A Theology of Strategic Risk in the Advance of the Gospel

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Joel DeHart served as an English Second Language instructor among Afghan refugees in Pakistan from 1987 until July 6, 1991—the day he was taken hostage. Joel knew several local languages and deeply loved the culture and the people. Few would have been better prepared for captivity, a six-month “forced vacation” in the mountains of Afghanistan by a people hostile to the Gospel. Joel’s preparedness for captivity was rooted in a faith focused solely on a sovereign and good God. His rock-solid foundation in God’s sovereign goodness is seen clearly in this excerpt from his journal, The Upper Hand: God’s Sovereignty in Afghan Captivity:

God has the upper hand, no matter what the plans of man.
He rules and reigns above, and does His will.
Just trust His sovereignty, and you’ll not discouraged be,
But live each day with joy, and worship Him.

From his mountain prison Joel DeHart exhibited true Spirit-empowered faithfulness. For even in captivity he memorized Philippians using a hand-written transcription, witnessed to his captors and worked on his language skills. Joel taught English to the captor’s children (who held the key to his cell), worked on the farm and praised Jesus daily, singing hundreds of songs and hymns from memory. While in captivity, DeHart wrote, without the aid of a Bible, his recollection of the grand themes and stories of Scripture—all laced with the reassurance of God’s sovereign hand. And expressing his deepening intimacy with God, Joel created a list blessings and lessons learned through his own hostage situation.

Joel DeHart serves as a poignant example of a rising generation of missionaries spurred to death-
defying mission by an intimate knowledge of God’s sovereign goodness. In his book, The New Friars, Scott A. Bessenecker chronicles a current movement of young missionary warriors like Joel DeHart, who put aside the typical concern for jobs, pensions and careers in order to pursue God’s Great Commission call to engage all nations with the Gospel. These “new friars” are ready to sell it all and go live for Jesus among the poor. Bessenecker, using Paul’s image in 2 Corinthians 4, calls the young friars ordinary broken vessels. For they are not the “elite branch of the church—the Christian Marines or the Navy Seals of the faith,” and the slum community is not a badge of righteousness, but rather it is “a place where God can better shape them on the potter’s wheel of service.” Both Joel DeHart’s journal and Bessenecker’s account of the new friars reveal the continuing call of Christ for self-denial and spiritual combat. This call leads the contemporary church into fruitful discussions of how to respond in the face of dangerous missions.

TWO PRESSING QUESTIONS

Two questions drive the discussion. The first is personal: Would our sovereign God knowingly direct us to engage in dangerous Gospel witness, even to the point of death? The second question is institutional: How should the church and mission-sending institutions respond when the ones we send insist on obeying God’s direction, even when it involves entering or remaining in harm’s way? The answers to both questions will have a drastic impact on the way we do missions. As we will see, Scripture and history are not silent in regards to costly missions.

Would a Loving God Call Us to Costly Missions?

In view of the many stories like Joel DeHart, Christians are confronted with the question: Would a loving God intentionally send his servants on missions bound for certain injury and death? The Bible gives us clear teaching in both Testaments that the servant of God often faces persecution and hardships. Old Testament prophets are predecessors of the type of obedience found in Paul’s life and the lives of other New Testament witnesses, all of which find their ultimate fulfillment in the perfect obedience of the suffering Christ. Ostracism, persecution, and even murder may accompany obedience to God’s call in both Testaments. These servants willfully chose God’s mission in the face of certain persecution and potential death at the hands of the enemies of God.

Spiritual Warfare

The Bible is clear that we as witnesses to Christ are actively and constantly engaged in spiritual warfare. The expression militia spiritualis requires a fundamental concept of self-sacrifice and readiness for the missionary cause of Christ. In his thesis Malone presents the term militia spiritualis, referencing the inner spiritual battle against Satan, the flesh, and the enemies of God. According to Malone “every Christian is a miles Christi.” The Holy Spirit seeks to arm every Christian for spiritual battle. Followers of Christ are intended to be soldiers of Christ on active duty. Malone uses the military metaphor primarily to address every Christian’s personal battle against sin and Satan. He addresses a distinct missionary trait - eager and willing suffering for the advance of Christ’s mission. Missionaries, cross-cultural evangelists and urban church planters may willingly choose a risky lifestyle under the hostile administration of government or other authorities that violently oppose gospel-centered and obedient Christian witness. Such a missionary is a spiritual soldier, waging a dangerous war for Christ’s eternal Kingdom. Unlike the crusaders of old, the missionary is conquering no land. The cross-cultural church planter is not fighting to establish a political regime, but to serve as a relational bridge and bold witness for Christ. The pages of Christian missions, like Reformation history, are spotted with the blood of Christ’s servants who eagerly engaged in the spiritual battle, elevating God’s mission and His message far above their own safety and security. The Christian missionary has found a cause worthy of self-denial, even death. The cause is the
Such engagement in spiritual warfare on the mission field can result in the death of a spouse or the child of a missionary, as was the case of Adoniram Judson. Dangerous missions can lead a person to sacrifice entitlements others consider essential to optimal health. For example, living in a rural village in the Global South could require a missionary to drink contaminated water and eat amoebic-infested vegetables. Such a lifestyle leads to long-term and potentially debilitating health consequences. Many missionaries live with chronic intestinal difficulties and other undiagnosed maladies. Inner-city workers risk living in high-crime areas. Costly missions may not always be dangerous, but it can be debilitating to marriage and family life. Obedient witness can diminish overall physical wellbeing and may result in personal loss of life. The lives of stalwart missionaries such as William Carey, Thomas Coke, Adoniram Judson and Lottie Moon exemplify a standard of dangerous witness. These missionaries and countless others like them exemplify the bold witness for Christ in the midst of persecution and spiritual warfare established in Scripture.

**Old Testament Precedent**

It is clear that throughout the Old Testament that God consistently leads his prophets to unknown, dangerous, and potentially fatal circumstances. Traced throughout the Old Testament narrative are many examples of violent opposition against God’s prophets because of their obedience to his commands.

One such example is found in the life of Noah. God chose Noah to carry out a mission to judge and to preserve God’s creation (Gen 6-9). In spite of absolute ridicule, Noah obeyed and carried out the mission of God. The earth was cleansed and preserved for God’s glory. In later generations Abram became the father of nations as a result of his selection by God. “The Lord established this covenant plan with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 18:18-19; 22:15-18), later confirming it, first with Isaac (26:2-4) and then with Jacob (28:14).” The covenant required Abraham’s obedience, which would at times be met by unknown consequences in an uncertain and distant land. Abraham obeyed and followed God on the mission that would give birth to God’s covenant people.

Moses reluctantly, but faithfully obeyed and served God and the people of Israel under the forceful opposition of Pharaoh. The consequences for his obedience were severe for both Moses and the people of Israel. As a result of Moses’ mission, Pharaoh forced the people of Israel to produce more bricks with less straw—a physically exhausting and near-impossible task. Pharaoh’s oppression became so severe that even the people Moses was sent to rescue began to grumble against him (Exod 5:20-21). Moses’ persistent obedience to God’s mission resulted in the accomplishment of God’s plan for the people of Israel. According to Bryant Hicks Moses was, “Yahweh’s instrument to bring the Hebrews into a clear understanding of how they were to live in relation to God.” Because of his obedience, Moses led Israel out of exile and oppression, was the mediator of God’s covenant with them, and led the nation through the desert to the edges of the Promised Land.

Jeremiah was a prophet whose message brought scorn, public humiliation and torture. He was mocked in the public square. An opposing false prophet even deceitfully plotted against Jeremiah (Jer 11:18-20). Yet Jeremiah persisted in his godly prophetic role, carrying out the mission of Yahweh. In response to violent persecution, Jeremiah retorts, “And if I say, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name, then there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with forbearing, and I cannot contain.” (Jer. 20:9 NAS) Jeremiah confesses that the enemies of God can defame him, denounce him, and do all kinds of evil against him. Nevertheless, Jeremiah relentlessly proclaimed the message of God, regardless of the personal injury incurred.

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego lived out this type of commitment to God. The three faithful servants were brought to serve the royal court of Babylon (Dan 1). Eventually Nebuchadnezzar made a golden idol and decreed that every person in the kingdom bow down to the god at the sound of
music. The king declared that anyone who failed to bow down would be thrown into the fiery furnace. Aware of the penalty, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar’s god, and were bound and cast into the blazing furnace. They risked their lives in defiance of a king and his corrupt law that forced worshipers of Yahweh to bow to a false god. In the end, the king exalted God, who spared the three servants. The three men would rather die than deny God. God used this dangerous mission to establish his sovereignty and advance his worship throughout the kingdom:

Nebuchadnezzar spake and said, 'Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, who has sent his angel, and delivered his servants that trusted in him, and have changed the king’s word, and have yielded their bodies, that they might not serve nor worship any god, except their own God. Therefore I make a decree, that every people, nation, and language, which speak anything amiss against the God of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, shall be cut in pieces, and their houses shall be made a dunghill; because there is no other god that is able to deliver after this sort. (Dan 3:28-29, ASV)

Also, the story of Daniel’s deliverance from the den of lions serves as a similar example of obedient witness for God and his law. Daniel’s behavior was certainly a light in the midst of darkness, boldly demonstrating his living witness for God. Daniel served alongside of the pagan satraps of King Darius who coerced the King to sign an edict that would ultimately lead to Daniel’s strategic choice (Dan 6:7). Daniel would obey the edict, defying God, or he would defy the king, worshiping only the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Daniel faithfully obeyed God and was thrown into the den of lions. God’s faithful deliverance of Daniel moved the King to reverent fear:

