

L'Abri is Born

At the end of the last lesson, we were at the point when the Schaeffers had been notified that they were being thrown out of Switzerland. That notification came on February 14. They were told that they would have to be out of their canton and out of Switzerland in six weeks. Of course, they were tremendously crushed when they received this news. They thought that God was leading them to start a new work, or rather continue a work in which people from every nation would come to their home in the mountains and learn God's truth and come to know Him and walk in His ways. They were sure that they had been praying for a life of reality, for a demonstration of God's existence. Their response, when they received this news, according to Edith was this, "How could this staggering blow be in line with the life of reality we have been praying for?"

It is a good question. Yet as we review what happened, we can see that this staggering blow was actually the best, most dramatic, possible way in which they could be given the reality that they had been praying for. That is what I want to consider today. We will consider how they were given that reality they had been praying for. They were able to see what God can do in a seemingly humanly impossible situation. In a way, it was rather like the situation of Gideon. He had to fight the forces of Midian, and God kept cutting down his resources until he only had 300 men left and basically no weapons except their pitches. Yet God used them to overthrow the armies of Midian. This staggering blow put the Schaeffers in the situation of seeing that they had no resources to do the work that God was calling them to do. They would have to stand like Gideon and see what God was going to do.

As I said at the end of the previous lesson, they voted as a family, including Frankie, who was two, that rather than trying to contact everybody they knew to try to do something about this situation, such as writing to congressmen back in the United States, they decided to pray that God would solve their problems for them. So they carried on with their work right after they received the letter. In the account of this staggering blow in *The Tapestry*, it tells that they carried on serving tea to a group of boys who were coming to their house for a discussion and who stayed late into the night. Edith commented how in that situation Francis was able to put aside his anxieties and pray that God would help him give answers. She said that that night there seemed to be a special power of the Holy Spirit on him as he answered those boys' questions.

How did God begin to answer their prayers? I will suggest a series of ways in which He did. The first was that immediately after they prayed that God would solve this problem for them, and they prayed one by one, Francis said that it had come to his mind that they ought to contact one of their Swiss Protestant friends and tell him what was happening. They contacted Misseure Andre, the lawyer. It was important that they did, because he was able to discover by reading the letter carefully, since his French was much better than theirs, that the letter they received was predated and they only had 36 hours left to appeal this command to leave the country. If they had not gone to see him, they would not have known that, and their appeal would have been handled late. His response was that such a command could not happen in Switzerland. It was a country with freedom of religion. It was impossible.

Then they believed they ought to see the American consul in Geneva. This was the second way God answered their prayers. He comforted them with His Word as they traveled on the train. Edith wrote in *The Tapestry* about the passage that she read from Isaiah 30:17 and 20-21. God used these words to comfort her tremendously. Isaiah 30:17 says, "A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill." These words were a great encouragement to her that God was going to give them their home on the mountains, despite their seemingly impossible situation. The next verses, Isaiah 30:20-21, say, "Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them."

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’” That is a wonderful promise from God that difficulties would come their way, yet He was going to show them the way and enable them to walk in it. So that was the second way that God comforted them. As they were traveling on the train to Geneva, these words from the book of Isaiah were a tremendous comfort, and they shared their readings with each other.

The third answer to their prayers as they began to see God unfolding things for them was that when they got to the consulate in Geneva, they discovered that the consul was a high school friend of Schaeffer’s from Germantown High School in Pennsylvania. They had not seen each other for all those years, but they had been in the same class in the same high school in Germantown many years before. He said that he would do whatever he could to help them. That seemed to be a wonderful answer to their prayers, too. In that situation, in that time, there was a person who had a personal interest in them going back all those years.

