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Missiology

Lesson 23 – The Problems of a Missionary

We know the problems Jesus faced in His ministry. We know the problems faced by the missionary Paul in his efforts to bring the Gospel of Christ to the Gentiles. We know the problems faced by Christian missionaries through the ages. It is not at all surprising that Christian missionaries today also encounter problems of various kinds: jealousy, sickness, opposition from family and friends, rejection, persecution, intimidation, temptation, depression, loneliness, government interference, family problems, disagreements with other missionaries, verbal and physical abuse, and finally death itself.

The mastermind behind all this opposition to the proclamation of the Christian Gospel is the devil himself. We read in Revelation 12:4: **“The dragon stood before the woman who was ready to give birth, to devour her Child as soon as It was born.”** Herod the Great tried to kill Jesus when He was just an infant. The devil tried to get Jesus to sin through strong temptation shortly after His baptism. He even used Jesus’ own disciple Peter to try to persuade Him to take the easy road and avoid persecution.

Having failed with Jesus, the devil is constantly hindering and obstructing the free flow of the Gospel in the world. **“Satan ... deceives the whole world”** (Revelation 12:9). In particular he tries to bring about the downfall of Christian preachers and other leaders in the flock. The devil is filled with **“great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time”** (Revelation 12:12). This rage is directed particularly toward the Christian Church, that is, all the believers in Christ throughout the world. **“The dragon was enraged with the woman”** (the Church), **“and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ”** (Revelation 12:17).

Jesus was opposed by all the leading governmental authorities of His time: Herod the Great, Herod Antipas, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the priests Annas and Caiaphas, and finally even Pontius Pilate, who knew that He was innocent and yet condemned Him. His brothers did not believe in Him at first. His hometown people in Nazareth tried to throw Him off a cliff. On several occasions Jesus’ enemies had stones in their hands, threatening to kill Him. But it was that rejection of His message through indifference that hurt Him the most. He wept because the citizens of Jerusalem did not want for themselves and their children what He offered. He told the people of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum – the cities where He spent much of His time – that they would be treated more severely because of their rejection of His message than would Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom. The culmination of all this

hatred came when they called for His crucifixion and ridiculed Him as He was atoning for their sins on Calvary.

Jesus frankly told His disciples that they could expect similar treatment. He said: **“If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household”** (Matthew 10:25). **“They will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues”** (Matthew 10:17). Some of Jesus’ last words to His disciples before His arrest were words of prophecy, telling them what they would face as His followers and ambassadors. He told them that His Father would give them **“another Helper, ... the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive”** (John 14:16-17). He warned them: **“If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. ... A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. ... They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service”** (John 15:18, 20; 16:2). But Jesus prayed for them: **“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one”** (John 17:14-15).

When Jesus called Paul to be His missionary to the Gentiles, He told Ananias, the man who baptized Paul: **“I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name’s sake”** (Acts 9:16). What sufferings did Paul have to endure? Attacks by false teachers and the disloyalty of some of his converts (see Galatians). Persecutions by Jews and Gentiles (Acts, 1 Thessalonians). Dangers and deprivations all kinds (2 Corinthians 11). Physical weaknesses, particularly his thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 12). Disagreements with his co-workers, such as Barnabas, Mark, and Demas. The responsibility of spiritual supervision over all the congregations he founded (2 Corinthians 11:28). Unjust imprisonment over long periods of time (Acts). Finally, death as a martyr (2 Timothy). But for the most part Paul endured these sufferings in a joyful spirit, informing his friends in Philippi: **“I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel”** (Philippians 1:12).

The first Lutheran missionaries in India had their problems too. Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg was burdened with a stomach ailment and sometimes fell into depression. He must not have been very intelligent either since he failed to pass his ordination examination the first time. Traveling to foreign countries was much more difficult in those days. The voyage by sea from Denmark to India took seven months, and it was a perilous journey. When he and Heinrich Pluetschau finally reached their destination, the authorities at first did not give them permission to come ashore.

