

Staying Well in Cross-Cultural Ministry

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Grit to Stay Grace to Go: Staying Well in Cross-Cultural Ministry

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Chapter 1

It's Harder Than I Thought
Missions Is Difficult

I am not a theologian or a scholar,
but I am very aware of the fact that pain is necessary to all of us.
In my own life, I think I can honestly say
that out of the deepest pain has come the strongest conviction
of the presence of God and the love of God.

—Elisabeth Elliot

Life, in general, is challenging. A life of faith is tough. Believers experience spiritual warfare and struggle (Eph 6; Phil 1:30; Rom 15:30). We battle against sin, labor for godliness, and strive to do good (Heb 12:4; 1 Tim 4:10; 1 Thess 5:15).

Beyond this, cross-cultural service adds another layer to an already complex life. The Apostle Paul writes about ministry being difficult, using words like "labor" and "toil" (2 Thess 2:8). He mentions physical challenges like hunger and lack of sleep (2 Cor 11:27). He talks about his labor and suffering in ministry (Phil 1:22; 2:16; Col 1:24). In his desire to see spiritual maturity in fellow believers, he describes "strenuously contending" (Col 1:29; 2:1). He mentions working hard so that he wouldn't burden the church (1 Thess 2:1, 9; 2 Thess 3:8).

Paul also commends his coworkers for their work. Epaphras not only worked hard but wrestled in prayer for the Colossians (Col 4:13). Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis all worked hard for the gospel (Rom 16). Timothy endured hardship (2 Tim 4:5). He considered the soldier, athlete, and farmer as he determined his work ethic in life and ministry (2 Tim 2:3–7).

While Paul normalizes the challenges in ministry, I am still often shocked when they interrupt my life. I find myself inadequately prepared for how overwhelming they are and how frequently they tempt me to quit for an easier life, especially when I feel stuck and unsure of how to make progress.

Whether I stay or leave, I want to do God's will. I want to be resilient. Sometimes resilience feels like grit. Maybe these two terms are synonymous. But the picture in the words feels different to me. Resilience is a beautiful word, seen from God's perspective. He knows we aren't strong enough on our own to endure, to persevere. He gives strength and we recognize that we can be resilient. But sometimes, when my soul feels crushed, resilience feels like grit. I barely hold on and strive with all my might to keep walking by faith. Only when I look back can I see how God held me up. At the time, I couldn't see his hand.

At one point in ministry, we faced a difficult time as a family. Tensions ran high. I pictured my husband Don and me in an ocean. Both of us attempted to stay afloat with bellowing winds and heaving waves all around us. But we had only enough strength to keep ourselves above

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water. Neither of us had the extra energy to help the other. Now that I look back at that, I see God had us securely tied to a lifeline and to each other. We weren't at the mercy of the storm, even though it felt like it. Grit can sometimes look like the human picture of divine resiliency.

Not every problem feels overwhelming. Some seem manageable. However, even when you successfully juggle several at the same time, stresses can build. In missions, lots of things happen at once. Therefore, overseas workers operate at a higher stress level than is considered average according to results from the Holmes-Rahe Stress Inventory, an assessment tool for measuring total stress levels. In fact, they often live above the serious illness level. (Elliot Stephens, in his webinar, highlights high stress levels especially for those in their first term.[1])

Herbert F. Lamp, in his book *Journey With Me*, gives testimony that stress can lead to a crisis of calling and cause us to leave too soon. Or we can allow God to use these stressors and problems to grow us. Lamp writes:

> Early in my missionary career I was faced with a crisis of calling. After about two years on the field I sensed God calling me into a deeper and harder work than I thought I could handle. During this struggle, I started to evaluate what I had accomplished and found little fruit. I asked God, "If you really want me to sacrifice even more, will you let me know it is worth it?" I wanted a clear affirming sign that God was at work. But guess what? Things only got worse, and my sense of failure grew even more. I wondered what was happening and if we should consider returning home. But then I started to pay attention to what was really going on in my life. I could see that every difficulty I encountered, every failure I experienced, became something God was addressing and solving. Rather than my problems being a barrier too difficult to surmount, I saw amazing ways in which God was present with me. I started seeing God in all my circumstances, and I regained perspective on God's calling and my commitment to stay.[2]

We cannot possibly be totally prepared for the reality that hits when we serve overseas, but we can be better prepared and ready to pay attention to what God is doing in and through us.

When thinking about how hard this life can be, we are tempted to believe lies. We know truth, but in the face of hardship, truth dims and lies shine brighter. In our heads, we would not acknowledge we believe these lies. But they show up in our hearts when life looms harder than we thought possible.

