

Struck Down but Not Destroyed

Lessons of Missionary Resilience

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The dictionary defines resilience as “the power or ability of a material to return to its original form after being bent, compressed, or stretched”¹—an enviable description for anyone who sets out on a life-long mission. However, in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul describes Christians as clay pots, humble vessels that display God’s power and not their own. Paul’s words describe the kind of paradoxical resilience that keeps missionaries moving forward: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed (2 Cor 4:8-9).”

Christian resilience is more than just bouncing back after a hard hit. It is the transformation of one’s character into something even better than he started with, precisely through those hard hits. It is the broken pieces of the clay pot, re-formed and held together by Christ Himself. Through the cracks, between pieces, the light of Christ shines through. God is intentional in making his people this way: “We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. . . so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh (2 Cor 4: 7, 11b).”

¹ Collins English Dictionary – complete and unabridged, 2012 digital edition. William Collins Sons & Co. LTD, 1979, 1986. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/resilience>

Missionaries understand this well. Leaving extended family, learning a new language and culture, engaging in the missionary task, and being on the frontlines of spiritual warfare make virtually every missionary feel (and momentarily respond) like a fragile clay pot. They are stretched and shattered. They face their own weakness and cry out for God's help, wrestling with the oft-present temptation to give up and go home.

The hardships missionaries suffer are often the same as those of Christians anywhere: cancer, loss of loved ones, church splits, leadership conflict, infertility, parenting crises, etc. However, sometimes their circumstances are extraordinary— like deportation, war, revolution, and terrorist attacks.

I talked to a few of our IMB missionaries who have weathered the hardships and asked them how they would describe themselves. They used words like persevering, stubborn, and tenacious. They also used words like unashamed, changed, and comfortable in his arms, testifying to the fact that the trials they have endured pale in comparison to the glory of knowing Christ.

They share about their most difficult times—how they made it through with their faith intact, what they learned about God, how they would encourage other younger missionaries, and what kept them in place serving and giving God the glory despite the pain. These missionaries are serving across the globe and range in age from Millennials to Boomers.

Europe: Sam White, Randy and Angela Stoda, Linda Gray, Allison Philips, Kyle and Jackie Kirkpatrick, and Mary Smith

North Africa and the Middle East: Don and Mary Allen, Dirk Dubose

Sub-Saharan Africa: Katee Shepherd and Alyssa Peveto

The common thread of God's goodness and the missionaries' gratitude

runs through each of their different stories.

Did calling matter?

God's call on their lives greatly impacted their resiliency. Regardless of the trial, it was their sense of his call that kept them in place, tethered to their mission and resolute in the face of loss. Surprisingly, it is also his call that caused the greatest confusion and anger as they wrestled with unmet expectations and disappointments.

When asked what advice they would give to new missionaries, their answer was consistently the same. "Be sure of your calling, remind yourself frequently of the calling," said Kyle Kirkpatrick. Jackie added, "If he called you, he also called you to the hard times, and he will provide all you need to stumble forward with your hand in His. You can know that those difficult periods will bring healthy growth and sweet-scented blossoms and abundant fruit, all for the glory of God. This is what He has called you to."

We can confuse the call with a promise of ease or success. Understanding that the call includes hard times is a learning process.

Mary Smith has served overseas for more than 30 years. After 11 years serving in one country, she had to leave because of conflict with ministry partners. The situation left her feeling attacked, falsely accused, and alone. She was hurt and shocked, unable to comprehend why God allowed this. "After all, he called me to follow him," she said. "He called me to serve as His missionary, so why would things go sour?"

Linda Gray is completing 25 years of service, but she wasn't sure what God was doing when 18 months in she was forced home because of a cancer diagnosis. "I was angry at God," she said, "it had taken me so long to get there, why would he send me back home?"

Randy Stoda had similar feelings when he was deported from one country. He was serving on a healthy team, had good national partners, and was seeing fruit in ministry. "I felt that I was in the perfect place," Randy said. They had a very good living situation—a comfortable (by this country's standards)

apartment that fit his family's needs perfectly, great IMB colleagues serving beside them, a local partner who was a pastor with a heart for the nations and was a very close friend, and they were just starting to see some traction in ministry. "So, naturally, when that was all taken away, I had some real disappointment— even anger," he said.

