

Distractions: Persevere through the Obstacles

By George Parson, John Hannah, and Kathi DeCanio

"Well, Steve, you're a grown man now. Your father and I would never say you can't go overseas. We want you to be happy. This is just a little hard to accept! You're in a great job with good contacts and a promising career in front of you! You want to walk away from all this for some people on the other side of the world you've never even met!?"

Who Me, Sidelined?

Steve's in a bit of a tough spot. Perhaps you can relate.

"Mom, it's hard to explain, I know that I've experienced the love of God in my life, and that's largely because of you and Dad. But these people in Indonesia have never even had a chance to hear and understand about Jesus; my going there may give them that chance."

It's hard getting to the mission field! I know! In the process, I had my car stolen, was scared about speaking in churches, didn't want to travel overseas alone, and prayed a lot about the issue of going single! But the Lord was able to work out these things for me.

There are many steps in the process of determining our role as world Christians and preparing to fill it well. For some, these include identifying your ministry gifts and determining how to use them, choosing a mission agency to serve with, getting training and raising support.

In addition, there are a host of potential distractions, obstacles and temptations to prevent you from fulfilling your part in proclaiming Christ among the unreached. Mark 4:19 reminds us that "the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the Word, making it unfruitful."

Being aware of the issues that frequently become distractions can help you stand guard when you encounter them, enabling you to move past them into the ministry to which the Lord is calling you. Rather than becoming hindrances, each issue can serve as an opportunity God uses to mature and prepare you for effective ministry.

As we seek to be used by God – whether it be on the mission field or in the role of sender or mobilizer – let's look at some of the issues we may face, some ways we can prepare to move through them, and then at a biblical example of a servant who was tempted like us, but was faithful to the call God gave him. First, some of those potential stumbling blocks.

The Parent Factor

As we've seen above, it can be awfully tough for parents to accept their son or daughter's desire to serve overseas. It can be equally tough for parents to see their well educated offspring choosing to live a simple and counter cultural lifestyle.

In general, include your parents in your world Christian journey from the beginning. Tell them what you're learning about God and the world; take them with you through the process as your perspective and values change. When you first think about a summer

mission trip, tell them. There will often be an initial shock reaction. Give them time to process it before you either give up or announce your decision.

Be gentle when talking to your parents about your missions interests; seek to listen and understand their point of view, and express sincere appreciation for all they've done to help make it possible for you to even consider serving in this way. As you work through the struggles involved in your decision regarding your contribution to the task, bring your parents along with you, step by step. And, of course, pray much for the Lord to give them and you greater understanding.

The Material World

We do live in a material world, and by the world's standards Steve had it made. Maybe you do, too. If you're on the path toward a successful career, with the money and time to enjoy your own apartment, nice clothes and two weeks vacation a year, you are blessed. The kind of security, comfort and physical well-being we experience in the U.S. is only a distant dream to most of the world's people. These blessings are not meant to be grasped, but accepted gratefully and held loosely. "Freely you have received," Jesus said to His disciples, "freely give" (Matthew 10:8). When we tightly grasp the good things God has given us, they have an ability to entrap us and hold us back from running the race God has set before us. We must beware the trap of being owned by the things we own.

Debt Dilemma

Another issue many face is debt. This may come in the form of a large college debt to pay off, buying a new car, or an endless stream of seemingly "small" credit purchases. Debt can derail you from your purpose to serve God wholeheartedly. You can't go to the mission field with these debts, nor are you free to give to the Lord's work as you would like to. Beware of the debt trap! If you're working to pay off your debt, great! Keep at it diligently. Make it your goal to "owe no man anything but to love one another" (Romans 13:8). Ask a close friend to hold you accountable for reaching your goal of being totally debt free by a specified target date. When that day dawns and you're debt free, you'll put on your dancin' shoes!

Matters of the Heart

Who can describe the way of a man with a maiden (Proverbs 30:18-19)? The emotions God has filled us with, the electricity that flows between two in love can be powerful. In fact, the female/male attraction is almost too strong for the Holy Spirit to counter! This is an exaggeration of course, but we put it boldly to make the point. We meet someone who seems "right," and those indescribable feelings soar off the chart! Then, who cares if he or she isn't interested in going with me to plant churches in downtown Beirut? Or willing to live very simply in order to free up more finances to help reach the unreached? Surely he or she will change for me!

If, however, you throw caution to the wind, go with what you feel, and later realize that your blind trust that "it will all work out somehow" wasn't as reliable as you thought, God's grace will ultimately cover you. But it will be a devastatingly painful process, and one that you could have and would have wanted to avoid.

Our faith may be tested if we're desiring, and still waiting for, that special relationship. If that's your situation, trust in God for this important area of your life. When God has brought two together who are following His bidding, the joy and delight in God are wonderful! As

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you follow His leading and seek to invest your life in His Kingdom, be assured He will take care of the rest (Matthew 6:33). In His will is the best place you can be!

Raising Support

Jesus told His disciples to go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. But how do we finance that? I've heard many people describe support raising as "begging for money." Doesn't sound too attractive, does it? But is it begging for money? I don't think so. There are many good articles and workbooks available on how to actually go about raising support. It would be foolish to re-invent the wheel and not make use of these good resources, so do check into them.

Suffice it to say that missionaries work in places where the people they serve either don't have the resources to pay for the benefits received (as in Bible translation) or they don't have any desire to pay someone to share the Gospel with them (as in Muslim countries). In both cases, it's Christians – who are blessed financially and blessed because they know the Lord – who choose to partner with those who to take the gospel to the nations.'

Paul taught that he who preached the gospel should earn his living from the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:14). There are many Christians who are happy to invest part of their material wealth in the eternally significant enterprise of helping fulfill the Great Commission! Those you have prayed with, worshipped with, ministered alongside, and ministered to, will be most eager. They know you and will want to continue to join with you. A committed home team can fill an incredible role, contributing not only financially, but also with encouragement, prayer, and expertise. And developing a support team can be a great opportunity to mobilize. Be careful though! You may, like some of us, find some of your supporters joining you in "going"!

Don't let the fear of raising support hinder you from following God's calling! Begin now, in your church and with your friends, to build such a team of people.

Ministry Opportunities Here

Your pastor, parents, or friends mention to you that there are so many people to reach here in the States that you might as well stay here. After all, if you stay you can minister in a language and culture you already know.

There's no denying that there's a great need here. But the need overseas is even greater. For every missionary to the unreached parts of the world, more than 100 Christian workers are at work in the parts with an active church.

Spiritual Apathy and Sin

It's easy to slide into a comfortable rut that leads nowhere but to apathy. It might begin with getting so wrapped up in life here that you become apathetic about what God is doing in the world. Or it may begin with cutting down on your time with the Lord due to growing work and life pressures. Soon your time with the Lord becomes minimal if it exists at all. Spiritual cobwebs clutter the corners of your life and threaten to overwhelm you. In such a state you rarely think about reaching the lost. In fact, when you fall into such a state of spiritual apathy, you are more easily led into sin. Deliberate disobedience to God's revealed will results in no further direction from the Lord.

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Lack of Initiative and Waiting

"I'm waiting for the optimum time. I'm not sure it's time yet for me to go." It's common to hear this from many would be missionaries. Some people are waiting for a mission board to recruit them. Others are waiting for a bolt of lightning. Still others are waiting for a mate. The common thread is the lack of initiative. Don't misunderstand. Waiting is valid, but you need to ask the question, "What am I waiting on or waiting for?" It's waiting upon God for His leading that is righteous; the Psalms speak over and over again about how good it is to wait upon Him.

Don't act in haste (Proverbs 19:2), but realize that there's a difference between active waiting and passive waiting. If you don't actively pursue the options of going overseas, radically sending or mobilizing others, chances are that the Great Commission will have just been a thing of the past in your life.

And a Host of Other Things...

Perhaps you're aware of other things in your life that are seeking to pull you away from your desire or commitment to help take the Gospel to all nations, whether as a cross-cultural witness, a mobilizer or a sender. Hey, as Peter said, "Don't be surprised, as if some strange thing were happening to you!" (1 Peter 4:12) You have entered into a battle against a powerful, evil adversary. We are encouraged to be aware of Satan's schemes and to be on the look out (2 Corinthians 2:11, 1 Peter 4:8).

Ask yourself what things Satan might be using to try to distract and derail you from following the Lord's leading in your life. The pursuit of your career or unwillingness to change career tracks? Close family ties that are hard to leave? Delay in dealing with emotional and relational limitations resulting from a dysfunctional family background? A ministry here that's so fulfilling it's hard to leave? Concern for self-fulfillment? The many human needs so visible at hand? Fear of raising a family overseas? Fear of learning another language? Feeling you're too old?

Just be aware and be prayerful. You and I won't help finish world evangelization without some skirmishes along the way! But we're on the winning team! Keep focused on your Lord, your high calling and the long-term benefits of faithfully fulfilling your part in the plan!

An Example to Follow: Moses

God called Moses to lead His people out of bondage and slavery in Egypt. God cared for His people, and He wanted to use Moses to deliver them. He wanted His people freed from Pharaoh's bondage so they could worship Him and become a testimony to the other nations. Today, God calls us to the privilege of being His messengers, His Moses, to help set people free to be able to know, love, and worship Him.

Well, when God called Moses to be His messenger, how did Moses respond? He was tempted in many of the same ways you may be! He felt inadequate and fearful. He was probably tempted to cling to the wealth and opulent lifestyle in which he was raised. Exodus 3 and 4 and Hebrews 11 give us a glimpse into these events.

Moses could easily have found an excuse not to follow God's call, but he obeyed! He stepped out and followed God. And God used him to set His people free. Moses witnessed the miracles of the plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, and the giving of manna in the

wilderness. In the process, Moses became a man of prayer, and he walked with God intimately.

Moses persevered, and it is written of him: "By faith, Moses refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" (Hebrews 11:24-26). Moses persevered in his calling because "he saw Him who is invisible." What an example for us to follow! We serve a King we've never seen, and we live for an invisible, eternal and glorious kingdom! When we're tempted to be discouraged, let's remember God's servant Moses, and imitate his faith and obedience! Don't let Satan sideline you! Don't be sidelined as you seek to live for God's global purpose!

George Parson, John Hannah, and Kathi DeCanio all served on the staff of Caleb Project. George (not his real name) had previously served for four years in Papua New Guinea with Wycliffe Bible Translators.

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