

*Come and see what God has done,
how awesome his works in man's behalf!*

*He turned the sea into dry land,
they passed through the waters on foot--
come, let us rejoice in him.*

*He rules forever by his power,
his eyes watch the nations--
let not the rebellious rise up against him.*
(Psalm 66:5-7)

These are the verses that served as my Scriptural invitation to visit Almolonga, Guatemala. Featured on the *Transformations I* video as a community that had experienced amazing revival and transformation through the power of prayer, I wanted to “come and see” with my own eyes and experience what truly could happen if God’s people called out to Him and sought Him for transformation.

It was my prayer that God would open my eyes and fill my heart with renewed faith and vision. I want to truly believe for all God has for His people—and never again settle for anything less.

Background of Almolonga

Almolonga is a city of 19,000 people that has been completely transformed through prayer over the last 20-25 years. Once known for idolatry, drunkenness, poverty, and abuse, the city is now known for prosperity and blessings at the hand of God. Where there were once more than 30 bars, there are now more than 30 churches. The four jails (which were once not enough to hold all the prisoners) are now closed because there is no need for them. The police carry no guns; they carry only whistles to direct traffic. This is especially unusual for this area because most banks and stores are guarded by police and security people with loaded rifles—something you see all over Guatemala.

But most amazing is the healing of the land. Almolonga is now known as the “Valley of Miracles,” and the people now ship vegetables of amazing size and quality all around the world. Almolonga is the complete fulfillment of **2 Chronicles 7:14-15**:

*If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my
face and turn from their wicked ways,
then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin
and will heal their land.*

Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place.

Whereas in the American Church we might want to know what program they developed, what books they read, or what strategies they used effectively to reach this place of transformation, the people of Almolonga have nothing to offer along those lines. They can only offer their example of humility and prayer, their sacrifices and their absolute dependence upon God. As Pastor Moriano Riscajché emphasized to us (the pastor God used to begin the transformation process),

there is no program. It is all about humbling ourselves and praying. That is the message we heard over and over again. That's it; there's nothing more to try to figure out. If we are praying and seeking God alone, He will show us everything we need to know about the path to transformation.

Almolonga, Our Destination

I traveled to Almolonga with three other people, including ten-year-old Nathanael. The first night we arrived, we took a quick drive through Almolonga, just to look around a bit. Our plan was to spend the entire day on Saturday, walking the streets and visiting the marketplace. As Omar (my family friend from Guatemala City) drove us through the town, it was interesting to hear his perspective as one who really knew very little about why we were so determined to come to Almolonga. Omar's family has lived in Guatemala for generations, so he knows the people and its culture. He was immediately impressed with the prosperity of this mountain community in an area that is known for extreme poverty (which we witnessed as we drove through town after town in the mountains). And he was absolutely amazed at the farming techniques the people were using—and wondered how they had learned them. It was clear to Omar that Almolonga was different than anything he had ever witnessed in Guatemala.

This was a relief for me because very quietly I had harbored a concern—perhaps due to my own lack of faith. I had wondered, *What if the video is exaggerated even slightly? What if Omar could easily explain this away? What if Almolonga wasn't truly all that different from other cities around it? What if this is just another claim of revival that is really only man's perceptions or exaggeration?*

All of those fears and concerns were alleviated as soon as we drove into Almolonga. You could sense the difference immediately, and the presence of God would grow stronger for us as we spent more time there. There was nothing about this trip that was even a slight disappointment!

First Prayer of Blessing

Our first interaction with the people of Almolonga came the first night as we drove through the streets. We stopped on the edge of town to watch a family working in their field. Eventually the children came running to us as we waved and took pictures. We were able to interact with them a little in Spanish, but the most profound moment came as we turned to get back into the car. The first words spoken to us in English suddenly burst out of a ten-year-old boy. He surprised us by calling out, "God bless you."

As we returned to the car, Nathanael summarized how we were all feeling with the quote of the trip: "***Wow, I just really need to get out more!***" We laughed, but all agreed. We all need to get out more and see what God is truly doing in His Kingdom.