At that time there were already pastors in India, including Lutherans, who were serving the European traders and their communities. For some reason these pastors resented the arrival of Lutheran pastors who intended to work among the natives of India. And it was a daunting

task because Pluetschau and Ziegenbalg had no knowledge of the Tamil language, and there was no such thing as a Tamil dictionary or grammar book to help them learn the language.

At one point they lost their financial subsidy from Denmark through an accident. The authorities of the Danish colony did not support the missionaries; Ziegenbalg was even imprisoned for four months on one occasion. But one problem that pervaded their entire stay in India was a total lack of understanding of their situation on the part of their Mission Board back in Copenhagen, Denmark. When the Mission Board later sent them more workers to help them in their work, friction developed between them and their new helpers.

The medical care they received in India proved to be inadequate. No doubt the difficulty of communication contributed to the problem. Nevertheless, they persevered for some time, and the Lord blessed their labors. The work they started continued long after their departure. Pluetschau did not last as long as Ziegenbalg, who remained in India until his early death.

Many years later William Carey came from England to work in India. He is sometimes considered the father of foreign missions because of his zeal for bringing the Gospel of Christ to those who did not know it. But it was not easy to convince others in England to support a mission venture in a foreign country. His father opposed his plans; even his own wife was not enthusiastic about his going to India. He did find a fellow-Christian to be his partner, but when they got to India, his partner decided to take up other work.

Carey carried out his work in a marshy area near Calcutta, where he could not find decent housing nor adequate nourishment. He had to constantly go from one place to another to find what he was looking for. He did not receive sufficient financial backing from England. All of this no doubt contributed to the sickness, jealousy, and insanity of his first wife Dorothy. One son died when he was five years old. The neglect of his other sons led them into delinquency. Through all of this he continued his work, even though he broke ties with the society back in England that sponsored his work.

He married a second time after his first wife died, and this second wife also suffered an early death. Some of his other family members and associates died also. His little mission had to undergo disease, grief, culture shock, and loneliness. Carey certainly worked hard, for he was devoted to this mission cause. But there was no Indian convert for seven years, and even after 28 years there were only 700 converts in a land of millions. He labored to translate the Bible into the language of the people, but at one point a fire destroyed much of his translation work. No doubt he attempted to do too much. In 41 years he did not take a furlough, but remained at his arduous task in India.

Mission pioneers often have to labor hard and long before they see fruit from their labors. But they do sow the seed, and in God's good time there is always a harvest. The stories of Ziegenbalg, Pluetschau, and Carey could no doubt be repeated many times over as we look at the work of missionaries who first brought the Gospel to North and South America from

Europe, and who later brought the Gospel back to Asia and Africa where Christianity first had its start. Now Christianity is growing more in Asia and Africa than anywhere else, whereas Europe is swiftly losing its Christian past, and it seems North America is heading in the same direction.

Mission work in foreign countries today is considerably different from what it was in earlier centuries. Think of the improvement in transportation, communication, and medical facilities. There are still many places that do not enjoy these advantages, but certainly it is easier to travel, and modern technology allows for speedy communication even in many remote areas. What would the missionary Paul have done with jet travel to every continent in the world, cell phones, electronic transmission, computers, and the speedy printing of literature in all kinds of languages, as well as the availability of dictionaries, grammars, and instant information on many topics, including Bible study? What is missing among us so often is zeal for the work and love for the Lord and compassion for the many billions of residents in the world that still do not know of Jesus or trust in Him as their Savior.

A missionary in our time still has problems, of course. One problem is opposition or lack of enthusiasm among members of his own family. People become so used to all the comforts and luxuries and conveniences of modern civilization that they hate to think of any of their friends or relatives being deprived of those comforts. A problem today that was not as much of an issue in times past is completing all the paperwork and undergoing all the examinations necessary to satisfy the bureaucracies of various governments.

