

Pioneer Plowing

Staying Resilient in Tough Fields

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Luke 9:26 Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

It was the winter once again. We, along with our small team, had spent the last decade living among an unreached Muslim background people group in a Siberian city where the winter temperatures could dip to -40 degrees Celsius. It was a gray, cold Soviet-era city where communists had exiled famous writers and political dissidents.

At the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, our focus people group of several million had only a handful of Jesus followers, no churches, and only a small portion of the Scriptures in their native language. From 1991 to its peak in 2005, that number had grown to an estimated 25,000 followers of Jesus in over 600 churches throughout our country.¹ Some were calling this the beginning of a Church Planting Movement.²

On our city-focused team, we had been a part of several churches started during those early years. And yet, now, as winter descended after over 10

¹ International Mission Board Research Department. “ASR Stats, Historical Stats Stans report’ obtained 07 February 2023. (Note: These numbers have since been lowered based upon further research.

² David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God is Redeeming a Lost World* (Monument, CO: WIGTake Resources, 2004), Kindle Version, Location 1530.

years of ministry, only one of those churches still existed and it too would eventually dissolve. Several of the main leaders of these house churches had either departed from our town or worse, departed from the faith. We were tired and needed a change of scenery. Our strategy coordinator agreed, and soon thereafter we moved to another city among our people group.

It has now been over 25 years since my wife and I first moved our lives to Central Asia. The “fruits” of those early years have slowed to a steady trickle, and at times it has even seemed like the work is going backward. So, what keeps us plowing forward in the task? What is it that helps cross-cultural workers be resilient? Merriam-Webster defines resilience as “an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change . . . it derives from the Latin verb ‘resilire’, meaning ‘to jump back’”.³

As many mission organizations focus upon tough-to-access and even tougher-to-reach unreached (UPGs) and unengaged (UUPGs) people groups, cross-cultural workers need biblically grounded truth and principles that can help them survive and thrive amid opposition, wars, relocation, lack of evident fruitfulness and discouragement. We need to hear from Jesus. So, what do I think Jesus, based upon His Word, wants to tell his ‘sent ones’ who labor in tough fields? There are many foundational principles that help cross-cultural workers honor the Lord and serve well. A vibrant relationship with God, a clear sense of calling, and a deep and humble love for the people you serve likely top the list. Likewise, the importance of going deep in language⁴ and culture learning,⁵ empowering and equipping local leaders,⁶ discipling our children and nurturing our relationship with our spouses cannot be

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/resilience>.

⁴ Preston Fidler, *1000 Cups of Tea: Gospel Fluency Across Cultures* (Language 180, 2020), Kindle Version.

⁵ Elizabeth and Thomas Brewster, *Language Acquisition Made Practical: A Comprehensive "How-to" Book for Learning Any Language* (Colorado Springs: Lingua House, 1976).

⁶ Kanat Yesmagambetov, *What's Wrong With Western Missions?: The Perspective of a Local Believer* (Leeds, West Yorkshire, England: Emerald House Group, 2021), 128-144.

overstated. However, in this article I want to focus on four faithfulness-sustaining-truths that I hope can encourage you to keep your hand to the plow.

Truths to Foster Resilience in Tough Fields

1. Trust Jesus' Pace

We live in an unprecedented age of speed and busyness. Christian medical doctor Richard Swensen warns that we live in an age of unequaled exponential change (and he wrote this in 1992 before the internet and cell phones even existed!) which is affecting us more than we can imagine: “Meanwhile, largely unnoticed by us, history has shifted to fast forward. If linear still best describes our personal lives, exponential now best describes much of historical change. The significance of this is incalculable . . . (we) consistently underestimate it.”⁷ He provides graphical illustrations of the exponential growth over the last 100 years of such things as debt, cost of a home, health care costs, divorce, prisoners, birth to unmarried women, advertising, new books published, air miles traveled, foreign travel, world population, . . . and hypothetical graphs of the exponential explosion of information, complexity and change.⁸

There are few that would doubt that rapid change is now a constant in our lives. There are several consequences to this exponential change. Firstly, we can become exhausted and experience “change fatigue.” If we are to be resilient, we must acknowledge the effect of unceasing rapid change upon our souls and according to Dr. Swensen, create “margin” in our lives. Physician and Christian counselor, Dr. Mike Emlet, in his article “Persevering in Ministry” likewise summarizes his advice for avoiding burnout in ministry

⁷ Richard Swenson, *Margin: Restoring Emotional, Physical, Financial and Time Reserves to Overloaded Lives* (Colorado Springs: Navpress. 1992), 44-45.

