

# Filling Up the Suffering of Christ

## “Good News” Ministry in Dangerous Situations

Mission invitations for people to accept God’s call to serve Least Evangelized peoples and cities are often met with the question, “Is it safe?” Celebrated missional churches often trumpet quick, pain-free, sanitized forays among these “hard peoples”—after which these envoys enjoy the prestige of having done missionary work...and return to their “normal” lives, whether in Singapore or Seattle, London or Lagos, Sao Paulo or Stuttgart.

Proponents of developing comprehensive strategies to stimulate holistic gospel movements (also called transformational church planting movements—CPM) among peoples and cities clearly understand that successful transformation will require suffering from the messengers (both local and cross-cultural) and the new converts. This view precludes the simplistic and formulaic caricatures of “CPM” thinking, which suggest that “perfect” strategies and contextualization and “mercy” ministries will divert suffering.

Essentially, Scripture teaches that Gospel proclamation (in word and deed) among all peoples will come only in the middle of great suffering and sacrifice. Those called to the Least Evangelized of the world must be strengthened both by the promise of God’s help in suffering and God’s ultimate success. This understanding will prevent a reductionistic or an over-simplistic understanding of missions.

Allow me to lay out some thoughts for your reflection:

**The biblical standard for Jesus’ challenge to discipleship emphasizes cost-counting and the likelihood of suffering.** Jesus asked James and John if they were willing to suffer on His behalf. He set the rich young ruler’s price at “suffering” the loss of his possessions. He challenged all believers to die in order to succeed on His behalf.

Paul celebrated his own brutal spiritual execution which freed him from Satan’s ownership in order to live an incredible Spirit-generated and guided life of proclaiming the Good News (Gal. 2:20).

Hebrews 2:10, and 10:32-36 include a call to suffer for the sake of the gospel. Peter tells his readers that suffering for the sake of Jesus is normal and will be offset by being overjoyed when His glory is revealed (1 Pet. 4:12-17).

**Scriptures celebrating the spread of the Gospel reflect an assumption that suffering is often a “given.”** Paul celebrates that, in spite of severe suffering, the Thessalonians joyfully welcomed the Holy Spirit-transmitted message—with the result that the message rang out in Macedonia, Achaia and everywhere (1 Thes. 1). Paul tells Timothy to join him in his suffering by not being ashamed to testify of the Lord, points out he is glad to endure his chains—and implies that this suffering causes the Word of God to go further

**Kent Parks**, and his wife Erika has served in SEAsia for 17 years, working mainly among Unreached People Groups and in helping develop UPG ministry networks, as well as nation-wide and region-wide UPG-focused networks. He served seven years as a Baptist pastor in the US before serving in SEAsia as a seminary professor (Ph.D. in missiology), and as a Strategy Coordinator focused on stimulating trans-denominational and trans-national efforts among UPGs. He is currently serving as SEAsia Regional Facilitator for the Network for Strategic Missions and as the Facilitator for SEALINK, an emerging SEAsia UPG network.

(2 Tim. 1:8-10). The apostles rejoiced they were counted worthy to be disgraced—which motivated them to teach and proclaim Jesus continuously (Acts 5:41-42).

**Many mission sermons surgically remove “suffering” verses and use “triumphal” verses.** As long as we isolate such Scriptures, mission theology and practice will be stunted.

The suffering to fill up the incomplete sufferings of Christ (Col.1:24) was not generic suffering because of living in a fallen world. This suffering’s purpose (v. 27) is so that the saints can make known to non-believers this glorious mystery—“Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Paul’s expanded teaching (Eph. 3) adds the emphasis that this is a mystery of humanity being reunited in Jesus—Jews and Greeks are now one.

Mission speakers quote Habakkuk 1:5—God’s promise that something incredible will happen, which not only will be hard to believe but will *not* be believed (!)—as if wonderful positive “mission success” is imminent. While ultimately this interpretation is borne out in Chapter 2 with the promise of the knowledge of the Lord covering the earth as the waters cover the sea, most “do not believe” when warned that the “incredible things” in Habakkuk 1:5 describes great disaster and suffering brought about by a “ruthless” and “slaughtering” and massive devastation. Only after a significant, lingering period of this suffering does God clarify to the watchful that God’s ultimate revelation and victory will come and will be seen by those who patiently work for God’s appointed fulfillment.

Isaiah understood. In his wonderful and terrifying experience of seeing, being purified and being called by God, a final price to pay was required—to go to a people who would not listen and who would persecute him (6:9-

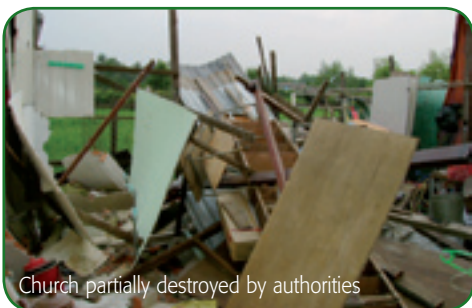
13). Few mission sermons go beyond verse eight and the joyous “send me.”

Isaiah 66 (often considered the pinnacle of Old Testament mission vision) celebrates both the sending of people to proclaim His glory to the nations, and the resultant pilgrimage of believers from all nations (vv. 18-21). What is usually ignored is that those whom are sent to all the peoples are the *survivors*—clearly indicating that this sending will be through and in spite of suffering.

Matthew 24:14’s great promise that all *ethnè* will hear the Good News is often violently used out of context. This verse is part of the conclusion of Jesus’ “final days” teaching. He does not suggest all peoples will hear “in spite of” this catastrophic turmoil. He links the hearing of the peoples with these disasters when he says “and” all peoples will hear. More disturbingly, He stresses that in the middle of this increase of evil (and suffering?) many believers will betray each other and that the love of most believers will grow cold (only doing missions where it is “safe?”). Jesus’ conclusion seems to be that God will redeem catastrophic situations by opening doors for the spreading of the “knowledge” of the Lord in dangerous times and places—when He finds those willing to serve the peoples in spite of danger and suffering.

*New converts and cross-cultural witnesses are applying these Scriptures by spreading the Good News and rejoicing that they are worthy to suffer for doing the right thing. Here are three case studies.*

**Asia I:** A small congregation in a mountainous village learned to answer severe persecution with love. They shared food with those who trampled their gardens. They loved those who threw feces into their wells. They responded with love when one of their homes was burned to the ground. The main



(and very cruel) persecutor finally brought a mob to the home where they were worshipping. The mob did severe destruction to the roof and outer walls of the home. Suddenly, for an unknown reason, the mob turned on their leader and literally beat him to death before the Christians had time to come outside. As the mob angrily stormed down the path as the sunset, the Christian leader asked them who would guard his body until the police could come to that mountain village in the morning. The sneering reply was, “Let the Dogs have his body”—an amazingly strong curse for a Muslim to give. So the believers took turns staying up all night to guard the body of their enemy. After the police finished their report, the believers asked the village leaders who would prepare this man for burial, since as Christians, they could not legally do so or bury him in the Muslim cemetery. The angry retort was, “Let him rot!” Again, the believers lovingly took the body of their enemy, washed it and buried it.

**Asia II:** A congregation in a neighboring village that had emerged from this first congregation faced similar persecution. Over a year later, with pressure from outside “enforcers,” the village warned this second congregation that they were going to burn the small meeting place (like the home noted above). After praying and asking God for wisdom, the believers came back to the village leadership and asked to be allowed to worship one more time in their place, and promised that they would then dismantle the structure. The village leadership agreed. The congregation had a powerful service of praise to Jesus followed by a wonderful biblical message—while throngs from the village stood in a circle around the building—and listened quietly the full time! Then the congregation emerged, dismantled their building, and held a celebration meal for all who were there.

And now, these congregations have grown, plus there are congregations in eight more villages! When did this all begin? When the initial congregation began to



understand that their job was to pay whatever price to spread the Good News and asked God to give them power to touch their villages, their people, and the world!

**Africa:** A Nigerian believer was arrested in a North African nation as he left a worship meeting at a house church. The members were Sub-Saharan Africans, Indians, Pakistanis and Filipinos. He (plus others who experienced similar suffering) was arrested, beaten, shaved, forced into heavy labor, beaten as he worked, and dragged face down over gravel. Personal property and passports were confiscated and never returned.

He was forced to reveal meeting places of other believers who were also arrested. One such believer worked in a car wash and served as a voluntary pastor in a government approved congregation. He was hung upside down and required several hospital visits as a result of his beatings. He was accused of being an agent receiving money from the “Mother Church” in order to bribe others from this nation to become Christians.

Shortly after this, a pogrom broke out against Nigerians and other black Africans. Hundreds of black citizens from other African nations were killed or simply disappeared. Yet, these who were persecuted continued to pray for the peace and salvation of this country—and continue to work so others will come bear witness to Jesus in this dangerous place.

The suffering of Christ will not be “filled up”—nor His joy complete—until all peoples are fully served with the “works, word, and wonders” proclamation of His Good News. <<