Then king Darius wrote unto all the peoples, nations, and languages, that dwell in all the earth: Peace be multiplied unto you. I make a decree, that in all the dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel; for he is the living God, and steadfast for ever, And his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed; and his dominion shall be even unto the end. He delivereth and rescueth, and he worketh signs and wonders in heaven and in earth, who hath delivered Daniel from the power of the lions. So this Daniel prospered in the reign of Darius, and in the reign of Cyrus the Persian. (Dan 6:25-28, ASV)

Amos was a prophet who spoke to the people of Israel in a time of national prosperity, when their devotion to Yahweh was waning. Amos spoke out against the oppressive acts of the wealthy upon poor farmers. And like so many faithful followers of Yahweh before him, Amos was persecuted and ridiculed for faithfully proclaiming the Word of God. But still Amos spoke of a compelling passion to prophesy, regardless the cost. “The lion hath roared; who will not fear? The Lord Jehovah hath spoken; who can but prophesy?” (Amos 3:8, ASV). Amos viewed it as inconceivable not to act in obedience to the call of God.

It is clear through these choice examples, and the many that are not listed, that in the Old Testament God led his servants to carry out his mission even in the face of persecution. Like Amos, God’s servants hear the Word of the Lord and cannot contain themselves. The Lord speaks. The Lord calls. The Lord sends, and his servants follow even down the path toward personal injury or death. It is clear from the Old Testament that God sends his servants on missions that might result in personal injury or even death.

**New Testament Guidance**

Building on the foundation of the suffering and persecution of God’s chosen messengers in the Old Testament, The New Testament is not silent to the pains inherent to Gospel-centered mission. Jesus himself establishes our example through his teaching and ultimately through his suffering and death. The Apostles clearly followed in the footsteps of our rejected and crucified King, and their sacrificial witness to the Gospel of Christ extends to us today. For
in his death and resurrection Christ issues in a new covenant in his blood (1 Cor 11:25). One in which his followers are called to suffer because of his Gospel and for his glory.

**Jesus’ teaching on persecution.** In light of the persecution of Old Testament prophets and the murder of John The Baptist, Jesus warns his followers regarding the dangerous nature of His mission and the assistance offered by the Holy Spirit.

But beware of men: for they will deliver you up to councils, and in theirs synagogues they will scourge you; yea and before governors and kings shall ye be brought for my sake, for a testimony to them and to the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, be not anxious how or what ye shall speak: for it shall be given you in that hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you. And brother shall deliver up brother to death, and the father his child: and children shall rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name’s sake: but he that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved. But when they persecute you in this city, flee into the next: for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone through the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come (Matt 10:17-23, ASV).

Jesus commissions his disciples, only through the power of the Holy Spirit, to make disciples, build churches, and advance his gospel through the institution of the church. William Weinrich, in *Spirit and Martyrdom* points out, “persecution arises precisely because of the Church’s mission.” Weinrich indicates four pertinent factors present in persecution. First, the persecution is experienced by Christians, but is actually directed against Christ himself. Second, Christ’s followers must stand before the rulers as a witness unto Christ. Third, the disciples will be judged by their decision at the moment of persecution. Will they stand with Christ or deny him? Finally, since the Spirit speaks through his disciple at the moment of persecution, the disciple accepts or rejects the Spirit at the point of his decision. Weinrich’s description is a necessary reminder that God’s servants must be prepared to stand with Christ and witness unto Christ by the Power of His Spirit. The comforting news is that the Holy Spirit actually works in the one persecuted, and Christ himself speaks through him in such times of peril. Weinrich asserts regarding the faithful witness, “It is with Jesus’ mouth that the disciples shall speak wisdom.” Our role is simply to trust and obey. Does Jesus warn his disciples that their mission might lead to their death? In fact, he warns them very clearly. “They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.” (John 16:2, ESV) God does not guarantee the safety of his missionary servants. God does not guarantee immediate victory or fruit to missionaries or to any Christian. The overarching personal and institutional questions are particularly foreboding in light of Christ’s teaching. For if we are disobedient, it is a perilous endeavor to evade the call of our sovereign God. But obedience to his call may lead to persecution, physical harm, or even death.

**The apostolic example.** Acts 4 offers the first mention of direct physical opposition to the apostles. After Peter’s Spirit-empowered witness to the death burial, and resurrection of Jesus, Peter and John were thrown into prison. The priests imprisoned them overnight, questioning them regarding the authority and power in which they had healed the man. Peter and John were instructed not to continue teaching and preaching in Jesus’ name. But upon their release, Luke records their faithfulness to Christ in that they immediately gathered with friends, prayed for the nations, and “were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spake the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31, ASV). There are no guarantees for abundant fruit, but obedient witness can expect the empowering of God’s Spirit.

Stephen is known as the first Christian martyr, who willingly and faithfully suffered death at the hands of the enemies of the gospel. But according to Adolf von Harnack, Stephen’s death served a strate-
gic purpose. For, "By his words and death he helped to set up [the course of change for the advance of the church]." The consequent persecution forced the Christians to move out from Jerusalem. Harnack explained that the Christians who dispersed after Stephen's martyrdom, "were the first missionaries to the heathen; they founded the first Gentile church, that of Antioch. In this work they were joined by Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11:23ff), who soon became the real leading spirits in the movement." Faithful unto death, Stephen's martyrdom played a role in Jesus' command of the advancement of the Gospel (Acts 1:8) and the pilgrimage of the Apostle Paul.

Paul, at the time a persecutor of early Christians, was present at Stephen's martyrdom. Soon thereafter, Paul's life would be transformed from persecutor to dedicated follower of Christ, and his world mission would be launched. Paul explained the vision and breadth of his ministry in Romans 15:19b-20: "From Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation" (ESV). Harnack described the strategic change that occurred in missions through Paul and his experience with Stephen's martyrdom. Harnack argues that the very concept of traversing the world was inherently an outgrowth of Stephen's impact upon Paul.

What is more, Weinrich shows that Paul points to his own sufferings as his proof of apostleship, "In the face of such opposition, Paul argued that it was precisely his sufferings which showed the pneumatic nature of his apostolate." And later, "To demonstrate that he is a 'servant of Christ,' Paul lists his experiences of suffering and persecution." Paul viewed suffering for the gospel as something characteristic of being a servant of Christ. For Paul, suffering was counted as joy and identification with Christ.

The ministries of Paul and the other apostles built on the foundation of extreme personal suffering and loss. Tertullian remarked, "the Apostles poured out their whole doctrine with their blood; where Peter was conformed to his Lord in suffering; where Paul was crowned with the death of John; and where the Apostle John, after being put into heated oil without sustaining injury, received sentence of banishment to the island." Eventually, Paul was imprisoned and murdered, like Stephen, for his willingness to preach the gospel, regardless of the inherent risks. Reflecting on Paul's ministry, Weinrich makes a significant proposal: "[Paul's] greatness does not lie in the mere fact that he penetrated as a missionary to Illyria, Rome and probably Spain as well; it lies in the manner in which he trained his fellow-workers and organized, as well as created his churches." Paul's greatness did not reside in pragmatic concerns or quantitative results, but in his faithfulness to Christ's commands and to the Great Commission. His example to other followers of Christ of faithfulness in suffering and obedience stands resolute throughout the centuries.

I conclude from the New Testament that Jesus warned his disciples of the potential for persecution, even death while serving in accordance with his mission. The Apostles, Early Church Fathers, and countless others throughout the generations have forfeit their lives for the sake of the Gospel. As Christians we have a grand tradition of those who have sacrificed everything because of their profound belief in Jesus and His mission. My observation is that most Americans, even those with a profound salvific faith in the risen Lord, have never faced a decision that required obedient witness at the risk of violent physical harm, much less death. Thus, the discussion of this topic seems nonsensical. A place for Western Christians to increase awareness is by listening to the example of obedience of the martyrs. Stuart Hall states, "Dead martyrs no longer speak. But while they still live, they have become vessels of that special gift, and must be listened to with appropriate care." So let us listen to those whose voices appear to have been silenced. And let us realize that God may very well call us to follow in their example. The servants of God under persecution face a crisis of faith regarding their witness. Either they submit to the work of the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to...
speak through them, or they choose submission to the opponents of God.

**Calculated Christian Suffering: Noble Death**

In his discussion of Old Testament views of the afterlife, Arik Greenberg refers to an Old Testament prototype that he terms “the suffering righteous” or the “noble death.” Among several theories lies the premise that justification for such a noble death comes in the afterlife. The noble death prototype is found in both Testaments. In the Old Testament, the righteous sufferer presents himself willing to die for the sake of the Torah or for the sake of the prophetic Word from God. Greenberg affirms “the rise of the noble death as an acceptable concept, a laudable practice.”

Greenberg explains that, unlike the noble death concept, the earlier Deuteronomic theodicy does not allow for any evil to “befall the righteous and go uncorrected.” The Deuteronomic thought was that God’s righteous ones will not suffer. Those sentiments are evident in Job’s dialogue with his friends who held such a view. They castigated Job assuming that if he were righteous he would not be suffering. Greenberg asserts that Hebrew thought evolved through more recent Old Testament narrative. The later Hebrew theodicy incorporates the reality that God’s righteous servants actually might be called upon to endure suffering and even death. Greenberg cites the examples of righteous suffering from the book of Daniel: the narrative of the three men in the fiery furnace, and the story of Daniel in the lion’s den. Although the three men, as well as Daniel, submitted themselves to potential death, they were obedient to God and He protected them from harm. “The righteous individual is tested by worldly authorities, at the hand of God, and asked to turn away from ancestral law – i.e. piety and righteousness.”

In these two narratives from the book of Daniel, God does not allow the righteous to die. They willingly march as good soldiers into suffering, but in these two cases God preserves them unalloyed. Like Christian martyrs, “there is the understanding that they will be willing to die for the law, and that if they are truly righteous, they may hope to be saved by God prior to death.” Greenberg posits that the noble death concept stems from later Hellenistic influence on Judaism. Such a view insists that suffering on earth should not occur among the faithful, but if suffering does occur, it is rectified and vindicated in the afterlife.

The later Roman concept of noble death is found in a military tradition known as *devotio*. *Devotio* is best explained as an act in which a general would plunge himself into the midst of the enemy, effectively committing suicide, but also appeasing the gods by his self-sacrifice and thereby ensuring the victory of his troops against previously insurmountable odds.” The act of *devotio* had its impact on Hellenistic Judaism and the growing theological acceptance of noble death. In the same manner that a Roman soldier calculated his options and purposefully drove himself into the heart of battle, the servant of Christ calculates the mission of God, plunging himself into the flames of spiritual battle.

The term “martyr” is thrown around in contemporary circles to describe trivial circumstances such as getting the wrong end of a boss’ frustration. In the New Testament, however, the word “martyr” comes from the Greek root *martus*. The literal meaning of martyr is “witness”. In his book, *Martyrdom and Noble Death*, J.W. van Henten explains, “Scholarly definitions of martyrdom often mention the aspect of witness or confession as a central characteristic of the martyr’s action.” While the term often serves in the New Testament to denote a general witness of the Gospel, it is also chosen, as in contemporary usage, to reference those who gave their life for the sake of the Gospel (e.g. Rev 17:6). Bernard Ruffin described martyrdom as “individuals who witnessed to their faith in Christ by choosing to die rather than compromise that faith.” The critical factor in martyrdom is a witness that points to saving faith in Jesus. And we can be certain that martyrs play an important role in our faith. For not only have many of the apostles and believers throughout the centuries experienced a martyr’s death, but we in Revelation that there is an appointed number of believers to be martyred for the
faith (Rev 6:11) and that they will even reign with Christ in his thousand year reign (20:4).

**SHOULD WE SEND OUR MISSIONARIES INTO DANGER?**

After surveying the biblical foundation of suffering and persecution in missions, we are confronted with our second question: How should the church and mission-sending institutions respond when the ones we send insist on obeying God’s direction, even when it involves entering or remaining in harm’s way? In preparation, both the senders and the sent should understand the theological foundations of dangerous missions. But how can we decide whether or not a dangerous mission is merited? Since 1983 I have been interacting with American Christians about missions. I have gained the distinct impression that many American Christians view such self-sacrificial missionary behavior as admirably insane. How are we to combat the majority negative view of dangerous missions? The first step is belief. We must have faith that extends beyond the surface, leading an individual to radical obedience, even reckless abandon. We must have faith that Christ can and will save people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. We must believe that God is completely in control of not only our lives, but of the actions of our persecutors. Dangerous missions may seem unnecessary to Western Christians because of a lack of faith not only in the sovereignty of God but also in the necessity of the Gospel. In order to answer if we are to send missionaries into dangerous situations, we must first outline the importance and necessity of a Gospel witness.

**Is Christian witness urgent and essential?**

Recently in *Encountering Theology of Mission*, Craig Ott addressed the necessity and urgency of the gospel by asking three questions:

1. Is it too narrow and intolerant to advocate Christ as the only way to salvation?
2. How could a good and righteous God under any circumstances condemn people to eternal conscious punishment in hell?
3. Is it not unfair of God to condemn people who have never had the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ?”

The answers to these three questions are sufficient to propel individual Christians and the church as a whole into death-defying missions. We will look at three underlying principles that will help us answer Ott’s questions and solidify the necessity of the Gospel.

**Humans stand condemned because of sin.** Because of sin, every human stands condemned and is naturally inclined to sin—rebellion against God. And the Bible is clear that because of our sin we have earned death and condemnation. In shines the light of the Gospel, but every person has a choice to make. And to that effect, Ott addresses the essential nature of mission as follows: “In his love God has provided a way for all humankind to enjoy eternal fellowship with him. But the Bible’s teaching is clear: some people will persist in their rejection of God and as a result will condemn themselves to an eternity of separation from him.” Ott continues, “God will not coerce them into accepting his love, forgiveness, and fellowship. Hell is a real place, and its misery will be the eternal state of all those who reject God’s revelation of himself and choose to follow the rebellious inclinations of their own will.” If we truly believe that every human being apart from Christ stands condemned before God, and that only the Gospel of Jesus Christ can lead sinners to salvation, we will see Gospel-proclaiming missions as eternally necessary.