⁸ Swenson, *Margin*, 247-254.

as “The underlying theme is slow down. Or as Psalm 46:10 says, ‘Be still, and know that I am God.’”⁹

The unbelievable pace which many of us cross-cultural workers live at borders on unhealthy and might be evidence that we trust our hard work more than God’s life-changing Spirit. A relentless, unceasing, hurried life may be a sign that we need to slow down before we have an emotional, mental, or physical breakdown. Depression and anxiety can be the fruits of an ungodly, unsustainable pace. Christian counselor Dr. Archibald Hart notes that

In fact, a hundred years ago, panic anxiety disorder was very rare. But with industrialization and urbanization, it has become increasingly common. Remember, there were no jets, electric lights, or concrete jungles until recent times. The pace of life was slow. Camel speed was about as fast as you could travel for long distance. Lots of recovery time was built into the natural cycles of life. No late-night Tv or football games could eat up your leisure time. Why, I can vaguely remember times of such boredom even in my own lifetime.¹⁰

A second consequence of exponential change is that we in turn expect rapid change. Our global digital culture is becoming more and more of a results-now-society. As cross-cultural workers, we must not allow the world’s pace to guide our expectations of the God of all time’s pace. We must learn to trust God’s pace and His timing. This can mean patience, perseverance, avoidance of shortcuts, a ‘long haul’ perspective and not becoming unhealthily focused on the data of conversions, baptisms, and new churches.

⁹ Michael R. Emler, “Persevering in ministry,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 31, issue 3 (2 January 2018): 25.

¹⁰ Archibald D Hart, *The Anxiety Cure: A Proven Method for Dealing with Worry, Stress, and Panic Attacks* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), Kindle Version, 14

Without a doubt, God is moving in unprecedented ways among the unreached, as many missiologists document.¹¹ “Rapid reproduction” is even one of the ten characteristics of a Church Planting Movement.¹² One of the praiseworthy aspects of current missiology is that cross-cultural workers should thoughtfully consider the reproducibility of their work in light of multiplication. However, as Tyler¹³, a colleague of ours in Central Asia, recently noted, reproducibility should not be equated with speed. Similarly, the International Mission Board’s *Foundations* document also states that, “rapid reproduction is biblically possible, but is not biblically promised.”¹⁴ A study of God’s pace from Scripture can help to give us a bigger perspective on how the God of history seems to work.

Is God in a Hurry? One of my close Central Asian friends used to remind me of a local proverb: “Hurry is the work of the devil.” In contrast, Scriptures teaches that “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9, NIV).

God’s Timing in History Starting with God’s promise to make Abraham into a great nation (Genesis 12), dated approximately the 19th century BCE, the Hebrew people had to wait approximately 600 years for this promise’s

¹¹ David Garrison, *A Wind In The House Of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around The World To Faith In Jesus Christ* (Monument, CO: Wigtake Resources. 2014). According to Dr. Garrison’s research, as of 2014, there were over 70 current movements (defined as at least 100 new church starts or 1,000 baptisms that occur over a two-decade period) of Muslims to Christ happening in 29 nations with an approximate two to seven million Muslim background followers of Jesus. (page15). By contrast, before 1979 there were only 2 or possibly 3 known movements of Muslims to Christ over the 1300 years since the death of Muhammad. (page 27).

¹² Garrison, *Church Planting Movements*, Location 255.

¹³ Name changed for security reasons.

¹⁴ International Mission Board, *Foundations* (Richmond, VA: IMB, 2018), 111.

fulfillment and Joshua's conquest of the land.¹⁵ In the meantime, the Jewish people waited in Egypt as slaves for over 400 years and then another 40 years in the Sinai desert (Exodus 12:40, 16:35). Deuteronomy 8:2-3 (NLT) states, "Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands. Yes, he humbled you by letting you go hungry and then feeding you with manna, a food previously unknown to you and your ancestors. He did it to teach you that people do not live by bread alone; rather, we live by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord."

Character is important to the God of Scripture, and building character takes time. A significant number of the requirements for being a church leader in Timothy and Titus are centered upon character more than skills (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1) and these Scriptures warn us to "not be hasty in the laying on of hands." (1 Timothy 5:22). *Foundations* speaks of the importance of 'being' in the life of the disciple and also points out that, "The most obvious characteristics of these [leadership] qualifications have to do with character and family life."¹⁶ The churches, leaders, and disciples we hope to develop need a God-pleasing foundation of character that often only long-term persistence, endurance, and perseverance can produce.

At our church here in Central Asia, recently our local pastor, while preaching from Malachi, asked us, "How would you like to wait over 400 years for a promise to be fulfilled?" He was referencing the promise of the Messiah from Malachi 3 and the 400 "silent" years between the Old and New Testament. It is also clear that the first-century Jesus followers believed that Jesus would return "soon" (Revelation 22:7,12). We have now been waiting for over 2000 years for our Lord's return. So, we have to ask ourselves, "Is God in a hurry?"

