

THE GLORIOUS REWARD IN MISSIONS



ALEX KOCCMAN & CHAD VEGAS

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Alex Kocman & Chad Vegas

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*For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an
eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.
2 Corinthians 4:17*

When missionaries Todd and Jennifer DeKryger celebrated the opening of their new mission hospital in West Africa, they never dreamed that a year later Todd would be medevacked to Germany and admitted to a hospital for the first time in his life.

Todd, a surgeon and chief of staff at Hospital of Hope in Mango, Togo, was known to all his teammates and supporters for his charisma, spiritual leadership, and passion for the unreached Muslim peoples of northern Togo. So, when the DeKrygers announced that Todd had contracted an unusual infection and was not responding to treatment, prayers and support flooded in. Yet Todd's condition worsened. Barely conscious, Todd bade farewell to his sons while being loaded on a plane to Cologne, Germany. Less than two weeks after first contracting Lassa fever, the forty-six-

year-old missionary slipped into eternity.¹

Left to raise four children in a third-world country, Jennifer was left with a choice: stay and minister or return home. We will consider her decision later. But for now, her example is sufficient to illustrate that *the missionary call is a call to suffer*. From the ordinary struggles of life overseas to the extreme trials of loss or imprisonment, to take the gospel to the nations is to enlist for hardship.

Jesus warns that anyone who would follow him should be prepared to forsake all worldly attachments (Luke 14:26–33). When he first sent out his disciples on mission in Israel, he punctuated his sober instructions: “Whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:38). The example of the apostles illustrates that faithfulness often precedes persecution, suffering, and even martyrdom. Perhaps the life of the apostle Paul provides the most vivid illustration. Paul tells the Corinthians that he was “afflicted in every way, ...perplexed, ...persecuted, ...struck down, ...always carrying in the body the death of Jesus” (2 Cor. 4:8–10). Gospel ministers must be prepared for affliction.

When was the last time you saw a missions organization speak candidly in this way? Have you ever seen a sending agency advertise the opportunity to carry “the death of Jesus” in your own body? What short-term missions trip offers a chance to be “afflicted in every way”? This is no light matter. Much of modern missionary mobilization

has become virtually indiscernible from tourist marketing. Prospective missionaries are promised that by traveling abroad they can realize their full personal potential. Workers then arrive on the field with an inflated view of self and an unhealthy craving for self-actualization—expectations shattered by the pain and toil of language learning, team conflict, homesickness, physical illness, culture shock, and spiritual warfare. They return home dejected, sometimes having done harm to the cause of Christ on the field—or, worse yet, they stay on the field and remain unfruitful. The church at home needs a wake-up call if we are to faithfully engage our missionary task.

What enables endurance through such turmoil?

An Eternal Weight of Glory

It is easy for our perception of Paul to take on a storybook quality. We envision a larger-than-life apostle gallivanting around the Roman world witnessing nonstop success. But Paul was refreshingly candid about his missionary suffering. We see Paul's honesty about both his pain and his source of comfort in 2 Corinthians 4:16–18: “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”

Paul is not dismissive of his hardships, and he is under no illusion that mere positive thinking could somehow change his outward circumstances. Paul would have been no friend to the modern prosperity heresy that teaches God always wants us to be healthy and wealthy, nor to the softer self-help version that predominates evangelicalism. His sufferings were not insignificant. But Paul's sufferings *were* insignificant compared with the "eternal weight of glory" awaiting him.

Citing 1 Corinthians 4:9–13 and 2 Corinthians 11:23–29, the nineteenth-century Princetonian theologian Charles Hodge insightfully remarked the following:

Viewed absolutely, or in comparison with the sufferings of other men, Paul's afflictions were exceedingly great. He was poor, often without food or clothing; his body was weak and sickly; he was homeless; he was beset by cruel enemies; he was repeatedly scourged, he was stoned, he was imprisoned, he was shipwrecked, robbed, and counted as the offscouring of the earth; he was beyond measure harassed by anxieties and cares, and by the opposition of false teachers, and the corruption of the churches which he had planted at such expense of time and labor. ... These afflictions in themselves, and as they affected Paul's consciousness, were exceedingly great; for he says himself he was pressed out of measure, above strength, so that he despaired even of life. ... He did not regard these afflictions as trifles, nor did he bear them with stoical indifference. He felt their