In a global economy as we have today some things seem basically the same all over, especially in the large cities. But there is still a culture shock in moving from one's own country to another. There are many differences in matters of finance, shopping, cooking, medical care, dental care, social life, and various other matters that we do not even think about when we are in our native surroundings. In more remote areas the culture shock is greater than elsewhere, because of more primitive living and working conditions.

It generally takes a long period of on-the-job training before a missionary can begin to accomplish much of anything. At first, he remains a spectator, watching what others are doing rather than doing anything himself. He may find himself disagreeing with those who were working in the field before him. He may find himself having difficulty in conveying his situation with the board of missions that is promoting and financing his work. It may take a long time before he can understand the best way to deal with the native people, including the native pastors who understand each other but may not fully understand him, and whom he may not fully understand. What about native customs and traditions, such as polygamy or spirit worship? Certain native customs may seem harmless, but they are associated with heathen beliefs and possible idolatry.

Another difficulty may come from living near missionaries from false-teaching churches. We cannot work together with them, but nevertheless they may become our friends and we can

learn something from them regarding various practical matters and they can help us understand of the culture.

Often missionaries may want to do something that was easy for them to do in their home country, but on the mission field there is a lack of materials and tools and personnel to do the job that needs to be done. Most likely there will be frustrations caused by interminable delays, frequent interruptions, language misunderstandings, and the missionary's sinful flesh and the sinful flesh of his family and his associates. The education of the missionary's children may cause distress and separation. What kind of social life can there be for a family that does not fit in, or feels that it does not fit in?

Occasional furloughs are necessary for various reasons, sometimes to satisfy the laws of the land. Returning to one's native country can cause problems of its own. A missionary must find a place to stay when on furlough and it can be difficult to return to the mission field after a week or month in back home.

A Lutheran missionary in central Africa, E. H. Wendland, experienced the following during his furloughs to the United States. In 1965 his wife had major surgery. In 1968 he had to deal with the failing health of his parents. In 1971 two of his children were married. In 1973 he returned one year earlier than usual because he needed major surgery. In 1976 much of his furlough time was spent at Mayo Clinic because of malaria. In 1978 his furlough was marred by the tragic death of a son through an accident.

There is no doubt that being a missionary to a foreign land does not make for a problem-free life. But the same is true for every human being in every country, particularly for Christians and for Christian pastors, teachers, and other leaders. There are difficulties and problems and temptations in every kind of work. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: **"No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it"** (1 Corinthians 10:13). The apostles Paul and Barnabas told the new converts in Galatia: **"We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God"** (Acts 14:22). The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy: **"All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution"** (2 Timothy 3:12).

If we remember the final destiny that God has provided for us through Jesus Christ, the **"salvation ready to be revealed in the last time"** (1 Peter 1:5), the **"inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away"** (1 Peter 1:4), we shall be enabled **"for a little while"** to be **"grieved by various trials"** (1 Peter 1:6).

"Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19). **"Resist him (the devil), steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same sufferings are experienced by your brotherhood in the world. But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you**

have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you. To Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 5:9-11).

Questions

1. Why is Satan so intent on hindering the preaching of the Gospel of Christ?
2. Why does Satan direct his fiercest attacks on Christian pastors and leaders?
3. What similar problems faced Jesus and His chosen missionary Paul?
4. Why should Christian missionaries today expect to face many problems?
5. List some of the problems faced by Ziegenbalg and Pluetschau.
6. List some of the problems faced by William Carey.
7. Why is it good for pastors and missionaries to take vacations (furloughs)?
8. Why is loneliness such a problem in working far from home?
9. What blessings do missionaries enjoy today to counter loneliness?
10. If you have done some mission work, what problems have you faced?
11. What assurance do we have from our God with respect to these problems?
12. What is the missionary tempted to do to escape problems?
13. What specific problems does a missionary face in your area?
14. List some Bible passages that should help a pastor with his problems.