¹⁵ Dean Phillip Bell, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Jewish History and Historiography* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge Printing, 2018). <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429458927-50/timeline-dean-phillip-bell>.

¹⁶ International Mission Board, *Foundations*, 114.

This point is not to undermine the reality of thousands dying each day without knowing our Lord and the urgency of fulfilling Jesus' command in Matthew 28, nor to ignore the Spirit of God at times moving in rapid movements. The Bible teaches that we must be alert and labor as if He will return at any time (Matthew 24:44). However, adapting modern culture's need for instant gratification and results must be balanced with the reality that God's timing and pace are often much different than ours. We do well to often remind ourselves of the Lord's words to the prophet Habakkuk, "This vision is for a future time. It describes the end, and it will be fulfilled. If it seems slow in coming, wait patiently, for it will surely take place. It will not be delayed." (Habakkuk 2:3 NLT)

2. Trust Jesus' Leading to Help You Prioritize

Amid an ever-changing, all-access, information-overloaded world, one of the greatest skills in ministry is knowing how to set healthy boundaries, say "no," and manage the urgent with the important. We do well to trust God's Spirit to guide us as He promised in Psalm 32:8 (NIV) "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you." If we are to learn to slowdown as Dr. Emlet advises, then we need to grow in the skill of prioritizing. The needs and the challenges of working in tough fields are overwhelming. Biblical counselor Alasdair Groves, speaking on burnout in ministry at the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation 2023 national conference, shared that a sense of obligation in relationships, the inability to say "no." and the dread of disappointing people are three of the sinful root causes of burnout in ministry.¹⁷ The sense that "I must keep people happy with me" might reveal thoughts grounded in an unhealthy fear of man (Proverbs 29:25).

¹⁷ Alasdair Graves, "Weariness in Ministry: Conversations on How to Combat Burnout," conference presentation October 19, 2023. <https://store.ccef.org/conference/2023-national-conference-sessions/>.

As Cloud and Townsend point out, God is the ultimate example for us in having healthy boundaries: “He [God] defines and takes responsibility for his personality by telling us what he thinks, feels, plans, allows, will not allow, likes and dislikes...He confronts sin and allows consequences for behavior. He guards his house and will not allow evil things to go on there. He invites people in who will love him.”¹⁸ Scripture shows us that God rested (Genesis 2:2) and also communicated his boundaries to people like Moses (Exodus 3:1-6), Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-8) and Aaron (Leviticus 10:1-3). One has to follow certain requirements to have a relationship with God (John 14:6, 1 John 1:5-7; 4:7-8). Jesus would leave people and even said “no” to some so he could say “yes” to others (Mark 1:35-38), but Jesus also showed that some of His boundaries had flexibility (Mark 6:30-34). Jesus had to spend time hearing from the Spirit about where to prioritize His time and ministry focus and when to say “no” to other demands.

Where to prioritize? Serving for many years in Central Asia, we have new and old friends and acquaintances in many places all around the planet. One of the great aspects of technology and globalization is that we can maintain those relationships. One of the difficult aspects of technology and globalization, though, is the ability to maintain those relationships. There are a few principles we have learned over the years for discerning where people might be responding to God’s Spirit in these relationships. The first is gently placing upon others, instead of upon ourselves, the onus of staying connected. The person who writes, calls, or makes extra effort to meet with us may be the person we need to invest in.

Another way of filtering where the Spirit might be at work is to, as quickly as appropriate, ask others to study Scripture and see their response. This is especially true of people who not only meet with us and others to study Scripture but also study it on their own. “K,” a young student who came to the

¹⁸ Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to say yes, when to say no, to take control of your life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 32-33.

Lord early on in our time here in Central Asia read the whole Bible within a few months of getting his hands upon his first copy. “K” has served faithfully in the church here for over 20 years now.

A third sign of God’s Spirit at work is where people are willing to confess sin and show humble repentance. Humbling oneself through confession and repentance does not often come naturally, but is usually evidence of people who are open to God’s leadership. These are people with whom we should invest our time and efforts.

A final filtering principle of discerning where we should say “yes” is investing in others who are willing to share the good news with their families and relatives. We seek to invest in those that will also invest in others themselves. (2 Timothy 2:2).

Although there is no simple formula for knowing where to focus our lives, learning to say “no” even if to some good things while building God-honoring boundaries can help. We must continually examine our hearts and motives for why we may have problems setting boundaries. If we are to labor faithfully in demanding pioneer fields, we must realize our limitations. Struggles in this area may reveal that we have an unbiblical understanding of God’s sovereignty balanced with our responsibilities, which leads us to our third faithfulness-sustaining-truth.

3. Trust Jesus to Build HIS Church

A healthy understanding of God’s sovereignty in building His church and the peace that comes from knowing that He is the one who draws people to Himself can balance the weight of an unengaged and unreached lost world. Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18) and “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6:44). Holding the delicate tension between the very real role we play in fulfilling the Great Commission with the wonderful truth that ultimately it is God who saves and builds His church is a balance that comes with spiritual maturity.

It is such a beautiful thing to know that our lives matter. It is equally wonderful knowing that even if we leave the field or leave this life, God's kingdom will still advance. Paul reminded the first-century believers of Corinth, "So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building." (1 Corinthians 3:7-9, NIV).

4. Walk (literally and figuratively) with Jesus.

With the move toward urbanization and digitization of our lives, being in God's creation, getting physical exercise, and having time to sleep, think, pray, and meditate can be very challenging and require intentionality. In some of Jesus' final words to his disciples he stated, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5 NIV) Nurturing one's relationship with the Lord is with little doubt the most important way to remain resilient in tough fields. There are many tools and methods to help us "remain in Him", but the simple task of walking (literally) has proven invaluable for a wide array of reasons. Walking has even been called the closest thing we have to a "wonder drug."¹⁹ Likewise, being outside is a significant factor in promoting emotional health. Christian psychologists Winston T. Smith and J. Alasdair Groves note that "In an increasingly digital age, it bears repeating: you probably need to get outside more than you currently do... It's hard to overstate the value of regularly reminding your body that you live on a larger

¹⁹ Dr. Thomas Frieden, 5 *Surprising benefits of walking*: <https://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/5-surprising-benefits-of-walking>. 25 Aug 2022. Dr. Frieden is the former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

stage and in a larger story than your messy house or the four walls of your office that surround you hour after hour.”²⁰

Here are just a few of the benefits that we can experience by making walking, especially in God’s creation, a regular part of our life rhythms: 1. Walking forces us to slow down our pace of life. 2. We can talk to God while walking, and He can talk to us. 3. Walking is a low-stress exercise with an abundance of health benefits.²¹ 4. Walking can facilitate the calming of our thoughts and souls by helping us get away from distractions at home and work and into nature and fresh air. 5. Walking allows us to see people and places as we go, which can help us better pray for and understand life and the culture where we live. 6. Walking is environmentally friendly compared to riding in transportation. 7. Walking means less driving, which can mean fewer opportunities for road rage and traffic stress. 8. While walking, we

²⁰ Winston T. Smith and J. Alasdair Groves, *Untangling Emotions: ‘God’s Gift of Emotions’* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 127-128.

²¹ Some sources on the benefits of walking: <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/walking-for-good-health> (accessed 22 Nov 2023) “Walking is low impact, requires minimal equipment, can be done at any time of day and can be performed at your own pace. You can get out and walk without worrying about the risks associated with some more vigorous forms of exercise.” <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/fitness/in-depth/walking/art-20046261> (accessed 22 Nov 2023) “regular brisk walking can help you: Maintain a healthy weight and lose body fat, Prevent or manage various conditions, including heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, cancer and type 2 diabetes, Improve cardiovascular fitness, Strengthen your bones and muscles, Improve muscle endurance, Increase energy levels, Improve your mood, cognition, memory and sleep, Improve your balance and coordination, Strengthen immune system, Reduce stress and tension.” <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/defeating-depression-naturally> Tori Deangelis. “Defeating Depression Naturally.” *Monitor on Psychology*, 53, number 8. (1 Nov 2022), 80. - 25% lowered risk of depression among adults who got the recommended amount of physical activity per week—about 2.5 hours of brisk walking. 1 in 9 Cases of depression that could potentially be prevented if all adults did just 150 minutes of physical activity per week, the minimal amount recommended by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.webmd.com/fitness-exercise/mental-benefits-of-walking> (accessed 22 Nov 2022) “Walking helps boost your mood because it increases blood flow and blood circulation to the brain and body. It has a positive influence on your hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which is your central nervous response system. This is good because the HPA axis is responsible for your stress response. When you exercise by walking, you calm your nerves, which can make you feel less stressed.”

can still do things on the phone (listen to music, podcasts, text, make calls) while being outside and getting exercise.

Conclusion

There will be “Siberian winter seasons” while we serve, times when the fruits and harvest of spring and summer seem to have been swallowed up by the bitter cold of death. Maybe the work you are part of has always seemed like a fruitless winter. Let us remember that God’s sovereign timing is perfect for all peoples and tribes, that He wants us to depend upon His guidance daily and not solely on our hard work, and that as we walk with Him, times of refreshing and strength will sustain us. May the relevant truths we hear from our Lord help us keep our hands to the plow and empower us for what Eugene Peterson calls, ‘A long obedience in the same direction.’

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