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The Market Place

We were eager to return the next morning to the market place and not miss anything, so we arrived at 7:00 a.m. Within about an hour, we were in the midst of a whirlwind of activity as truck after truck began pulling up, overloaded with enormous, abundant vegetables. The people began unloading the trucks and literally running with huge loads on their backs of cabbages, carrots, radishes, beets, and other vegetables.

We noticed the dramatically different work ethic from what we had experienced in the other towns. The people were hustling, carrying unbelievably heavy loads, and doing so with great joy. This was obviously not a burden to them, and there was great excitement and energy all around us. Even the children were involved in the market. We observed the unity of the families and the wonderful respect and obedience of the children.

We began to see the dramatic sizes of produce that we had seen in the video. Again, nothing was exaggerated! The cabbages were the size of basketballs, the carrots as long and wide as a man's arm, the beets the size of softballs, and radishes the size of your fist. We were overwhelmed at what we were seeing. And it wasn't just the size; it was the abundance! I have never seen so much produce at one time. Piles and piles; bag after bag.

It was hard to believe that all of this was coming from the small plots of land we saw in the valley. Each of these plots of land, farmed by individual families, produced several cycles of crops—apparently a 1,000 percent increase over what they had previously known. As a comparison, we looked at the vegetable in the other cities nearby, including Quetzaltenango, which was just two miles away. We bought carrots in Almolonga and Antigua, just to compare. Joy wells up in your heart as you see the *dramatic difference*.

Interactions with the People of Almolonga

We had so many wonderful interactions with the people on the streets and in the farm fields of Almolonga. I noticed two prevalent and consistent characteristics of the people: *humility* and *joy*. Without exception, these people were humble servants filled with the joy of the Lord. That has become the prayer for my own life—that people will one day see that reflected in me as well.

We also were impressed with how the people gave all the glory to God for the things He had done in their lives. As Nathanael observed, “Everyone has a story of what God has done for them.” When we asked the farmers about their crops, no one spoke of “farming principles.” They all immediately pointed up to God and gave Him the praise for their abundance. I thought about the marketplace and businesses in America, and how rare it is that God given *all* the glory and credit. We usually talk first about our marketing strategies or our skills and production techniques. Perhaps that is because we base our business on those things first, and then ask God to bless it. Perhaps we have not experienced such incredible abundance that we can give glory to God alone.

As we walked the streets, people seemed eager to meet us, and several stopped and prayed for us. Although we did not understand everything that they were praying, we sensed the power and presence of God each time. Here are a few examples of how people showed us love by what they said or prayed:

- ❑ A younger man in the market, when we asked if he would pray for us: “That is our work. Our work is to pray!” He then prayed a very long, moving prayer for us.
- ❑ Older farmer in the field: As he shared his story of his physical healing that now allowed him to work in his fields, he began to weep. As he wept and gave glory to God, he said he was feeling an increase of God's presence, and wanted to bless us. He reached out and touched each of our heads and prayed.
- ❑ An older man in the market: “It's the power of God! You have to get on your knees and humble yourself.”
- ❑ Family in the field: All of the children were working together to bag carrots. The father came up and joyfully presented each of us with large carrots as a gift from his field.
- ❑ Abraham (youth pastor and son of Pastor Riscajché): When asked if the people in Almolonga, in their prosperity, become materialistic—he was surprised at the question.

“Oh, no! Never! Everyone gives glory to God. *Americans* become materialistic.” When we asked Abraham if there was unity among the churches, he was also surprised. “Of course, all 30-some churches are completely united!” He had known nothing different during his entire life as a pastor’s son.

- ❑ Policeman in the market: We asked why he didn’t carry a gun (so common in Guatemala), he responded: “We have no need for guns in Almolonga.” He then blew his whistle for us as a demonstration of the only thing the police use in the city.

Final Demonstration of God’s Wonderful Favor

One of our final prayers was that we would be allowed to bring home some carrots from Almolonga through U.S. Customs. Nathanael, Joy, and Jenny were able to do so a few days earlier because the Agricultural Inspection line "closed" just as they got there (in Atlanta). So they went on through without having their bags checked.

