

## The Cost of Discipleship in Afghanistan

*The Wired Word* for August 15, 2010

### In the News

Since 1966, the International Assistance Mission has been serving in Afghanistan, providing health care to more than a quarter of a million people each year. Its members delivered some of the first toothbrushes and eyeglasses that residents of remote villages had ever seen. Tom Little, an optometrist from Delmar, New York, had worked in Afghanistan for more than 30 years, and he knew the dangers. In 2001, the Taliban government expelled him for allegedly trying to convert Afghans to Christianity. Later that year, he returned to Afghanistan after U.S.-backed forces toppled the Taliban government.

Dr. Little led a team that had spent two weeks on a medical mission to northern Afghanistan's Nuristan province. As they were returning to Kabul, they were attacked by approximately 10 gunmen, who robbed and shot them one by one. Only one Afghan man, who had been traveling with the group, survived. He recited the Qur'an and begged the gunmen to spare him, saying, "I am Muslim. Don't kill me."

The Taliban has claimed credit for the attack, saying the team was trying to convert Muslims to Christianity. But the International Assistance Mission doesn't proselytize, and family members and friends say the slain medical workers weren't trying to spread religious views. The twin brother of Thomas Grams, an American dentist who was among the dead, said his brother "was there to help the people of Afghanistan. He knew the laws, he knew the religion. He respected them. He was not trying to convert anybody. His goal was to provide dental care and help people. He knows it's a capital offense to try to convert folks."

Another victim was Cheryl Beckett, daughter of a pastor in Knoxville, Tennessee. She had spent six years in Afghanistan and was a specialist in nutritional gardening and mother-child health. "Cheryl loved and respected the Afghan people," said her family. "She denied herself many freedoms in order to abide by Afghan law and custom. Those who committed this act of terror should feel the utter shame and disgust that humanity feels for them."

Glen Lapp was working for International Assistance Mission as manager of its provincial ophthalmic care program at the time of his death. In a recent report, he wrote that he and his colleagues were "treating people with respect and with love and trying to be a little bit of Christ in this part of the world."

The FBI will conduct autopsies of the six dead Americans as part of its investigation into the killings. Afghanistan authorities haven't ruled out the possibility that thieves unaffiliated with the Taliban might actually have shot the medical workers.

Members of **The Wired Word** editorial team have offered a variety of insights into discipleship, sacrifice and the presence of evil in the world. Malia Miller, a guidance counselor at Green High School in Canton, Ohio, says the tragedy "will challenge us to appreciate the sacrifice that is sometimes made as we serve. I also think it is interesting that the Taliban is so threatened by the discipleship of Christians that they took such extreme measures to stop them. Perhaps they understand the power of the gospel more than some Christians do!"

Joanna Loucky-Ramsey, pastor of First Baptist Church of Potsdam, New York, is reminded of five missionaries who were killed in Ecuador in 1956, influencing many people to get serious about their faith and witness. Both

acts of costly discipleship lead us to wonder "how to make sense of such sacrifice and how God brings good out of devastating loss and tragedy."

And Timothy Merrill, senior editor of the preaching journal *Homiletics*, broadens the subject by reminding us that evil isn't limited to the hills of Afghanistan. "We are almost numb to the killing of innocents in our own land by people who put a gun in their hands and use it on others, or get behind the wheel of a car while intoxicated and get out onto the highways." He senses there's something dark and malevolent in our world, and Christians are called to confront it.

To stand up to evil -- and sometimes lose our lives in the process -- is part of the cost of discipleship.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[10 Aid workers killed in Afghanistan, CBC News](#)

[Friends of slain doctors deny they pushed religion, AOL News](#)

[FBI will conduct autopsies on 6 American aid workers slain in Afghanistan, The Washington Post](#)

## **The Big Questions**

1. What motivates people to travel to a foreign country, abide by local customs and deny themselves many personal freedoms in order to deliver medical care to residents of remote villages?
2. St. Francis of Assisi said, "Preach the gospel at all times and when necessary use words." How does this apply to the work of Christian medical missions?
3. In what ways might opponents of Christianity understand the power of the gospel even better than some practicing Christians do?
4. Following such a massacre, how can God bring good out of devastating loss and tragedy?
5. Evil exists in both Afghanistan and the United States, although it takes different forms. In what ways should Christians confront evil where they live?

