

Prayer Store

The
Missionary
heart

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This material is not strictly about prayer, but about the kind of heart a missionary must have if he or she wants to serve the Lord. Ultimately, such a heart has to be a heart of prayer, and that is why I have included it in the Prayer Store. I have worked on the mission field for 25 years, and have had a lot of time to think about this issue.

These days it is relatively easy and cheap to visit countries which were once regarded as “The mission field.” We see that these countries are developing, and while we understand there are still many needs, we easily overlook the need for continued missionary service to them.

There is as much need for missionaries to give this service as ever there was. The churches we planted centuries ago have grown, but they are still very much part of our spiritual heritage, and welcome our involvement. The nature of the task has changed, but it still remains. To abandon our missionary role would be to abandon our spiritual grandchildren, abandon our responsibility, abandon our heritage and to lose our fund of missionary experience.

What kind of person launches out into the mission situation today? What is the heart of a missionary? What is the Lord looking for?

“If anyone would come after me.” (Mark 8:34)

I have been working on the mission field for over 25 years. I remain as convinced today as I was when I started of one key truth - God’s people have to be called to this work. Apostle Paul wrote:-

“For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (2 Cor.5:14-15)

The Greek word for “constrain” is “synecho.” It means “to hold completely”, and it is used of sieges and prisoners. When we are constrained we are besieged, we are held in like a prisoner. We have no option but to obey, to continue in, and to hold on.

This describes the very core of the missionary heart. God has called us to a task. We must continue in it because we have no choice, and want no choice. Then we can survive this:- **“Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?– (2 Cor.11:22-29)**

The missionary experience is a tough one. We are exposed to dangers of every type. We are let down, under resourced, under loved, ignored by those we serve and those we represent. We are doing something which is, in this century, undervalued and under-appreciated. We are oppressed by the enemy. We are opposed by other Faiths which are growing. We are undermined by the secular societies we come from. We are often tired, lonely and afraid. We are often sick from viruses and sicknesses which we are ill equipped to fight off. We might, and in these dangerous days more frequently do, die. In the 21st century we are facing opponents who believe that to kill us gains them merit, and who are unafraid to use bombs and bullets.

Being physically tough and having a tough exterior is no help when facing this kind of opposition. Our courage has to come from being “constrained”, from knowing that we are called into this, and have not yet been called out. This inner constraint, this inner conviction and compulsion comes from God alone, and is implicit in our acceptance of this call. This is our covenant - the same one Jesus made:-

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death —even death on a cross!” (Phil 2:6-8)

“deny himself” (Mark 8:34)

“Deny” is from the Greek word “aparneomai” and means “to lose sight of oneself and one’s own interests.” The missionary heart has to take this as normal, but it’s far from easy. Take these areas for example:-

*** Personal deprivations can irritate and undermine.**

It doesn’t look much to be denied our favourite newspaper, our favourite coffee, good shampoo, razors that work, sanitary products of reasonable quality, a nice deodorant or an internet connection that works. They are not much until we are away from home for month after month, and are feeling fragile, lonely, and unloved. Then our favourite little things can make all the difference, and they are not there.

“Denying” is not always a matter of denying Jesus. It’s accepting the lack of all that we might value and for a long time.

*** Personal relationships can grate and disintegrate.**

Missionaries are people. We fall in love, we mess up relationships, and we like some and dislike others. This comes as a shock to those who are just starting out. Somehow they have this idyllic picture of a bunch of holy people, all terribly “Christian”, all serving the Lord in a foreign culture.

We are a special bunch, but we are also normal people, and things don't always work out. In such an environment, "denying self" and accepting others with all their weaknesses is a very real challenge, especially when we are tired.

*** Standards of ministry can sink to levels we find hard to endure.**

Missionaries have given up a lot, and hope for a lot. We try to exercise good ministry, and train others in the same way. But often things don't work out, and we have to accept standards way below what we would like and expect in our own country. Being able to accept less is a denying process which is relatively easy at first, but gets harder and harder. That dreaded day can come to all of us, when we can deny no more, and believe that we are working in the negative – being pushed back beyond our starting point. This is an intensely painful moment. We have to face our inner self, and find the courage to deny that self, and push on. Never easy.

*** The ceaseless attacks of the enemy can destroy our identity and sense of worth.**

The life of a missionary is a life spent at war. There is never any rest from the constant attacks of the enemy - attacks designed to undermine confidence and worth.

This is how it works. We want to get a sense of value and self-worth from what we are doing, forgetting that it should come from who we are serving. The enemy knows this, so works ceaselessly to bring our works to disaster and failure. Then we feel valueless and worthless. Then we give up.

We have to deny all this self-worth, value and esteem, receiving these solely and only from the Lord. Not everyone can work in this "value free" environment. Missionary hearts can, and have to, if they are going to survive.