**The existence of eternal judgment and hell.** At present there is a decline in the belief of a biblical hell and absolute judgment. In their book, *Is Hell Real or Does Everyone Go to Heaven?*, Albert Mohler, Timothy Keller, Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson trace the decline of the belief in biblical hell in Western theology. They write, “In the eighteenth
century, Enlightenment skepticism took center stage. Philosophers began arguing that hell should be viewed metaphorically, not literally. "Without abandoning a literal view of hell, other groups have chosen a different route. "Alternately Thomas Hobbes suggested in Leviathan that hell might be eternal, but the torments of the unsaved were not—another version of the Socinians’ annihilationism."

Following the same logic, a growing number of theologians acknowledge the veracity of hell, but view it conditionally, with its purpose as restorative and temporary. Hell, in their view, serves as an inducement to repentance by God’s grace. Pluralists and Universalists read scriptures from the premise that God’s love prevails and God is not able to judge absolutely or eternally. Because the symbiotic and paradoxical coexistence of both hell and a loving God is untenable in Universalism, Universalists often reconfigure the coexistence of judgment and grace through their own redefinition of a softer, gentler, temporary hell.

In contrast to the unbiblical views mentioned above, Scripture teaches us that hell is a place of conscious, eternal torment. As Christians we must not be defined or constrained by the finiteness of human logic. God, not logic, defines both heaven and hell. The Bible is God’s Word for guiding and instructing us accordingly. And God, through the doctrine of hell, instructs us about himself. I agree with Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson who explain, "Hell emerges from a biblical understanding of God. It reminds us that though God’s love is central, it should not be viewed independently of his other attributes. His love is in unity with his justice and his holiness." 31 Hell is proof that our holy God righteously judges sin. And in stark contrast with the teaching of the day, hell is a real place of conscious eternal torment for all who sin and stand apart from Christ.

The exclusivity of Jesus the Christ. Central to the Gospel proclamation is the exclusivity of Jesus as the one and only way of salvation. We find this clearly taught all throughout the New Testament, especially in Jesus’ own teaching. Ott explained that Jesus himself claimed “the unique identity of the one true God of the Old Testament and insisted that he was the only way of salvation.” 32 Matthew’s Gospel is particularly rife with evidence of Jesus’ claims. That he fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies (Matt 5:17), reinterpreted the law (Matt 5:21-44), and claimed divine authority (Matt 28:18; John 8:58), including authority over the forgiveness of sin (Matt 2:5,10). Jesus even claimed Old Testament titles and roles reserved only for God (Ps 8:1-2; Isa 8:13-15; Ps 27:1; Ezek 34:10-22; Ps 23:1-4; Dan 7:9-14; Joel 3:1-12). The relationship between God the Father and Jesus was intimate and unique (Matt 11:27; John 5:19-23). In John 14:6 Jesus claims to be the exclusive, singular, sufficient path to God. 33 The preponderance of Scripture and Jesus’ own claims clarify the facts: there is only one narrow path to God, and that path is Jesus.

The exclusivity of Christ is singularly sufficient to propel missionaries to a potentially mortal risk for the sake of the gospel. Aware that Christ alone is the answer, we must share God’s message with a Muslim who is convinced of another path. If, on the other hand, we question the existence of hell, the eternality of judgment, and the exclusivity of Christ’s sacrifice, perhaps we may doubt the essential nature of our witness.

Contemporary Shift in Thought

Missionaries and ministers of the Gospel today must be equipped to fight a unique battle. Pagan-influenced, moralistic teaching abounds under the guise of Christianity, especially in the United States. In a recent work Albert Mohler outlines key points in the contemporary, pluralistic drift and its effects on people’s understanding of the Gospel. The first shift is to an altered view of God’s love, which, contrary to biblical teaching, says it is non-coercive. Consequently many people view God as a distant, passive, and oblivious grandfather figure who, bound by his loving nature, lets sin and sinners slide. The second issue is a warped view of justice that rejects universal and ultimate moral standards. Mohler points to John Stuart Mill, who asserts that in this view, “justice is about restoration rather than
retribution." This altered view of justice leads inevitably to a graying of the lines of morality and the removal of any culpability for sin. The third factor is a view logically developed from the previous tenets: moral culpability is removed. According to this view, there is no judgment because people are not responsible for their actions. Finally, in the fourth trend Mohler addresses an altered view of salvation. Sin is no longer sin; it is an unfortunate mishap. The gospel then becomes a means of "release from bad habits rather than a rescue from hell." As we share the Gospel in our present culture, we must be prepared with the truth of Christ’s Gospel to encounter such warped views of man and God, which ultimately cut the legs out of the urgency and essentiality of the Gospel.

