

Resiliency and Expectations

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When hiking in the jungle near my home, I look for a young tree to help me navigate down a steep slope. Its supple trunk will give way, allowing me to lower myself; its roots dig deep enough to steady my descent sans foothold. The green trunk bends to let me down and then pops upright as soon as I let go. This experience proves more pleasant than the times I grab an old branch, rotted on the inside, or an old dry tree with no bend left in its branches. Those latter decisions land me in the mud at the bottom of an incline with a handful of crumbled bark.

The first tree is resilient; the second is most definitely not. The difference was in the makeup of the tree itself. One had the inner strength to withstand the pressure and pull, returning to its normal state afterward; the other was destroyed by the strain. Resiliency. That's the difference.

“Resilient” is defined as: “able to recover quickly after something unpleasant such as shock, injury, etc.” and “(of a substance) returning to its original shape after being bent, stretched, or pressed.”¹ Cross-cultural workers need to be resilient. There is plenty of bending, stretching, pressing, and more than enough shock in the lives and ministries of cross-cultural workers. What is the cause and what do we do about it?

¹ “Resilient,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, 2023, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/resilient?q=resilient>.

Our Expectations Challenge Our Resiliency

Much of the stress of life and ministry in our cross-cultural contexts boils down to unmet expectations. No matter how many books we read or seminars we take and no matter how many seasoned mentors advise us to “leave your expectations at home”, cross-cultural workers arrive on the field and discover that we inadvertently brought along expectations.

We expect to stay healthy on the field, learn a new language, enjoy team life, and fall in love with our new home. What happens when we battle illness, struggle in language study, experience conflict on our team, or find ourselves irritated by the culture we now live in?

Reality suddenly doesn't match what we expected. Can we be resilient, or will we crumble?

When my husband and I waved goodbye to our families and flew away for our first overseas assignment, I mostly focused on our own adventure. I assumed the people and place I'd left behind would stay the same. I didn't expect to receive news from my sister, several months later, that she was pregnant with her first child. My sad emotions knocked me over when I realized that I would miss her whole pregnancy and the birth of her first child. My expectations did not match up with reality.

In that first year of cross-cultural work, we expected culture shock and the feeling of helplessness as we struggled to communicate while learning a new-to-us language. When it happened, we persevered. We expected that after gaining basic knowledge of the language and culture, we would grow in our ability to navigate our new life and ministry. This proved to be true also, and we went along swimmingly . . . until we didn't.

Part way into our second year, we hit a wall. We felt the stress of culture, life, and ministry, and we suddenly didn't like our mission assignment after all. Discouragement wrapped its tendrils around us. We dragged along, wondering what had gone wrong. How would we continue to serve overseas when our expectations were so different than our reality? How could we be

resilient to bend when we felt we were going to break?

During those difficult days, we sought advice from seasoned workers, and we read some helpful books. The most effective thing we did, though, was turn to God's Word.

Scripture Calls Us to Resiliency

Scripture calls us to forsake our idols. In Philippians, Paul encourages us with the promise that God will supply our needs (Phil 4:19), but we often mis-define our needs. We want God to supply our desires, our expectations. After all, we've given our lives in service. We tell ourselves it's only fitting that at least our expectations be met. When we take this attitude, we are left holding unmet expectations in one hand and disappointment over how things are turning out in the other. Edward T. Welch in his book *When People are Big and God is Small* encourages us to consider our felt needs from a biblical perspective. He asserts that "many of our needs are more accurately called lusts, and the objects of these needs are called idols."² We may find that we have yet to conform our desires to God's desires and that we need to let go of these idols that we hold in our hands.

Secondly, God calls us to have faith in his presence. Moses' life was dotted with scenes where his expectations did not match up with reality. As a royal youth in Egypt, Moses expected to come to the rescue of "his people" (Exod 2:11 ESV), but in reality, he had to flee for his life. Years later, after Moses built a life for himself in Midian, God called him to return to Egypt for the task of rescuing His people. Moses' expectation was that he was not the guy after all. "Who am I?" he asked (Exod 3:11). And later he said, "they will not believe me" (Exod 4:1), and "I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exod 4:10). Nevertheless, God commanded him to go.

The author of Hebrews references these two scenarios in the "Hall

² Edward T. Welch, *When People are Big and God is Small* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1997), 169.

of Faith” chapter (Heb 11:23–28). How did Moses grow from the self-sufficient to the self-deficient to the subject of a significant portion of Hebrews 11? The answer is found in God’s promise to be with Moses (Exod 3:12) and Moses’ eventual maturity to put his faith in God (Heb 11:23). Like Moses, we are called to have faith that God is present in our lives.

Thirdly, God calls us to nourish ourselves in Him. In Psalm 1, David describes a godly person as one who does not feed himself on the “counsel of the wicked” (Ps 1:1) or plant himself in ungodly company, but instead spends time in God’s Word. Like a tree planted by a stream of water, the godly person is planted by the Water of Life. A hydrated tree can bend with the wind, while a dry tree will snap. The same is true for the child of God. Where we find nourishment will affect our substance and that, in turn, determines our resiliency when we face a challenge.

Conclusion

How can we be resilient cross-cultural workers? We should prayerfully consider whether or not our discouragement is coming from unmet expectations. If we find this is the case, we can rely on God’s Word to guide us. Are we trusting God to supply our needs? Are we cultivating an active faith in Him? Are we nourishing ourselves in Scripture so that we become hydrated in Truth? One expectation will stand up to our reality: God’s presence. It’s a promise. Isaiah 41:10 says, “fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” When our expectations are unmet, we can find strength in God. As the hymn writer wrote, “And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”³

³ Helen Howarth Lemmel. “Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus,” *Baptist Hymnal* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1975), no. 198.

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