The fourth thing was the discovery of what they needed in order to be able to stay. This was not so much an answer to prayer, but rather a setting out of what they had to pray for. They were made aware of how huge the mountain was that had to be climbed in order to find an answer to their situation. First they needed to find a house, which they had to rent or buy. It had to be in a village in a different canton. They had been living in Champéry, in the Roman Catholic canton of Valais. Second, they had to gain village approval to live in whatever village they hoped to live in. Third, they would have to have a financial arrangement to buy the house completed by the time the application was sent in. Fourth, the local commune of Ollon in that area would have to agree that they could stay there, and it would have to apply to the canton for them to live in that commune. Fifth, the federal government would have to agree that it was all right for them to stay, and it would have to annul the verdict that had been given against them that they had to leave Valais and leave the country because of the religious influence they had had in Champéry. So we may say that, metaphorically, they had a huge mountain to climb in terms of the things they had to accomplish in a short amount of time. That was what they needed, what they had to pray for. Their friends were able to help them see all the things they were required to accomplish.

They began looking desperately for a house. Houses in Switzerland are incredibly expensive, and they were even then. The real estate agent they went to only had houses that were deluxe houses, and he said he had nothing to offer to fit the kind of budget they had to work with. You remember that their budget was already going to be shortened because they had just heard from the Independent Mission board that their salary was going to be lowered. They started looking and were not able to find anything for rent that was in their means. They were left with only two days to go.

Edith recounted what happened at this stage. They were growing increasingly discouraged. They were up in the village of Chesieres, which is between the Huemoz and Villars. They were looking for houses when suddenly somebody called them across the street. It was Professor and Madam Czerny, the couple from Czechoslovakia who had been working in Switzerland and had become Christians through the work of the Schaeffers. They said, “We need help,” and Edith’s response was, “We are the ones who need help, not you.” Yet God taught them both at this time a very important lesson. They were overwhelmed in this time with their own situation, but God gave them something to do. It was a reminder from Him that if there was going to be provision from Him, then He was the one who was going to give it. In the moment, however, they had something to do.

The Czernies were in a desperate situation. She was seven months pregnant and had been feeling very ill. They simply wanted help. At the moment they went over to talk to them, Madam Czerny’s water broke. So Edith had to arrange for a taxi to take her to the hospital and see a doctor. Edith was told that she had to go with her. Remember that this was the second to the last day that they had to look for a place to live. Yet she went rushing

off to the hospital with Madam Czerny, because Edith realized that the Czernies' need at the moment was much greater than theirs. This decision turned out to be quite important in their lives.

Edith went with Madam Czerny to the hospital, and the baby was born that night. Edith stayed with her in the hospital overnight and had a completely sleepless night. Francis had gone back to the village of Champéry to look after the family, with their last day of house hunting before them. The baby eventually died two weeks later. Edith recounted the tragic story of the grandmother who lived in Czechoslovakia who obtained a permit to leave Czechoslovakia to see her grandson. When she heard that the baby had died, the government revoked the permit, and she hanged herself, because she was not prepared to carry on living in Czechoslovakia in the state that it was at that time. It was a situation of tremendous oppression and very little freedom. So this family was in tremendous need. As those next few weeks went by, Edith saw how important it was for her to have let go of her desperate search for a house to help this couple.

They were left with only the final day for looking for a house. Francis actually did not go looking at all. He went back and started packing their belongings in their home in Champéry. He thought it was hopeless and there was no point in looking any more. Edith decided to carry on looking once more, and she gives the whole story in both the books *L'Abri* and *The Tapestry*. She went back to the village of Villars and had it all figured out in her mind what she was going to do. She went desperately looking around. She was pushed out of somebody's house who had a house for rent for far more than they could handle, and she broke down in tears. She tried to explain her situation. She had gone for the night without sleep, so she was really near the end of her tether, feeling absolutely desperate. As she was walking down the street, not even looking up because she had been weeping so much and her eyes were swollen and red, she heard a voice calling out, "Madam Schaeffer, Madam Schaeffer." It was her real estate agent, Misseure Gabuz, asking if she had found anything. She replied that they had not. This was the man who had only had the deluxe houses. He said, "I have a house now for you to look at." So he took her down the valley to the village of Huemoz.