Scripture is clear that hell is real. It is also abundantly clear that faith in Jesus alone is necessary for salvation. Since hell and God’s judgment are real, and since Jesus is the only path to redemption, missions is essential. Added to Jesus’ missionary mandate (Matt 28:18-20) and the countless examples of faithful witnesses in the history of the church, the nature of the message and the sure judgment upon those without Christ resolutely confirm the urgency and the essential role of Christian missions.

**WHY COSTLY MISSION?**

In light of the abundant teaching and examples in both Testaments of God’s plan for the suffering of his messengers, we cannot avoid the question: why would a good God send his servants into costly mission with suffering and even death? In view of the Bible’s teaching, we can be confident of this truth: God uses suffering for the ultimate good—the advance of his Gospel, and the deepening faith of those suffering for his name.

John and Peter’s persecution resulted in thousands turning to Jesus (Acts 4). Stephen’s martyrdom established a New Testament noble death prototype of persecution, bold witness, and execution (Acts 7). The result of Stephen’s death was the launch of the church into a new era of expansion. Because of the resulting persecution, Christians were forced to leave their home in Jerusalem taking the Gospel with them and effectively furthering Jesus’ commission (Acts 1:8). Paul himself was dramatically impacted by his own participation in Stephen’s murder, and after a dramatic conversion spearheaded the advance of the Gospel to Gentile nations. While maybe unseen to us, it is clear through Scripture and countless stories that God uses the suffering of his witnesses to both move the hearts of sinners and encourages other believers to proclaim the Gospel with a greater sense of urgency and boldness.

God also uses suffering to strengthen our reliance in him. In 2 Corinthians Paul pleads with God three times to remove a “thorn”—a cause of suffering in his life. But God would not take it away, but instead says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). Following closely in this pattern is the example of Joel DeHart. As reflected in his personal journals during captivity, it was God’s allowance of suffering in his life that deepened his passion for, love of, and faith in our sovereign God.

**A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

In 1990 my wife and I faced a watershed decision. For several years we prayed for the salvation of the inaccessible Hazara people who lived in the mountains of Afghanistan. While the exact population is unclear, a missionary source reports that the Hazara make up twenty percent of the Afghan population, making the Hazara people one of the most populous and ill-evangelized group in Afghanistan. At that time as well as now, Afghanistan was filled with civil strife and danger. So while actively praying for an opportunity of access, we ministered to the Hazara diaspora in Pakistan, outside of their mountain homeland.

Such an opportunity came. During the spring of 1990, God led a new Hazara acquaintance to invite me to his mountain village. The journey would mean traveling through Islamic militant regions in order to avoid the hostile communist-controlled cities. Adding to the danger was the fact that I would travel with Hazaras who were hated and massacred by the majority Pashtun peoples. We would travel through
enemy Pashtun territory for at least four days going
and four days returning to Pakistan. After a final night
of prayer concerning the opportunity, my wife and
I agreed that I would go, knowing that the decision
could result in my death. The trip lasted for over 3
weeks, including, among many other things, a narrow
escape from a hostile Hazara warlord who saw me as a
potential hostage-for-ransom opportunity.

The decision to go into a hostile terrain to preach
the gospel is strategic and costly, and ours was not
flippant. We prayed for months for such an opportu-
nity. We sought godly advice. Together, we trusted
God and obeyed his clear command. In the end, my
journey into Hazara territory was used to advance
the gospel among an unreached people group.

God's Spirit intervened at critical points along the
way, providing me words from on high. God's hand
protected me in the midst of hostility. God's Spirit
spoke through me during tense moments in the
midst of meetings with terrorists who had trained
under the Palestine Liberation Organization, the
Ayatollah Khomeini and the Hezbi Islami. God gave
me opportunities to share the gospel and witness
through my words and deeds. Though he does not
guarantee our physical safety, on that journey God
brought me home safely.

Although I was not harmed, two of my American
teammates were taken hostage on a subsequent jour-
ney into the same villages. But seizing the opportu-
nity, those men preached Christ faithfully while in captivi-
ity. And Joel DeHart’s six-month captivity advanced
the spread of the gospel in the most influential Haz-
ara region of Afghanistan. Stories of the godly witness
of these two men spread throughout the mountains
and valleys of the Hazara. DeHart received repeated
requests from Hazara people for the Bible. Even locally
published accounts about their captivity were written
and distributed by Afghans. Afghans in the villages as
well as in the major cities recounted a common mes-
range regarding the two captive Christians: these are
godly men; they live faithful lives to the Bible; they love
the Hazara people. Through this experience I learned
first-hand that God may call upon me to willingly
choose danger, possible captivity, and even death in
the process of carrying out His mission.

