

# THE THEOLOGY OF **RISK**

**D**anger for Christ's sake is both a past and present reality. When thinking of such danger, we think of martyrs of the past. It is estimated that 70 million believers have died as martyrs over the centuries, which is a staggering figure. But even more staggering is that about 45 million, or two-thirds of that number, gave their lives in the 20th century. The point is that danger from a world that hates God has not diminished but has increased and has become aggressively more violent.

Because of these facts and the dangers missionaries face, we are developing what we refer to as the BBFI Theology of Risk. We understand that serving the Lord in the 21st century may be an even more dangerous enterprise than in the 20th. We want our new missionaries and their sending churches and families to be aware of those dangers and risks.

The ministry of BBFI missionaries is reflected by what Paul wrote concerning his own ministry in 1 Corinthians 16:9, "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries."

## **GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER DANGER IN WORKING OUT HIS PURPOSES**

Romans 8:35-39 demonstrates that danger cannot separate the believer from the love of Christ; in fact, the passage states that even while in danger, the believer is more than a conqueror. "Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us."

Danger never takes God by surprise or finds Him "off-guard." He is never confused regarding what we should do in times of danger, nor is He ever uncertain of His plans for us as we are going through these times.

## **DANGER IS A REALITY TO ALL BELIEVERS**

Believers should not think of danger for Christ's sake as a result of location or occupation but of relationship. Jesus said in John 15:18-21, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you ... If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you ... But all these things will they do unto you for my name's sake."

It is important to point out that pertaining

to danger, this scripture makes no distinction between a believer and a foreign missionary.

The Word of God does not make a distinction in the danger that may come to the Christian who witnesses for Christ in his home area and danger that comes to the Christian who is considered a “foreign missionary.” The Bible, in fact, encourages us to view danger as a reality we all face, rather than danger that certain few missionaries must face. “Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body” (Hebrews 13:3).

Paul wrote to all believers of all generations, geographic locations, and occupations when he said to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:11-12, “Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.”

### **DANGER COMES SPECIFICALLY TO THOSE WHO PREACH THE GOSPEL**

Although believers will face persecution from the world in any geographic location and in any occupation, simply because of their relationship with Christ, some geographic locations are “hot spots” religiously or politically, and preaching the gospel in those areas may incite anger from those who are anti-Christian.

Believers who devote their lives to the spreading of the gospel, either in their own hometown or in a foreign country, should be prepared to face the probable animosity of the enemies of the gospel. Paul wrote, “Whereunto I am appointed a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. For the which cause I also suffer these things” (2 Timothy 1:11-12).

### **BIBLICAL BASIS FOR CRISIS MANAGEMENT**

Paul told his friends; “I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13). Perhaps no believer can be truly prepared for suffering, imprisonment, and martyrdom until those things face them. It appears God gives the grace we need when we need it. Paul was prepared in the sense of having faced the very real possibility that death could come to him by martyrdom and because he was firmly

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convinced that Jesus Christ was worthy of his life and death.

The apostles and elders considered Barnabas and Paul to be “men that have hazarded their lives for the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 15:26). Like Paul we must be convinced that Christ Himself and the task He has given us is really worth dying for.

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Hebrews 11:35-38 gives the account of believers who could have escaped martyrdom but deliberately chose not to do so. “Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection.” It was clear that a way out of suffering was offered these believers if they compromised or denied God, but they did not accept deliverance and chose martyrdom instead.

Jesus’ words to the church at Smyrna in Revelation 2:10 show that faithfulness to the Lord, not escape, is what is priority when facing death: “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.”

We know that God uses persecution and martyrdom to glorify Himself and further the gospel. Paul told the Philippian believers that he wanted them to understand that what was happening to him was for “the furtherance of the gospel.” He indicated that many other believers were bolder to speak the word without fear, having seen Paul in bonds.

As we face danger for Christ’s sake, we become very aware of the risk of losing our possessions or even our own lives.

It is important to maintain perspective

when facing extreme danger and possible loss. Peter gave this perspective in 1 Peter 1:6, 7: “... ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ.”

The safety of our missionaries is an important aspect of missionary care; however, we are reminded that there is an urgency for the people of the world to hear the message of the gospel. There is also an understanding that often mission work can be dangerous.

We want to be ready to help our missionaries assess the risk and to decide when to flee and when to face. We understand that both fleeing and facing can be godly responses to danger. The Mission Office comes alongside the sending pastor to give advice and assistance in making these decisions.