One thing that is important to notice is that they knew nothing about this village. She could not see the view. It was completely foggy when she arrived to look at the house. He showed her around, and she liked the house. As they drove off, she asked, "How much is the rent?" He said, "It is not for rent. It is for sale." She thought, "Oh, no. That is impossible." So she got on the bus and went down the valley, and then changed buses and went up the other side to Champéry. She was too frightened even to tell her husband that the house was for sale and not for rent. Francis was a fierce man in some ways. Yet she thought that the Lord had shown it to her, so when she went to bed that night she prayed, "Lord, if You want us to buy this house, please send \$1000 by tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock." That was when she was going to take him back to look at this place with the family. That is an amazing prayer to pray, but it was obviously one the Lord had put on her heart.

They went off the next morning to look at the house. They met the postman coming up from the village post office on his skis. There had been an avalanche in Champéry at that time and most of the roads were still out. So the post was being delivered on skis. As they went down to catch the train, they opened their letters, and they had a letter from a couple called the Salisburys.

Let me read a little bit of what Helen and Art Salisbury said in their letter. Helen wrote, "I have a story to tell you that will interest you. Art came home from work three months ago with a check that was a surprise. The company paid all the insurance premiums for men who had worked a certain length of time and made it retroactive. We went to look at houses to invest in, and as we looked at beams in a likely small house, I said, 'Art, look at those termites. Does that not remind you of the verse in Matthew that says not to lay up treasures on earth where moths and rust corrupt?' Art said yes it did. I said, 'Would you be willing to take that literally and invest this money in heaven by giving it to the Lord's work somewhere?' He replied, 'Yes, Helen, I would.'" She went on to tell of their praying for clear certainty as to where to use this money for a period of

three months. Then in her letter she said, “Now tonight we are convinced we should send the enclosed to you to buy a house that will always be open to young people.” The amount of the check was exactly \$1000. What else was amazing was that when they came to this conclusion, it was when they were about to go to bed. They became so convinced that they ought to send the money right away that they got dressed and went out at night and posted the letter. It arrived in time for the answer to Edith’s prayer. So God provided a house for them.

When they saw it that morning, it was still shrouded in fog. They still had no idea how beautiful the situation was. They had no idea at all, because when it is foggy in Switzerland, it can be completely foggy. The valley will fill up with fog solidly, and you cannot see anything because you are right in the clouds. So a house was provided. The money was provided in answer to Edith’s prayer. When she opened this letter and read it to Francis, she told him that the house was for sale and not for rent. She told him that she had prayed the night before that this money would arrive that morning. So they became convinced that they ought to buy the house. They told the real estate agent right away that they would buy it.

Then next answer to their prayers happened when they came in to fill in the application for the permit to stay and have the expulsion overturned. The official who was to do it for them in the canton of Vaud, which is a Protestant canton where Huemoz is, turned out to be an extremely good friend of Mr. X, the man who had been converted through them in Champéry and who was the reason why they were being thrown out. So they had somebody who was on their side, who was put in that place by the Lord. When Mr. X went to him and told him his story, the man was happy to fill out as positive an application for them as he possibly could.

Then the time came for them to move out. Everything had been sorted out just in time. Edith recounted their packing and just crossing the river Rhone by midnight, which was when they had to leave the canton of Valais. She said it gave them a tremendous sense of what it is like to be a refugee. They simply had to leave their former home. Then over the next years there were many refugees who came to L’Abri from many different parts of the world.

They had tremendous problems getting out because of the avalanches. The moving van could not come. A man turned up with a jeep to help them get across the field. Swiss law is extremely strict. If the authorities had found anything at all, the Schaeffers would have been finished. The police made it quite clear to them that they had to go. Everything in Switzerland is absolutely precise, including the law. If you try to catch a train anywhere, the train arrives early so it can depart at the second it is time. That is true everywhere in Switzerland, and everything is like that.

I can tell you a story about how committed the Swiss are to having people keep their laws. A friend told me this. He had some American friends who were living in Geneva. They hung their washing out one Sunday. They got a notice from the city council the next week saying they must not hang their washing out on Sunday because it is against the law in Switzerland. Being Americans, committed to total independence and freedom to do whatever you want to do, they thought that was ridiculous. So they hung their laundry out the next Sunday. They got another letter saying that if they continued to hang their washing out they would be asked to leave the country. The Swiss are extremely legalistic. They do everything in an exact manner.