**THE TOUGH QUESTIONS**

For as long as I can remember I have heard Bible-
believing, mission-minded Christians confess that
they privately pray, “God, I will do anything you
want. But dear Lord, do not call me to missions.” Is
there a detachment between our theology and our
faith? According to biblical history, God sends some
of His servants into peril on His mission. Neverthe-
less, there is a common question that international
missionaries are asked as they prepare to leave for
a distant land: “Don’t you think God can do His
dangerous missions without you?”

But this is simply the wrong question to ask. A
better question is, “Does God want me in a poten-
tially perilous mission?” And if so, “Am I willing to
trust and obey Him?” Such a question is personal
and can only be answered through prayer, fasting,
God's teachings in Scripture, and after much godly
counsel. As we have already seen, suffering is often
the result when we are faithful to proclaim the
Gospel of Christ to the nations. We must ask our-
ourselves if God is sovereign and if he is good. If he is
both, which the Bible clearly teaches, then his plan
for our life will be for the ultimate good and noth-
ing that happens to us will be apart from his will.

While the personal question can be straight for-
ward, the institutional (sender) response becomes
very complex.

The institutional question falls to churches and
mission sending agencies: Do senders run the risk
of opposing God when they elevate missionary
safety and security (both very good things) above
the urgency and necessity of God’s mandate (the
higher of the two things)? Both the personal and
the institutional questions should succumb to our
answer to the primary question: Does God lead
and direct missionaries to proclaim Christ in peril-
ous times and locations? But even when we affirm
unreservedly that God does and will, the institutional
questions become more pointed when asked specifi-
cally: Should senders protect missionaries by pre-
venting them from preaching in terrorist-controlled
areas of Iraq? In the name of security, should senders
compel missionaries to depart dangerous villages in
West Africa during times of civil war? Because of the
potential of debilitating litigation by the parents of missionaries, should senders prohibit missionaries from entering Taliban-controlled villages? Should missionaries necessarily be withdrawn from a North African nation while rebels engage in violent skirmishes all around them? What is the role of senders in dangerous times? The institutional questions raise complex legal, financial, and theological issues, but as every difficult decision, we should submit ourselves to God and seek to obediently follow him in faith.

If the mission of God is God-ordained and Spirit-empowered, then the actions of the missionary and the senders come to a question of obedience. The role Christ’s messengers play is critical, urgent, and inherent to the spread of the Gospel of Christ. Jesus Christ has commanded the spread of his Gospel into all the nations, and God has sovereignly ordained his people to be the means by which the Gospel spreads. What is more, both Testaments provide ample precedent for the willful, obedient pursuit of God’s mission, even at the risk of personal injury. We should consider the theological, personal, and institutional questions mentioned above in light of our sovereign, omniscient, loving Lord. Our obedience to his commands should flow in response to who he is and what he has done, regardless of personal cost.

**CONCLUSION**

We have learned that Scripture teaches that God leads His servants to be bold witnesses even in dangerous circumstances. Biblical and missional history verifies that the strategic advance of the gospel occurs through faithful proclamation under dangerous circumstance. In some cases, missionaries die in the process of obedient witness. The New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit accompanies His children during false accusation, under torture, in captivity and even in the grip of death. In the midst of dangerous missions, bold witnesses receive help and guidance from the Holy Spirit. As an individual, church leader, member of a congregation or a representative of a mission agency, we should dare not assume that God gives us permission to prioritize safety and security over and above the advance of God’s mission and the preaching of His gospel. Missiologists, missionaries and senders alike should approach missions with a heightened awareness of the biblical, theological, and historical prototype of the obedient witness and martyr’s death. We have seen that God is good and sovereign. So, when faced with danger, persecution, and death in the advance of his Gospel, will we trust our sovereign Lord and obey His guiding voice?

**Endnotes**

2. Ibid., 259.
5. Ibid., 97.
10. Ibid., 19-21.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 53.
14 Weinrich, 44.
15 Ibid., 48.
16 Ibid., 77.
17 Ibid., 74.
20 Ibid., 24-25.
21 Ibid., 27.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 27-28.
24 Ibid., 30.
28 Ibid., Strauss, and Tennent, 81.
30 Ibid., 12.
31 Ibid., 331.
32 Ibid., 318.
33 Ibid., 319-320.
34 Keller, Morgan, and Peterson, 20.
36 Peter, Richard, Hazaras Still Make up About 20% of the Population, edited by Mark Morris (Kabul, Afghanistan: Mark Morris, 2010), 1.