The Mission Office staff is undergoing crisis management training. We will be giving different levels of training to our missionaries, determined by the area of the world in which they live and serve. Because the missionaries are approved by the BBFI, most governments, including our own, see the BBFI Mission Office as the responsible party in case of an emergency or crisis situation. There are certain liabilities that go along with that responsibility. Therefore, we must be prepared for these things. However, in our dealings with ANY situation, the sending church and pastor will be involved. We believe that is the Biblical pattern. The sending church is the sending agency and therefore has the final authority.

We appreciate the opportunity given to us by the churches to help in the preparation and care for the honorable servants of God sent with the gospel to the regions beyond us.



# RISK AND PROVIDENCE

**T**he life and work of career missionaries can involve high levels of risk and danger to their safety. The risks can be in the form of physical accidents, medical emergencies, criminal activities, religious persecution, political upheavals, official corruption, civil wars, long-term health issues, and natural disasters.

Most of us believe there is a special and divine call to vocational ministry. At the same time, we recognize that there is a level on which all Christ-followers are called, gifted, and sent. We recognize that all of us who know Christ as Savior have been instructed to share the good news; we have been given spiritual gifts to be used for the edification of the congregation; and we are to be obedient to the Lord wherever and however He chooses to use us. All of us have been sent into the world to be salt and light for the glory of God!

We believe that it is God's will for churches to send Christians to all peoples and nations to share the gospel of saving grace ... with the understanding that we may face accidents, illnesses, and difficulties.

As we think about risk, let's begin with some general thoughts about the providence of God.

God's providence involves the continuing work of God where all things in the universe are under His ultimate control. God's providence would include His unique, purposeful, and special intervention into the natural process to accomplish His will.

God's providence at times also transcends human affairs, taking challenging situations and using them for good as He promises in Romans 8:28 and illustrates with the life of Joseph in Genesis 50. We believe God has a plan and a purpose for all things, even those things that we don't understand. We believe God's providence points to God's plan for this world.

God's plan begins in eternity. Nothing catches God by surprise. God's plan is always consistent with His nature. God's plan allows humans a free will to act in ways consistent with their nature. It is the element of human freedom that raises the reality of risk in all of life's endeavors.

God's plan ultimately centers on Jesus Christ. Jesus urged His followers to live in light

of a coming day of reckoning. Jesus knew that obedience to the will of God would involve His own suffering and death.

Jesus' commitment to his Father's will called for a life of faithfulness, rejecting self-interest and self-protection. Jesus' own sacrifice provides a model for his followers.

If Jesus' followers are to live in accordance with His teachings, they must be willing to live faithfully in spite of the circumstances of life, always being open to God's providential guidance. Such a life is willing to take risks for the sake of the gospel.

The tension of providence and risk is

*Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; And in nothing terrified by your adversaries: which is to them an evident token of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that of God. For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake; Having the same conflict which ye saw in me, and now hear to be in me.*

Philippians 1:27-30

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reflective of the tension of our dual citizenship; we currently live in this world but are already citizens of Heaven. Providence and risk also reflect the tensions of living in the orderly world as created by God and a fallen world that is affected by sin. Providence and risk are extensions of the struggle between a confidence in God's sovereignty and the reality of human freedom and responsibility.

It is in light of these things that we live by faith, a faith that gives assurance and pleases God and a faith that calls Christ-followers to a life that is sometimes without immediate answers. In the midst of this tension, we recognize that God's grace not only enables us to believe the gospel of Jesus, but also gives us the opportunity to sometimes suffer for His sake.

The BBFI has a legacy of missionaries who have given their lives for the gospel. Lives have been lost through accidents and illnesses. Over the years, our BBFI missionaries have paid high prices to fulfill their ministries. "... not terrified by adversaries ..." Among the sufferings that we know of are: religious persecution, rape, armed robbery, sexual assault on missionary kids, grand theft, corrupt government officials, betrayal of co-workers, breaking and entering, false accusations, marriage struggles, wayward children, imprisonments, marriage destruction, horrible traffic accidents, serious diseases, and murder.

We are blessed with missionaries who are willing to take risks or go to difficult places because the love of Christ compels them to go minister to lost and hurting people.

There is an underlying understanding that missionary work is often dangerous. BBFI churches should not cower from our task of involving Christians in missions and sharing the love of Christ with lost people. Rather, trusting in His all-powerful providence, we should encourage our best and brightest to give their lives to the service of Jesus Christ and the gospel as they live their lives in the light of eternity!