## **Confronting the News with Scripture**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **Genesis 50:19-20**

*"But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.'" (For context, read 50:15-21.)*

Joseph's brothers had done terrible evil to him, beginning with their decision to sell him into slavery. But God worked through their treachery to put Joseph in a position to prosper in Egypt. Eventually, Joseph saved his entire family -- and thousands of others -- during a time of famine.

**Question:** Where have you seen God take human evil and use it to produce a positive outcome?

### **Isaiah 56:7**

*"These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (For context, read 56:1-8.)*

God extended the covenant to all who keep the sabbath and refrain from doing evil, including two categories of people who had formerly been excluded: eunuchs and foreigners. The circle of inclusion continues to widen, until the house of the Lord is "a house of prayer for all peoples."

**Question:** Why is it so hard for some Muslim nations to accept Christians, and for some Christian churches to accept people of different races and nationalities?

### **Luke 4:18-19**

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (For context, read 4:16-30.)

Jesus began his ministry by bringing good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind -- similar to the work of the International Assistance Mission. But he, too, encountered opposition and came close to being thrown off a cliff by the people of Nazareth.

**Question:** What is it about the Gospel -- proclaimed in word or deed -- that evokes such rage in some people?

### **Acts 7:57-58**

*"But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against [Stephen]. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul."* (For context, read 6:8 - 7:60.)

The deacon Stephen did great wonders and signs among the people of Jerusalem, and members of the synagogue accused him of blasphemy. He gave a speech to the council in Jerusalem that so enraged them that they stoned him to death. Acts reports that a man named Saul -- the future apostle Paul -- "approved of their killing him" (8:1).

**Questions:** The early Christian author Tertullian said "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." How could this apply to martyrs such as Stephen and the medical team of the International Assistance Mission? Respond to the following: In 2,000 years of Christian history, about 70 million people have given their lives for the faith, and of these, 45.5 million -- 65 percent -- were in the 20th century, according to *The New Persecuted*, a book by Italian journalist Antonio Socci.

### **Romans 7:21**

*"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand."* (For context, read 7:14-25.)

Paul writes of an inner conflict between good and evil, spirit and flesh -- one that causes him to do the very things he hates. He finds that he is a captive to sin, and the only thing that can rescue him is Jesus Christ, his Lord.

**Questions:** Where do you see evil at work in the world, both at home and abroad? Where do you see the power of Christ in this ongoing struggle?

## **Questions for Further Discussion**

1. Because of this massacre, do you think the International Assistance Mission should withdraw from Afghanistan? Why or why not?

2. How is Christ present in loving humanitarian actions, and what impact does this have on non-Christian cultures?
3. Can you make a connection between religious violence and lack of religious freedom?
4. Imagine yourself as an Afghan citizen who has benefited from the care of the International Assistance Mission. How would you react to news of this massacre?
5. What significance do you find in the medical team's sacrifice, and how should the church respond?
6. What does it mean to you to "put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil" (Ephesians 6:11)?

### **Responding to the News**

Evaluate your church's support of overseas medical missions, and determine if your offerings of prayer and money should be adjusted in light of this incident.

### **Other News This Week**

Starting on August 11, the beginning of the Islamic month of Ramadan, a football player named Husain Abdullah, a safety for the Minnesota Vikings, will be practicing without benefit of food or water. During Ramadan, observant Muslims such as Abdullah fast for 30 days, avoiding food and drink while the sun is out. They can eat and drink after sundown, but this is little help during an intense and dehydrating NFL practice session under the hot sun. How many Christians are as committed to their faith as this young man is?

For more information, see:

[Ramadan means no water during workouts for Husain Abdullah, \*Yahoo! Sports\*](#)

### **Closing Prayer**

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for the willingness of your disciples to bring good news to the poor and recovery of sight to the blind, even when discipleship costs them their lives. May we remember their contributions, honor their sacrifices and grow in Christian faith and obedience. Amen.

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