God patiently helped all of them as they stumbled forward.

Mary healed over time stateside. God brought her future husband into the picture, answering a long-term prayer request. They were married at the end of her stateside assignment and were re-appointed together 3 ½ years later. "God's comfort was there in the healing process. To know that He had called me and still had me in mind for future ministry was a blessing," Mary said.

Linda never got a clear answer to her questions, but she has no doubt that the Lord used her cancer diagnosis and return to the states for treatment to teach her and grow her for the next part of the journey. "I trust the Lord more today than yesterday and I am more committed to his call, to him, and to serve where he has put me for this season," she said.

The Lord eventually brought Randy to a place of acceptance: "I was able to remember that the Lord didn't call me to a place, but to Himself, and He didn't call me for my comfort but for His glory."

In the paradox of the call, these missionaries faced a myriad of emotions, learned hard lessons, and had their faith stretched as God led them on a journey of following, trusting, and believing.

What were some of your biggest spiritual struggles during difficult times and how did you work through it?

For Angela Stoda, getting kicked out of her country of service not only made her question the "call," but caused her to question her own salvation. She had grown up in a tough situation and God had been her refuge. "I always

felt like God and I were together,” she said. “It wasn’t until this experience in this country that it seemed like we were not on the same page.” She prayed and believed God would prevent her deportation and when he didn’t, Angela was thrown into a crisis of belief: “I realized my will and God’s will were not one and the same. I had never been angry at God before and I knew my heart wasn’t responding the way it should, so I began to question whether I was even a Christian.”

The leadership was helpful in Angela’s working through some of these issues. God brought Angela to a place of honesty before God, realizing she had allowed her service to God to usurp her devotion and submission to Him. “His ultimate goodness to me was continuing to love me even when I was angry and hurt and his desire for me to continue to grow and walk with him,” she said.

Don and Mary Allen grew up on the mission field and returned as a married couple. They have experienced evacuation, wars, and loss of teammates due to a terrorist attack while serving in North Africa and the Middle East. They quickly learned that God doesn’t always call people to safe places. “There was a place we were called to, and it was going to be risky. We had to settle that before God, not once but in each individual situation,” said Don. “It was not a ‘one and done’ conversation but coming to God again and again when those times arose.”

For Kyle and Jackie Kirkpatrick, the trials have taken many forms, from ministry burnout to a cancer diagnosis. They didn’t question God as much as they did themselves and their own ability to understand and be obedient in the circumstances. “I sometimes felt hurt to be facing these painful situations, but because I know that he is faithful and good, (I knew) that I must not be seeing clearly,” Jackie said. “I believe Lord, help me in my unbelief.”

While leadership helped many work through some of the hardest times, for others the struggle was over leadership decisions with which they didn’t agree. Anyone who spends significant time serving with IMB must get used to change. At pre-field training, new missionaries are told they must not be

merely flexible; they must be fluid.

As organizational strategies change or political situations arise in dangerous places, decisions are sometimes made without the missionary's input. But in each case, faithful ones like Mary Allen take their questions to the Lord. "There were several times when I had to ask God again, 'Am I still supposed to be here?' when hard things happened. Some of those hard things were decisions made by leadership that I didn't agree with. Each time, I felt that God didn't release me from overseas work. My call to be here with IMB had not changed."

For Kyle, even when decisions were made that caused him to question, he ultimately trusted that "God will use even what I perceive to be poor decisions for his glory and my growth."

Mary Smith advises new missionaries to remember that God, not the IMB or its leadership called them to be where they are. Trusting God to work through imperfect leadership stretches a person's faith and is vital to perseverance. "I believe that remembering God's call and staying faithful through changes and difficulties is the key to being resilient," Mary said.

How did God bring comfort or insight to you during this time?