full force and pressure. When five times scourged by the Jews and thrice beaten with rods, his physical torture was as keen as that which any other man would have suffered under similar inflictions. He was not insensible to hunger, and thirst, and cold, and contempt, and ingratitude. His afflictions were not light in the sense of giving little pain. ...It was only by bringing these sufferings into comparison with eternal glory that they dwindled into insignificance. So also when the apostle says that his afflictions were for a moment, it is only when compared with eternity. They were not momentary so far as the present life was concerned. They lasted from his conversion to his martyrdom. His Christian life was a protracted dying. But what is the longest life to everlasting ages? ...We are, therefore, not to seek afflictions, but when God sends them we should rejoice in them as the divinely appointed means of securing for us an eternal weight of glory.²

For Paul, the prize was worth the fight. Elsewhere he writes, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). We encounter this same theology of suffering throughout the New Testament. Jesus himself endured the cross “for the joy that was set before him” (Heb. 12:2). For saints and martyrs through the ages, only in view of “the things that are unseen”—things eternally weighty and glorious—can one endure the adversities of faithful, missional service to God.

What are these unseen things? We may consider three such realities.

Refinement of Our Character

In Psalm 119, in which King David praises God's law at length, he also commends his own affliction. In verse 67, he sings, "Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word." He repeats in verse 71, "It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn your statutes." David's suffering was good, not because he was a masochist but because it resulted in his own personal sanctification. The flames of trial purged away his worldly desires and refined his affections for God's law, causing him to persevere in holiness. This is what Paul means in Romans 5: "We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (vv. 3–4).

Sufferings can only refine the character of the missionary if he realizes they are not random but that an omnipotent, sovereign Lord foreordained them as a tool for his ultimate good. Sufferings are not merely "used" by God to sanctify us as though God had to play the hand dealt to him by some cosmic card dealer. Rather, God *intends* whatever happens to us. Sufferings sanctify us because they are filtered through the sovereign hands of our all-good, all-wise God. William Carey spent more than twenty years translating Scripture into a variety of Indian languages, yet his life's work was lost in mere hours when a fire engulfed

his print shop in 1812. In a letter reporting the tragedy to Andrew Fuller, his key sending pastor, he reflected on Psalm 46:10 (“Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!”) and concluded this: “1. God has a sovereign right to dispose of us as he pleases. 2. We ought to acquiesce in all that God does with us and to us.”³ This attitude only comes from a missionary convinced that sufferings are expressly ordained by a loving Father whose purpose it is to conform us to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:28–29).

Even here, however, is an error we must avoid: that of embracing missionary life simply to achieve some mythical level of personal spirituality. We see this in the number of missionary candidates who describe their sense of calling in exclusively individualistic terms—“I feel like I need to do this for my life to matter,” or “I have this constant yearning to travel overseas,” or “I won’t be satisfied unless I do something more meaningful than my current occupation.” The problem with these responses is that they all share one subject: the self. Such thinking, untampered by consideration of God’s glory or the plight of the lost, demonstrates a lack of perspective. It is commendable to find one’s satisfaction in service to God, but there are easier ways to do this that do not put the souls of others on the line. The character-building sufferings of missions must not be undertaken merely as an exercise in some self-serving spiritual fitness regimen.

The trials and difficulties of missions indeed serve to sanctify the missionary, but this is not the only glorious,

unseen reality to pursue.

Redemption of Our Hearers

We suffer not for mere personal benefit but for others. God is the ultimate cause of the salvation of his people, but he utilizes instrumental means in that process. In the economy of God, the suffering of gospel workers is one such means used to accomplish the salvation of the church. Missionaries suffer so that Christ's people may be assembled into the community of the redeemed.

As we return to 2 Corinthians 4, recall that Paul said that his suffering for the gospel was “all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:15). This glorious multiplying of worship refers to the upbuilding and spreading of the church as the people of God. Paul also wrote to Timothy, “I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory” (2 Tim. 2:10). In Colossians, Paul is even more explicit: “I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col. 1:24). Paul's pain didn't add to the finished work of Christ, but it commended his message to his hearers. Paul conducted his ministry “in weakness and in fear and much trembling...in demonstration of the Spirit and of power” so that the faith of his hearers “might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor.