

from The Sacrifice

George Herbert (1593–1633)

Then on my head a crown of thorns I wear:
For these are all the grapes Sion doth bear,
Though I my vine planted and watered there:
Was ever grief like mine?

So sits the earth's great curse in Adam's fall
Upon my head: so I remove it all
From th' earth unto my brows, and bear the thrall:
Was ever grief like mine?

...

O all ye who pass by, behold and see;
Man stole the fruit, but I must climb the tree;
The tree of life to all, but only me:
Was ever grief like mine?

Lo, here I hang, charg'd with a world of sin,
The greater world o' th' two; for that came in
By words, but this by sorrow I must win:
Was ever grief like mine?

Such sorrow as, if sinful man could feel,
Or feel his part, he would not cease to kneel.
Till all were melted, though he were all steel:
Was ever grief like mine?

But, O my God, my God! why leav'st thou me,
The son, in whom thou dost delight to be?
My God, my God— — — —
Never was grief like mine.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Global Missions Amid Global Crisis

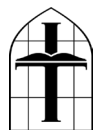
Jeff Straub

Few things have so universally affected the missionary movement like the current COVID-19 pandemic. As the world's economy has ground to a halt, so too has the advance of the gospel been significantly curtailed. With "shelter-in-place" orders stretching from California to Canada, Romania to Rwanda, the world is facing the pandemic with vigorous efforts to halt its spread and mitigate its effects.

Americans are under orders to remain in our homes with limited movement. Restaurants are closed to sit-down dining; non-essential businesses are also shuttered and social distancing is the order of the day. Churches which would be preparing for Good Friday and the Easter weekend are now thinking of creative ways to make this year's celebration unique and special.

There is a body of people affected in unusual ways by this global situation—our missionaries. My son and his family returned to the US for a four-month furlough in late February, just in time to have most of his prearranged meetings cancelled and his well-thought-out travel plans disrupted. Conferences he was to attend were suspended and long-overdue visits are on hold. Even his scheduled return to Zambia in early July is uncertain but hopeful. A consequence of the disrupted furlough is the inability to connect with churches in person to report on past activities and future plans. Many churches are using technology in the interim to maintain connections with the congregations that cannot meet in person. He spoke at his first scheduled mission conference to an empty auditorium and into a digital camera. He has Zoom meetings with churches and supporters, but helpful as this is, it is not the same as face-to-face meetings with pastors, church leaders, and congregations, meetings which normally include informal fellowship and prayer times. His churches are doing their best to help him in these days.

Recently, I was communicating with a mission leader who is dealing with the unique problems his missionaries are facing during these unprecedented days. I have already alluded to numerous problems state-side missionaries are facing, in addition to normal virus precautions: travel plans cancelled, churches not having regular services, some not having any services at all, concerns about getting to or returning from the field. Missionaries on full-time deputation are stuck and may not even qualify for unemployment



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

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900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

benefits. For missionaries overseas, the problems compound. They have concerns about their families so far from home and their families back at home. How can they be close to older parents who may be imperiled by COVID-19?

Missionaries also face health concerns of their own. Those in the majority world struggles with medical care at the best of times. Missionaries who are in countries with substantial health care resources may be in the hot-zones. They have little to no way to leave these places even if they wished to do so. They will need to ride out the storm. Missionaries who leave should not be judged against those who stay. Circumstances make these choices unique and must be made in concert with the sending churches and mission agencies. The decision to stay put or go home can be very difficult. If a missionary chooses to leave, the family will need support. If a missionary chooses to stay, it may mean weeks of isolation with little or no “work” to do for which they were commissioned. Missionary work demands lots of face-to-face interaction, Bible studies, and evangelistic outreaches, which are likely curtailed. Novice missionaries, who may be in the midst of language school or who may be dealing with culture shock, are trapped in strange places. “Cabin fever,” a challenge in the best of circumstances, can be compounded in a time like this. Grocery stores in some two-thirds world countries have a hard time staying stocked in normal times; how difficult might it be in these times of chaos? Some may experience food shortages and security issues in their countries. Challenges abound.

Financially, the missionaries may also be threatened. With the stock market in a rollercoaster pattern and churches not meeting, supporting churches have an uncertain revenue stream, meaning that supported missionaries may find their monthly commitments diminishing because churches cannot give what they do not have. In some countries, the currency may be in freefall, helping to offset some of the potential lost support. Planned furloughs must be put on hold for those who need to return from the field. Some mission agencies have emergency evacuation plans for exceptional circumstances for overseas personnel, but a pandemic could drain emergency funds, making repatriation for some impossible. Airlines are flying limited routes and even official needs like visa applications and renewals may be impossible to obtain. I have a friend who needs to return to his country soon to renew his visa, but it is looking like this will not happen. If the visa lapses, will the country renew it? Another friend has a work permit, but his country is telling him that it will not be renewed as he does not offer an “essential service” in times like this.

Beyond the personal and financial challenges, our missionaries are facing the myriad of issues related to the discipleship work they are doing. People have life and death questions. Missionaries will seize the moments as they can using technology to alleviate some of the issues, but some missionaries serve in places where electricity and internet are spotty at the best of times.

Nationals may not be connected. Pressures from a country in chaos may make things intolerable. Other missionaries have itinerant work, with travel a necessary component. Even if they wished to travel, they may be unable. Some may even be “stuck” in a place they traveled to but cannot get out from now that travel bans are in place. Or they may fear being caught if they do travel, so their options are limited.

Finally, there is the emotional toll that this is surely exacting on our missionaries. I know my family and I are stressed more than normal and our life is certainly less impacted than many overseas servants of the Lord. We have stable internet and pastoral support near at hand. Living in a strange land with few real friends, being cooped up in small apartments with little or no outside access so that children can run and get exercise, may be very taxing for some of our missionary families.

So what can we do from afar or near to help our missionaries during this exceptional time? First, we can be alert to the many kinds of issues they may now be facing that have not been reported in traditional missionary updates. “Pray for us as we enter into a sixth week of quarantine.” When is the last time you read a request like that? Prayer is the most important thing we can do for our missionaries. Beyond that, we need to do all we can to maintain their support lest they be left in a more difficult strait through want of finances. Send extra if we can to help our missionaries and to let them know they are loved and cared for. Third, drop them a note or FaceTime them to let them know you are praying for them and standing with them. There is one thing about days like this: we have a pretty good idea of where to find people—at home, hunkered down, waiting for things to improve! Reassure our missionaries that they are not forgotten and that we are praying for them to stay healthy and thrive with the Lord during these days. Finally, pray for their work. It’s the Lord’s work and it will go on, virus or no virus. Missionaries will have unique opportunities of ministry not afforded them at other times. Pray for them to use these to the glory of God.

God is in control of world events. He is building His church and not even the gates of hell can prevail against it. Our missionaries are in the vanguard of gospel advance. Let’s stand with them in these interesting days!



This essay is by Jeff Straub, Professor of Historical Theology and Missions at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
