older cities have public *Spirit Posts*. Similar to a shrine in function, the difference being that when an old city was established, a slave was killed, then thrown into a freshly dug pit which was then refilled and a large ornate post staked in the ground. An open-sided edifice was erected over the location where residents would come to leave offerings and make requests (done yet today) of the resident spirit of the dead slave. I've even seen mothers bring a young child to pray for various requests. Each location has an assigned human mediator; rural villages do the same.

Superstitious Practices: A Christian lady gave testimony one day that, after having been saved for many years, she found herself still following formerly-held animistic taboos, a holdover from her former unsaved life. These were: not doing certain household tasks on forbidden days for fear of retribution from offended spirits. Among these was weaving cloth on her loom on Thursdays. When she realized she was free, she freely wove on Thursdays, rejoicing that she had been freed from darkness and all of its fears by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Folk Remedies: Keep in mind that some folk remedies actually do work, including certain roots, leaves, herbs, poultices, etc. However, many are based on conjecture or animism, or both; yet they are believed and relied on. While living and ministering in a peasant village, one day a person ran up to our home, shouting out that a preteen child had just shot a playmate on a dare, and please come help.

The young boy's face looked a mess, blackened and dotted with a few scattered pinholes, yet it wasn't as bad as it appeared. He had been shot at close range in his lower face by an old percussion cap black-powder shotgun. The force of the blast was weak, the gun having been loaded with a light load of homemade black powder and tiny birdshot pellets, used to bring down small birds out of trees for food. I was busily loading the boy and his mother in my old VW van to rush him to the provincial hospital for treatment. Then, the dad told me to wait until he fetched a local spirit-healer to come dissolve the poison by blowing softly, while mouthing a magic incantation, calling on a familiar spirit. I told him to never mind, because I was on my way. The boy was fine; no damage done. (*Spirit-healers are also enlisted to heal open wounds and broken bones.*)

Folk Practices: A young married woman had given birth; not having experience, she asked a seasoned grandmother what she needed to do. Granny said; "*First, we must quickly stretch a fishing net across the entranceway of the house. Second, you must only eat certain allowed things, sticky rice, hot pepper paste, and salt... no more. Third, smear yellow cumin oil on yourself to help dry up your insides. Fourth, you must sit on a rack near the fire for six weeks, while your husband keeps the fire stoked and burning slowly.*"

Note: I asked the old grandma later as to why the fish net. She informed me that the net's "eyes" keep watch for malevolent spirits, preventing them from coming inside to do harm to the mother or the newborn infant. This is also why they give their children ugly-sounding nicknames: pig, frog, toad, cat, et al. The idea being, the spirit will be repulsed by the repugnant name; thinking the child must be ugly and stay away.

Seeking Good Fortune: A massive spirit shrine stands in front of a hotel in Nakhon Phanom province, the *avant-garde* place to stay when in town—massive lobby, great rooms, three restaurants, large conference room, and swimming pool—overlooking the Mekong River. The huge seven-story edifice was built in 1997, owned by the provincial's former Minister of Transportation. Their opening was a Gala event. All went well until the crash of the Thai Baht later that year. Guests became more scarce as the economy floundered, also causing the hotel to flounder. Every morning, both the hotel owner and his wife stood before the large spirit shrine. They placed food offerings, burning incense, and flower leis. Facing the shrine with clasped hands, they prayed silently, asking for good fortune before the *property landlord spirit*. In later years, things got better and they began to thrive, but their morning ritual continued. This was a massive shrine, sitting alongside the hotel's entranceway. The original owners finally sold their hotel to a Taiwanese hotel corporation. I see them around town on occasion, whereupon we exchange greetings.

Fear of Departed Spirits: Auntie Jume, a new Christian afflicted with terminal TB, died two months after her conversion. Family and friends arranged a traditional funeral according to their cultural norms. When I learned of Auntie Jume's passing, I had already transitioned from my village ministry to start the Isan translation project in Nakhon Phanom city. Fortunately, the news came just before her funeral, so I made the 36 kilometer trip into the rural countryside to attend. As per custom, the family had hired a loudspeaker system that played 24-hour music, interspersed with spots where people spoke. Auntie Jume's husband, Uncle Kaew, asked me to say a few words, which I did, reminding the village of Auntie Jume's recent decision to trust Christ. This couple was close friends, since we lived across from them during our eight-years living in the village.

