

Watch and Pray

Jamie Buckingham



Jamie Buckingham won third place in the 1987 Florida Magazine Association columnists competition. He is a pastor and an author.

When I was a kid the one thing I wanted more than anything else was a wristwatch. My dad was a pocketwatch man. As long as I can remember he carried one of those round, stainless steel watches.

In fact, the only men I knew who wore wristwatches were the rich, the famous, those who didn't work outside, and flashy men who appeared in magazine ads. No wonder I wanted a wristwatch.

The Christmas before I graduated from high school my parents gave me a Mido wristwatch. They felt I needed it when I went off to college.

Back then Mido was top of the line. One had just come out that had a self-winding mechanism, meaning as long as the watch was in motion it didn't need winding.

I wore the watch for 25 years. It kept perfect time. But as I grew older I began to look around at the flashy gold watches worn by some big-time preachers. Envious, I determined that sooner or later, I'd move up.

In 1972 I made my first trip to South America. My son Bruce, then 13, accompanied me. We were scheduled for a week in Bogota, then another week visiting missionaries in the Amazon valley. Our last day in the city was spent sightseeing. That evening, heading back to the hotel, we were stopped by a seedy looking fellow on the sidewalk. He whispered, "Hey, Gringo, wanna buy a watch?"

He pulled up his coat sleeve and there was the most beautiful gold Omega I had ever seen. I knew my chance had come. "Watch me, Bruce," I smiled wisely, "and learn."

Turning to the watch salesman I asked, "How much?"

He glanced in every direction, then pulled me over to the side of a building. "Three hundred pesos, Senor," he said. "I must sell. My sister needs medicine."

Worldly wise I shook my head. "Too much! I give you 50 pesos."

We haggled. He explained what a bargain I was getting. The watch was a genuine, Swiss Omega. Solid gold. He shook it so I could hear the self-winding

mechanism. It even said "automatic" on the face.

At the time it never occurred to ask why a Swiss watch would have Spanish writing on the face. All I could see was the sun reflecting off the gold band. We finally settled on 100 pesos—worth at that time about \$15.00.

"These guys will really take you if you're not tough," I told Bruce as we entered the hotel.

Three days later, visiting our missionary friends in the jungle. I noticed my watch had stopped. Not only that but my wrist was turning green. That night in the dining hall I mentioned it to the missions director.

"Is it a gold Omega that says 'automatic'?" he asked.

I knew I was in trouble.

"Hey, everyone," the director shouted to the group, "Guess who got suckered?"

When I got back home I sheepishly took my "Omega" to a watchmaker. When he opened the back a tiny piece of razorblade fell out. "What's that?" I asked.

"That's the 'automatic' mechanism," he laughed. "It slides back and forth. The watch is worthless."

I wore my Mido for the another 10 years, shedding it briefly for a stainless steel Seiko I had purchased in Hong Kong, which I finally gave away.

Then, last year, a friend returned from Korea and presented me with what looked like a solid gold Rolex. "Now you

can look like all the big-time evangelists," he said.

I was overwhelmed.

Three weeks later, while preaching in Dallas, I glanced at my watch. I was horrified. The second hand was moving counter-clockwise. Instead of being a valuable Rolex, it was a worthless imitation. I went back to my Mido.

Then, several months ago, everything changed. I was having lunch with a Jewish friend who had been deeply touched because his wife had been healed when I prayed for her. He was showing me his \$7,000 gold Rolex. I laughed until I saw the second hand, sweeping smoothly around the face. Suddenly, in a moment of grateful generosity, he handed it to me. "We Jews aren't known for this," he laughed, "but I want you to have it."

"I can't afford it," I moaned. "I'll have to buy a new car to go with it."

"Do you know why God gave you a \$7,000 watch," my wife Jackie said that night. "To keep you from making fun of all the big-time preachers."

I didn't sleep well. Twenty years ago my world centered around owning an expensive, gold watch. Now I had one, and didn't want it. Why should I own something that expensive when others had nothing?

"Maybe God wants you to give it to someone else," Jackie suggested.

But I didn't give it away. I enjoyed flashing it.

In June, when I went overseas, I was afraid to take it. I left it at home in a safe place. When I returned it had stopped running. Jackie took it to the jeweler for me and returned, laughing. "It's a fake," she giggled. "Outside it's Rolex. Inside it's Sears & Roebuck."

I was relieved—but sad. My Jewish friend, believing it was valuable had received a great blessing by giving it away. I only wish I had given it away when I thought it was worth \$7,000. Now all I had was another worthless watch—and no blessing.

I also have a 38-year-old Mido which keeps perfect time. What else is a watch supposed to do? ■