I went through Houston Customs, and I was praying for God’s favor as we started our descent to the airport. Amazingly, God orchestrated for me to have a customs official who had heard of the “land that is blessed” in Guatemala. So she pulled her co-workers and supervisor into a discussion about my carrots—and ultimately I was allowed to bring them in as well!

This final answer to prayer about the trip really "sealed the deal" for me. God was so good and showed us such favor. But there was one more specific answer to come: I asked God if He would preserve my carrots for a year so that I could show them to people—and He gave me above and beyond. My carrots lasted in my refrigerator for 18 months!

Principles and Observations of Transformation

As I have reflected on our trip, there are some key principles about revival and transformation that I observed from the people who are truly immersed in community transformation:

- ❑ When God’s transformational power and presence are present, it cannot be denied in the both the physical and spiritual realms. When we showed people in Antigua (another city in Guatemala) the difference between their carrots and the carrots of Almolonga, they could only be impressed and amazed. They could offer no other explanation. And when a place has been spiritually transformed, you cannot deny the joy and peace of the people. Without even being able to speak the language, you can still see it on their faces and sense it in their lives. God’s presence is undeniable when it is truly filling a place.
- ❑ The principles of 2 Chronicles 7:14-15 must be applied and obeyed if we are to hope for the outcome of a healed land and the attentiveness of God to our prayers. It is not about the latest church growth book, a great marketing strategy, or just the right programming. It is about the heart. It is about repentance, brokenness, praying, turning, and seeking God.
- ❑ Revival is not always evidenced or defined by powerful worship music, profound sermons, miraculous wonders or large congregations. Although all those things may be present, they are not necessarily the indicators of revival. God specifically had us attend a worship service that consisted of just prayer and a simple message from God’s Word. There was no music, although instruments were present—perhaps used at the evening services. But we did not witness that, and we were instead in the midst of a very small, quiet, almost subdued congregation. True transformation is evidenced in the community and all of society, and not just within the confines of the church. When a society has been

transformed, it touches families, government, the marketplace, the land, and individual hearts.

- Although Pastor Riscajché prayed over us and blessed us, it is not about going and receiving an anointing from somewhere else and bringing it back. That may happen, and we may sense that God did that for us. But true revival and transformation comes when we ourselves are willing to follow the 2 Chronicles 7:14 principles. This trip was about going and seeing for ourselves, and then allowing the Lord to increase our faith and vision for transformation. We must still humble ourselves and pray, seek God on our own behalf, and allow for our own desperation for Him to grow in us. This is not about receiving an instantaneous gift to bring back. Again, it is about our own hearts.
- Prayer does not need to be complicated or orchestrated in any particular way. We were surprised to learn that they pray only for about an hour in the middle of the night, but that is a typical standard for their corporate prayer. I admit I was expecting to hear more about all-night prayer meetings, 24-hour prayer vigils, etc. Obviously the prayer has become a constant lifestyle for them in their own lives and in their families. Again, it is not about the time spent and the prayer techniques used—it is about the heart!
- Sacrifice is required for complete obedience. Pastor Riscajché made it clear that revival and transformation have a personal cost attached to it, but it is well worth the sacrifice when God responds in blessing and abundance. For Pastor Riscajché, it nearly cost his life, as in the early days there was persecution of believers and direct death threats against him. But all that he sacrificed has been fully restored in physical and spiritual blessings.
- The core value of a revived and transformed person is humility. It is only through humility that we repent and declare our dependence upon God. It requires a constant heart attitude of seeking God for that humility, asking Him to reveal sin, and choosing to put ourselves completely under His rule and authority. Walking in absolutely humility is what attracts the presence of God. God cannot resist a lowly, contrite, and humble heart—as He says in Isaiah 57:15:

*For this is what the high and lofty One says--
he who lives forever, whose name is holy:
"I live in a high and holy place,
but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly
and to revive the heart of the contrite."*

My prayer is that I learn to walk in humility and fully embrace the transformational principles of 2 Chronicles 7:14 for my own life.

--Carol Madison
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