The Schaeffers had to leave the canton, and even Switzerland, by the 31st. The only way for that not to happen was if they could find somewhere to live in another canton by that time and get permission from the village in that canton for them to live there. The village would have to apply to the commune of Ollon for them to live there. The canton would have to agree that they could live there. That all had to be set in motion before the 31st, otherwise they would have to be out of the country. In other words, in order to fill in the appeal, which had to be sent off by a certain time, they had to have all this set in motion before the 31st. They had to have somewhere to go. Otherwise they had to be out of the country that night.

It was the federal government that had said they had to leave, although it had come from the canton of Valais and the commune in which they lived because of the local bishop. That was how they discovered what had happened. In order to even be able to appeal to have any possibility to have their expulsion overturned, they had to have somewhere else to live in another canton that was happy to have them. Even then it was not certain that the federal government would overturn their expulsion. Yet they had to be out of that canton by that time, and if they had not had somewhere else to live, they would have had to be out of the country by March 31 at midnight.

They were sure that God wanted them to do this work there. They believed it was what He was calling them to do. They believed that the money arriving was an answer to their prayers. It was not enough for the down payment, but it was a sign to them that God wanted them to be there. Over the next few weeks they had to pray for the whole of the down payment to come. They did so, and it arrived in time. Even at the point when they paid the down payment, they did not know whether the federal government would set aside their expulsion order. In order to stay in Switzerland at all, they had to have another canton, another commune, and another village happy to have them. They had to have a house and all of those things in place. They had to have the village apply to the commune saying it wanted the Schaeffers to live there. The commune had to agree with that and apply to the canton for them to live there. All those forms had to be filled in by the time they were to be thrown out of the country. That was why they had those terrible deadlines. If they had not found a house by a certain time, then they could not get all the paperwork done that had to be done by March 31. So they had to be across that river by March 31, but they also had to have permission to live in the new location. It all depended on the federal government agreeing that the order expelling them from the country would be set aside. They had to wait several months to find out whether that would happen.

William Farel, the Reformer, was the man who was instrumental in encouraging Calvin to stay in Geneva. Calvin had said that wild horses would not drag him back to Geneva after the first time he served there. Farel was the one who convinced him that he ought to stay in Geneva and bring the Reformation to bear in that city. Farel was not an organizer and administrator in the way Calvin was. Farel was a preacher. He was the one who went to the villages in the canton of Vaud, preaching the Gospel. He had an itinerant ministry. The Reformation was not only people like Calvin who were preaching in big cities like Geneva, establishing a theological college, and all of the other things Calvin did to train pastors. There were also people who traveled around preaching the Gospel in many places. That was why the Schaeffers called their study room "Farel House." Farel had preached in those villages, Huemoz and the other villages of the area.

They moved in just after midnight on March 31, 1955. One could say that L'Abri had begun at that point. At breakfast the next morning, which Edith called their first L'Abri meal, there were quite a few people with them. Right from the beginning there were three or four people with them. Some had helped them move. Some had been staying with them in Champery. It was quite chaotic. There was some furniture that came with them, and they had some of their own furniture, which they brought over from Chalet Bijou.

They moved in after midnight, and the next morning as they sat down for breakfast, they saw for the first time the beauty of the place that God had given to them. It is incredibly beautiful. It is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. The view from there is unbelievably beautiful. The village of Huemoz hangs right on the mountainside. It is several thousand feet up the side of the valley. It is far above the level where they are growing grapes in the lower sides of the valley. Just below the village of Ollon and slightly above the village of Ollon, there are vineyards on the sides of the mountains on terraced fields with stone walls. The road is incredibly steep going up the mountain, with a series of hairpin bends.

Huemoz is a tiny village, but the view is unbelievably beautiful. It looks across to the mountain across the valley, which is called the Dents du Midi, which means "the teeth of midday." It stands up like a series of

jagged teeth against the sky. You can see far into the Alps into France with Mont Blanc in the distance when the view is clear. That mountain is covered in snow all year round. It is one of the highest mountains in all of Western Europe. There is a wonderful range of mountains right across the line of vision from Huemoz. On the opposite slopes of the valley there are pine forests everywhere. It is incredibly beautiful.