Lies we are tempted to believe when we are in over our heads:

Obeying God and following him should make life easier, not harder.

I didn't fight God or disobey him. I left home, saying goodbye to family and all that was familiar. That was the hard part. The rest shouldn't be. So where is the blessing? Where is the fruit? Or as one global worker put it, "Where is the honeymoon period? I didn't get that. It was hard from the first moment I landed."

My definition of success defines who I am and determines my significance.

When I left for my first term, I had envisioned such great ministry successes. Looking back, many of those expectations were unrealistic, outside of my gifting and strengths, and based on what I thought I "should be" or "should do."

1 "Webinar: Stephens, Field Onboarding and Retention."

2 Lamp, Jr., *Journey With Me*, 109–10.

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After some time, if I'm not accomplishing what I came to do, why should I stay? I have my goals, my vision, my list of what I do so that my life can be significant or gain significance. Additionally, supporting churches can ask success-based questions that cause me to question if I deserve support. "You've been there one term, how many souls have you led to Christ? How many disciples?" I feel like it would be easier to achieve what constitutes "success" from the comfort of my home country. I mistakenly catch myself thinking that I must be at a certain level of success for God to value me.

Everything in my life would be easier if I left the mission and returned home.

I know that I'm experiencing selective memory when I start seeing life in Europe as much harder than life in South Asia. When I have trouble with bureaucracy here, I forget bureaucracy exists everywhere. I can remember so many positive things about life and ministry in the Middle East or how much easier life was when my kids were younger. Everything looks better somewhere else or at some other time when we face hardships. In every foreign place I've lived when I felt overwhelmed, I wanted to go home where life seemed much simpler. I fail to remember the issues I encountered in my home country.

Truths we must embrace to face challenges with power and courage:

Obeying God and following him brings us joy along with suffering.

Joy and suffering often go together in the New Testament. Luke records that after being flogged, "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (Acts 5:41). God's worthiness counted more than their suffering. They felt honored to suffer for his name. It gave them joy. Paul connects joy and suffering as he looks at the results of trials in our lives:

> Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Rom 5:3–5)

We rejoice in hope because our sufferings bring about good in our lives. Peter writes in his first letter,

> Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. (1 Pet 4:12–14)

Three major authors in the New Testament combine joy and suffering as part of our lives, which is an important aspect of our ministry and calling as believers and ministers of the gospel.

My definition of success matters little compared to fulfilling God's purpose for me.

As believers, we find our significance in Christ because he loves us, not because of what we can do for him. We are weak and helpless to save ourselves. However, our value is not dependent on our actions but in his declaration that we matter to him.

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The Psalms are filled with verses about fulfilling God's purpose in our lives. David wrote, "I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his purpose for me" (Ps 57:2 ESV) and "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands" (Ps 138:8). Luke refers to the purpose of God for David as well: "Now when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep" (Acts 13:36a).

A gap existed between my perceived purpose and God's purpose for me. As I realized my faulty thinking, I let go of my version of success and looked to God. I experimented with various ways of serving, failing, and succeeding. Basing my significance on my view of success undercuts the gospel. However, true success is found in fulfilling God's purpose for me.

I do not have to achieve my version of success. I need to know how God made me and serve him where he has placed me. I must be obedient to him and use the gifts he's given me knowing they are for the common good (1 Cor 12:7), not my own significance. My life is not about me. It is about my Lord. Life is for his purposes, done in his ways, for his glory, not my own.

Challenges exist in every place I live and in everything I do.

I sometimes look at other places and think life would be simpler there. Or, to the other extreme, I can feel guilty that life is easier here and ministry would be more important or my life more significant in a more challenging area of the world. No place is perfect. Every stage of life and phase of ministry has its drawbacks and benefits. No ideal situation or totally wonderful stage of life exists anywhere in this world.

Life and ministry are hard, for everyone. Satan is against us. We grow weary. We serve. Challenges come. Almost everyone has felt like leaving at some point. We try to decide whether to stay or go. But praise God that he is at work in us. He helps his children endure.

The Holy Spirit empowers me to do God's will and fulfill his purpose for me. Giving up on that purpose isn't an option. I need to walk in the power of God to do the will of God and follow where he leads—even when it's hard.

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REFLECTION

What have been some of your biggest challenges in ministry?

How have you defined "success" for your ministry?

What lie(s) have you been tempted to believe?

RESPONSE

Write a list of the challenges you might face if you lived in your passport country.

Compare it with the challenges you face in your current location.

Ask God to help you believe truth and not lies.

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