After I had spoken and the Isan music had begun again, Auntie Jume's sibling took opportunity to approach me about her older sister. "*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, is all she talked about over the last two months, ever since she believed,*" her sister said. She continued; "*And, it's amazing; she is really gone! Because, it was totally quiet last night as we were all huddled together in the house, for fear that her spirit might come tapping or knocking on something, to tell us that she was hungry and wanted to be fed... Besides that, I had a dream last night where I saw my sister way up high, dressed in a beautiful bright and shining white robe, all young and pretty again.*" (Note: I believe that God had given her this vision as a testimonial.)

Removing a Corpse: I was a bystander at a village funeral one day, standing outside the home with others. I watched as friends and relatives of the deceased maneuvered the roughly-sawn wooden casket through the home's entranceway, out onto the low porch. There, they passed it to others standing below. Just as the casket left the porch... CRACK! I was startled by a nearby gunshot. Yikes! What's that all about, I wondered, assuming some drunken villager must be feeling his oats. I then spotted a man standing beside the porch, holding an old percussion cap black-powder shotgun. Nearby, I saw a small ladder made of pencil-sized strips of bamboo, leaning up against the low porch. I asked a friend what that was about. "*We don't want the spirit of the deceased hanging around bothering people,*" my friend explained, "*so we scare it off with the gunshot.*" He went on to explain that the small bamboo ladder is there to help the spirit of the deceased descend from the house.

Choosing a Cremation Spot: Like the above scenario, there is an adjoining tradition, also based on animistic practices. When a family member dies, the departed spirit is asked where he or she would like to be cremated. The choice is limited to the 8-10 foot diameter ash pile, left from previous cremations. A village elder tosses a raw egg a few feet up into the air over the thick ash pile; again, and again. When the egg breaks upon landing (usually hitting a bone or rock), the deceased has signified that's where it wants the funeral pyre to be constructed. They conclude; if the spirit moves on happily, it will be less likely to pester the living. (Note: Before passing, some request to be cremated in their fields, which I've also witnessed.)

Rice Granary Harvest: I happened to walk past a rice granary on an open area behind a house. As I passed by, from inside I heard a distinct THUMP... THUMP... THUMP! Calling out, the owner emerged. "*What are you doing?*" I asked. The man quietly mouthed that the village landlord spirit hadn't yet given a designated day when the final aspect of harvesting could begin ...saying that he was doing it in secret so the village spirit wouldn't see him and retaliate with a period of bad fortune.

You can see by these examples how the spirit world plays an integral part of people's daily lives in Thailand. They are not required to be logical, or make sense, but are passed down intact from past generations. Sadly, many Evangelical Christians here in the West are not immune to this Animistic mentality. When we returned home on our first furlough, I was dumbfounded when I heard those whom I thought were solid Christians making statements like; "*Things have not been going well recently... God must be upset with me for some reason.*" Wow! I was under the impression that I'd left the whole animistic, heathen mindset behind in Thailand. Yet, I heard the same sort of talk right here, among Christians! God is *not* like an evil spirit who delights in pulling the rug out from under His people, or playing malevolent tricks on us. No, not ever!

God's Word clearly states that, we are accepted in the Beloved One: The Lord Jesus Christ: "*To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the Beloved.*" (Ephesians 1:6) Also, His thoughts towards us are good, and not evil: "*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end.*" (Jeremiah 29:11)

On a different note, I've been in touch with Pastor Pitak, my translation assistant. He told me that the proofreading process is nearly complete. Three members of the proofreading team have finished, and the fourth member, who is doing a very thorough and conscientious job, is nearly finished. This is great news, because upon my soon return, we will be able to make any adjustments or corrections to the Isan New Testament. Then, after formatting the text into Bible-sized page format, we can publish and distribute God's Word in the heart language of the over twenty-five million inhabitants of Thailand's vast Isan Region... comprising one-third (1/3) of Thailand's total population! [Note the dark green area of the Thailand map at the top-right corner of the first page.]

Cheryl and I want to thank each of you who contribute to our financial support. We also want to make everyone aware of a unique opportunity to have a part in this important Bible project... one of major significance. If you or your church group sense God's leading to participate, gifts of any amount should be designated as "*Isan New Testament Printing Project*" sent to our mission sending agency at the name and address seen in the dark blue strip below. Acknowledgements and/or tax-deductible receipts will be sent.

By God's Grace and for His Glory,



Ron & Cheryl Myers
God's Word for Isan: www.IsanBible.org