The work of L'Abri had begun. They had their first breakfast. It is amazing the way God brings people from the very beginning. When the English L'Abri began in 1971, it was exactly the same way. The first day they moved into the old manor house there, just before we arrived, a whole group of people came. Some were with them and some just turned up. In England there was a man who was into Zen Buddhism on the first day. They had just arrived, and a man with a bald, shaved head poked his head in the window and asked what was happening. He became a Christian over the next few weeks. That was how their work started, with some people to take care of from the very beginning.

They moved in on a Saturday, April 1. They had their first church service in the living room of Chalet les Melezes the next day. The name of their chalet, les Melezes, refers to a kind of pine tree, although the work was called L'Abri right away. About nine or ten people assembled for their first church service in the living room, including Mr. X, who came over from Champery for the service there. Edith described the sermon that Francis preached that day. The title was "Put Your Feet in Jordan," which was an appropriate sermon for the situation. They were beginning something completely new and did not know yet whether they would be able to stay. Yet they were determined to put their feet in the Jordan. They were going to start doing the work, believing that God had called them to it. They had to live by faith. His opening Scripture was Habakkuk 2:4, which says, "The just shall live by faith." He contrasted people who live out of their own strength and in their own pride with those who live by faith and the power of God and the work of God. That was a challenge to them at the beginning of the work.

Edith said that the real work of L'Abri was when new people started coming, and not just people who had moved with them. Their daughter Priscilla had started at the university in Lausanne, which is near Lake Geneva. She asked whether she could bring a girl called Grace home for the weekend. This was only a month later, May 6 through 9. Edith wanted to say no because there were so many problems. The hot water heater had broken. The furnace did not work. The wood stove smoked. She had to do their washing in the bathtub, because the washing machine did not work, because it had a different voltage. The refrigerator was not working, nor was the iron. Nothing was unpacked yet. They were living in absolute chaos. Priscilla described this girl Grace as tall and looking as though she had stepped off the cover of a *Vogue* magazine. Edith thought she could not have somebody like that to the house when they were living in such total chaos. Yet she swallowed her pride and allowed Priscilla to bring her along. So she came, as did several other people, including Dorothy, whose husband is now an elder at a church in Saint Louis. Various other people came as well for that weekend. That was really when the work began.

By the time the weekend came, they had no electricity at all because there was a storm that had knocked the electricity out. They only had candlelight. Yet they had their first real L'Abri weekend at that point. It was filled with all the things that became what L'Abri was in the years to come. There were meals that Edith cooked and tried to serve in a pleasant atmosphere, despite the lack of electricity. There were many long discussions. There was a Sunday service and more discussions over lunch after the service. There were walks when the weather was good, which it was that weekend. Those walks were in the beautiful landscape all around there. In the summer you cannot walk in any of the fields after about April 1, because all the stuff growing there is used for pasture, and the people living there are dependent on it for their livelihood. There are footpaths all over the mountains, however, that can be walked on. That was how their work began. In that weekend, Edith's institution of high tea on Sundays began so there would not have to be another cooked meal. She would make sandwiches and try to serve it all very nicely. That was the work beginning.

They still had to pray for the money for the down payment on the house. They decided again that they would not write to let people know how much money they needed. Nor would they ask anybody for money. They decided to pray that God would provide for them. They prayed that He would demonstrate that He wanted them there. Edith wrote about it, saying, “Over these next weeks, gifts in varying amounts arrived from 156 scattered people, totaling exactly enough for Fran and Pris to take to pay at the notary’s office.” She also said, “Only eight days before, we only had \$5000. Yet when the last mail on the morning of May 30 arrived, we were brought 15 letters from the village post office with gifts which added up to \$7306.” So they had enough to make their whole down payment just in time.

Their permit finally arrived on June 21. It said, from their government, that they could stay there. The insistence that they must leave Switzerland was marked all over with the word “annulled.” So they were firmly set to live in that situation.