Hours before flying from Shell-Mera to the Curaray River in Eastern Ecuador, Nate Saint, Jim Elliot, Roger Youderian, Pete Fleming, and Ed McCully gathered around a piano, with high hopes of taking the good news to the Waorani Tribesmen, and aware of the risks involved, committed themselves to the Lord as they sang the words of the old hymn.

We rest on Thee, our shield and our defender!  
We go not forth alone against the foe;  
Strong in Thy strength, safe in Thy keeping tender,  
We rest on Thee, and in Thy name we go.

We rest on Thee, our shield and our defender!  
Thine is the battle, Thine shall be the praise  
When passing through the gates of pearly splendor,  
Victors, we rest with Thee, through endless days.

And so it is that we rest and trust in the Lord of the Harvest, we take risks, and we obey.

**Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.**

**-Helen Keller**

BY T.S. LONG  
BBFI ASSOCIATE MISSION DIRECTOR

# RISK AND SUFFERING

*“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”*

Matthew 5:10-12

**A**s Jesus explained the cost and suffering of being disciples, He was looking forward into the events they would encounter, giving them direction on how to meet suffering, knowing that others before them had also faced persecution.

Being blessed as we are in America, it may be difficult to understand the suffering that our missionaries around the world encounter each day. Many Christians believe a door shut in the face on visitation or a mix up in a drive thru order brings us to the perils of persecution and suffering. Yet, our eyes were opened greatly as we arrived in the Middle East eleven years ago. In that time, we have personally witnessed and endured events and sufferings that are uncommon to the western Christian. We did not see these events as spectacular; just a part of our calling as missionaries.

One occasion involved our evangelism outreach into the villages in the south as we were starting a new church. Two of our teams encountered Muslims who had been antagonized by the local imam (Muslim leader) to attack our groups who were doing house visits. Through the mosque speakers, he encouraged as many as 50 men to throw stones at our group, forcing us to retreat back to the van. In all, we had five who were injured and had to go to the local hospital for medical care. Once we received care, we went back into the village and were able to complete the work we had started.

Not all missionaries would have as extensive a record of suffering as Paul gave in 2 Corinthians 11:25-27. Being beaten, robbed, and shipwrecked are but a few of his sufferings. Yet, our missionaries could each give stories of suffering they have experienced while on the foreign field. Many of those events will never be shared or revealed openly, but their suffering is real.

Suffering and difficulties are part of the call to blessing that Jesus spoke of. Samuel Zwemer, who 100 years ago spent his life in ministry to see Muslims come to Christ, stated, “Frequent setbacks and apparent failure never disheartened the real pioneer. Occasionally martyrdoms are only a fresh incentive. Opposition is a stimulus to greater activity. Great victory has never been possible without great sacrifice.”

We should never let our personal suffering dictate the extent or desire of our calling to go. Like Christ, suffering should be faced knowing that glory goes to the Father and our suffering is not a sacrifice, but a privilege in which we can rejoice.

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# RISK AND SAFETY

**A**s a father, father-in-law, and grandfather, I find myself praying every day for my daughter, daughter-in-law, son-in-law, and my amazing grandkids. I pray every day of my life for their safety. It is as natural as breathing. My fatherly concern and my grandfatherly love for them naturally cause me to be alert to issues of safety in their lives. I'm pretty sure that is normal and right.

However, I recognize that there are things that are more important than safety in the lives of those I love. And for those things I also pray. I want them to walk with the Lord, to know His presence, to be obedient to His voice.

As a Fellowship of pastors, churches, and missionaries, we want to continue to be effective in our church planting efforts all around the world. We want our global partners to be safe in those efforts. We recognize, however, that safety is not the most important aspect of our work.

As our Lord traveled all throughout Judea, Samaria, and Galilee, with his band of followers, we see from their discussions that they did not avoid danger nor seek comfort. There were certainly times when safety was sought and then there were times when safety became unimportant.

We are not promised anywhere exemption from danger or suffering. On the contrary, the Bible clearly teaches that suffering is to be expected and is a normal part of the Christian life and experience. We would do well to recognize that there are blessings that come from God that can effectively come through suffering.

Please be assured: Christ never leaves us, no matter how we feel, no matter how dark the storm or painful the suffering. He will never, no never, leave us nor forsake us.

Less than a week before Martin Burnham's abduction by Muslim guerrillas on the Philippine island of Palawan in May 2001, the New Tribes missionary spoke at a Wednesday evening service at Rose Hill Bible Church in his small hometown near Wichita, Kansas.