Alyssa Peveto and her husband struggled with infertility for years. After her second miscarriage she was in a pretty low place, but she was learning to trust God: "I can still remember sitting at my kitchen table and hearing God speak so clearly to my heart, 'Do you trust me?' And I did. I still do. So, with every subsequent miscarriage and with every 'No,' from potential adoptive families during our adoption process, my prayer was, 'This hurts, but I trust You.'"

God's personal presence was tangibly felt by many. Katee Shepherd echoed this: "Recognition of my limitations and His presence is always the greatest insight."

Dirk Dubose started as a Journeyman and is now married and has survived being forced out of his original country of service. Even during the most difficult and lonely times, his confidence in God's faithfulness and goodness didn't waver. God keeps him cognizant of the fact that he had been working in Dirk's life through every circumstance in his life. "I like to look back and see how God has put everything together," Dirk said. "I can go back to childhood and see how he orchestrated things in my life. None of it was a mistake. It's all been connected, and we can definitely see that."

Allison Phillips lived with her family in a country where they had to have a contingency plan just in case they were forced to leave. They didn't have to act on it until recently, but they had been ready for 20 years. She agreed that God's faithfulness was never in doubt: "There is too much evidence to doubt—all I have to do is ponder what He has provided in the past. It's all about the stories." e had provided in the past. It's all about the stories. He has

Kyle and Jackie Kirkpatrick voiced the overwhelming impact God's Word played in their perseverance. They began memorizing Scripture as they walked through their battle with cancer. "The Lord is using this to correct my thoughts and misperceptions throughout my day, constantly re-aligning my heart to His," Jackie said. Kyle added, "The Word is both a correction and a comfort."

Both Kyle and Jackie also found great comfort through friends and colleagues who stood with them on the hard days. "He has ministered to my heart through the ways he has provided for me when I felt so broken and lost in a fog. He sent many believers to encourage me as they sent notes and verses and songs," Jackie said.

Randy and Angela Stoda also found great comfort in other believers. "Find and treasure those relationships you have with life-giving people, and don't be afraid to lean on them when you face difficult times—which you will," Randy said.

Mary Allen not only appreciates her Christian friends but knows that she needs them: "I am reminded of how weak we are, how much we need

community and how much we need prayer. I am also grateful for how well

IMB takes care of us when there are security issues, evacuations, and major medical problems. They are amazing with resources.”

What is the biggest take-away from your hardest moments?

Jackie Kirkpatrick voiced that she’s still taking away truth and grace as she walks forward in her journey, but one of her biggest to date is from Matthew 13, the parable of the sower. The plant perished under trouble because it “had no root” (Matthew 13:6). “We must also have a root drinking deeply and regularly from the fountain of the Word. By having difficulties and drinking in Truth, we grow healthy and strong.”

Sam White learned to trust God more and not try to make sense of everything: “Instead of asking ‘why did this happen?’ I’ve tried to treat hard, difficult situations as opportunities to trust Him and His Word.”

Mary Smith echoes this and adds, “Don’t ask ‘why did this happen?’ but ask ‘for what purpose did God allow this?’ The first question leaves you angry, unfulfilled, and doubtful. The second one opens up the chance to see what’s possible.”

For Alyssa Peveto, the purpose showed itself quickly. Her infertility struggles became a bridge for the gospel to African women who are shamed if they don’t produce a child in the first year of marriage. “I even told God once, ‘if I have to go through a hundred more of these same hurts, it’ll be worth it If I can just minister to even one woman like me,” Alyssa said.

Randy Stoda also commented that his trials made him more patient with others who are struggling. He also learned that his work, and even his life, is transitory.

Don Allen came to an understanding that as big as each trial was to them personally, God has a much bigger plan and “we are but one part of that story.”

Allison Philips saw, too, that “life is short. The next life is eternal. Eternity is what matters.”

Linda Gray came away knowing that she can trust God’s ways: “Even if I do not ‘like’ the choices he has given me, they are always the best for me, for others, and for His glory.”

Angela Stoda summed it up well: “I think I have a greater sense of who God is and His loving care for us.”

Their words give testimony to the truth in Romans—we can rejoice when trials come because God is doing something good.

“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” (Romans 5:3-5 NIV).

Names have been changed for security reasons