*** Had a nice time?**

I get asked this every time I come home. I'm sick, tired, short of money, with a pile of things undone in the U.K., and yet many look on my work as a "nice time." It takes a lot of denying not to bite people!

But as the years have gone by, I have discovered that we have moved beyond asking about a "nice time" to not asking at all! Love for missions and missionaries seem to be at a low ebb.

In the face of these challenges, what does the Lord offer in support of us?

I think he would say this:-

"If anyone would come after me - that's all there is! All you have to sustain you is the conviction that I called and you are obeying. That's all there is. If that is not enough, don't accept the call."

I`m sure many people read this and say "That seems reasonable. Why do these missionaries get so uptight about it?" Try being positive when you are being sick down the toilet for the tenth time in an hour, when there is not enough food for the day or when the people you have come to serve fail to do what they promised yet again.

Or when your funding is being cut, and when you go home you are asked if you are having a "good time", and when you try to talk about your work eyes glaze over.

And when this happens for the hundredth time, that is when "deny himself" really presses home, and can become acutely painful.

“Take up the cross”

How should a missionary live? “Take up the cross” gives us the key. The missionary heart has to adopt the crucified lifestyle.

“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Gal 6:14)

This means stripping away all human ideas and plans - achievement, success, growth, being powerful, well known, being reassured of our worth through what we do. These things will drag us down, and ultimately defeat us. We have to have a different set of principle - “cross-like” principles.

Here are some to think about:-

*** Integrity**

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Since God has made all this known to you, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.” (Gen 41:39)

We are expected to be honest, open, financially pure, free of gossip, deceit and lies. This is not as easy as it seems, especially when some of the cultures we are working in deal in just this currency. To have integrity in such situations can look like weakness. Others, with less integrity get what they want. It’s a temptation which can touch any missionary worker, but it has to be resisted because it is not a “crucified” principle. Jesus suffered and died in public, with no deceit or deviousness. In his life “what you saw was what you got.” There were no signs or miracles to force faith. That would deny his, and our integrity.

*** Pure faith**

“Now when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.” (Dan.6:10)

There was a purity and a lack of compromise in Daniel's faith. When faced with the opportunity to compromise, he was not interested. In fact he went and did exactly what he was being accused of! We have to maintain a similar line. Living a holy life, in line with our Master's life, we must seek after a pure walk, untainted by the world. This purity will bring us in conflict with a world where purity has a low value, and challenges those who are impure so much that they could turn against us. This gets harder the longer we work in the mission field.

*** Compassion**

"When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." (Matt 9:36)

So many of those we work with have sinned, have failed, have ruined their lives, their marriages, their careers, their families and their bodies. Working with such people requires compassion and love. This is a simple principle, and at first easy to use. But as time passes, love can be replaced by other things. Look at the church in Ephesus:-

"I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first." (Rev.2:2-5)

Ephesus was probably the strongest church in Asia Minor, yet it lost its compassion and love. We need "soft hearts" towards those we work with. They need to know the truth, but they also need to know compassion and love. Again, this gets harder as the years pass by, and yet another church or group fails to support or to act as we hoped. That day can come when, forgetting compassion, we yell at them! This may satisfy us, but it is not the way of the cross.

*** Determination**

“Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” (Phil 3:12)

The missionary heart cannot be a “giving up” heart. We have to have the Spirit filled determination to overcome, to endure, and ultimately to win, and claim the prize.

A world class hundred metre athlete said recently - “The race is not on the track but in the mind. In my mind I am standing on the podium with the gold medal even before the starting pistol is fired.” We have to have this attitude. The Lord saw it through to the end, and so must we. We will not be deflected and we will not give up.

*** Fix our eyes**

“Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebs 12:2)

In the end, the missionary heart comes down to one principle - we walk the way of the cross:-

*** We struggle in prayer:** - “Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”(Matt 26:38)

***We are often in Gethsemane:** - “Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. “Abba, Father,” he said, “everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.” (Mark 14:35-6)

***We are often betrayed:** - “Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. The men seized Jesus and arrested him.” (Mark 14:44-46)

*** We often walk alone:** - “Then everyone deserted him and fled.” (Mark 14:50)

*** We face the strong possibility of rejection, ridicule and death.** “All who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, “So! You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, come down from the cross and save yourself!” (Mark 15:30-31)

We endure this simply because this was the way of Jesus, and we are constrained to walk that way. If we are able to exercise our ministries within this framework, then the joy is unlimited, and the possibilities are eternal. Our lives are fulfilled beyond our wildest dreams, and we achieve that fullness of potential which was the Lord’s plan for us. Here is our challenge, our watchword and our goal. Let’s live it!

“Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”
(Hebs.12:2-3)

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