Some of Burnham's last words in the United States were also among the last words of Jesus recorded in John 21, "Follow thou me." His uncle Ralph Burnham said, "Martin

not only spoke of following Him, but he took on that responsibility. Of course, at that time neither he nor any of us expected how far he was going to be required to go. But he was willing to go.”

Martin Burnham kept that attitude throughout the 376 days he and his wife, Gracia, were held captive by the Abu Sayyaf terrorist group.

Just before a Philippine military raid on the kidnappers that led to Martin’s death and Gracia’s freedom, the two huddled together in a hammock under a makeshift tent. They had been thinking that there would be a chance that they would not make it out alive. Martin said to Gracia, “The Bible says to serve the Lord with gladness. Let’s go out all the way. Let’s serve Him all the way with gladness.”

The two then prayed in their hammock, recited scripture verses to each other, and sang. They lay down to rest. The rescue assault began and bullets began to fly, puncturing Gracia’s leg and Martin’s chest.

We heard a pastor say recently, “We live in a day of easy believism. If you want to go to heaven, raise your hand for Jesus, live however you want, and at the end, He’ll say, ‘Well done.’

Actually, between your conversion and your resurrection is your discipleship. It’s growing, maturing in love, devotion, and commitment to Christ.”

Jesus says, “I’m God. If you want to follow me, people will hate you and you might die.” That’s the cost of discipleship.

We have read in the history of modern missions about the Student Volunteer Movement of more than a century ago. Young North Americans were rallying to take the gospel around the world. It is said that when they would ship missionaries out, they would pack all of their belongings in a coffin. It was a very clear way of saying, “I’m going to die. I’m going to go talk about Jesus until I die. That might be a short while, that might be a long while, but it will happen.” And they would write a final farewell letter and leave it to someone they loved or leave it with the missions organization. And upon their death, it would be delivered and read by that person.

One young lady, having gone to Africa, left the letter with her pastor:

“Dear Pastor, You should only be opening this letter in the event of my death. When God calls, there are no regrets. I’ve tried to share

my heart with you as much as possible, my heart for the nations. I wasn’t called to a place. I was called to Him. To obey was my objective. To suffer was expected. His glory, my reward. The missionary heart cares more than some think is wise, risks more than some think is safe, dreams more than some think is practical, expects more than some think is possible. I was not called to comfort or to success, but to obedience. There is no joy outside of knowing Jesus and serving him. I love you and my church family. In his care, Karen.”

The mental image of a missionary packing his or her coffin for their journey speaks volumes about their commitment. I wonder if we are losing sight of our mission. I wonder if our passion for the fulfillment of the Great Commission is waning. I wonder if in our churches “Missions” has become a good category to include on our websites and in our budgets. Maybe it has become a hobby for our spare time and extra money.

Jesus said it clearly — only through losing your life can you find it.

Take up your cross, pack your coffin, and change the world.

**Chet and Brenda Bitterman were new Wycliffe missionaries in Colombia at the same time Sharon and I were new BBFI missionaries in Ecuador. We remember following the event in which Chet was abducted by terrorists and 48 days later was killed, on March 7, 1981. Bernie May was the U.S. Director of Wycliffe at the time. He wrote:**

#### **WHY WE DIDN’T GIVE IN**

*Who made the decision that we would not knuckle under to the terrorists, even if it should mean that Chet Bitterman would be killed?*

*We did, the members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Wycliffe Bible Translators. We did it years ago, before anyone had been captured. We did it, aware that someday our hearts might ache with grief for a dearly-loved colleague. Above all, we did it with the calm assurance that we acted according to the will of God and in the tradition of those first-century Christians who lived and died by the refreshingly simple imperative: “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).*

*This is not the glib recital of an obsolete slogan. It is*

*the deliberate resolve to act according to the priorities God has declared.*

*Having experienced the biting pain of Chet’s long captivity and final execution, are we still committed to our position of no capitulation to terrorists? Has our decision stood the test? Though lips quiver and eyes blur with tears, we declare again our unwavering faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. He demonstrated for all to see that the ultimate sacrifice, the laying down of one’s life, when made in the will of God, is the greatest weapon we can wield in our battle against evil. “They overcame him (i.e. the devil) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death” Revelation 12:11.*

*Used by permission from Wycliffe Bible Translators.*





# RISK AND CROSS-BEARING

**W**hat did Jesus mean when He said, “Take up your cross and follow me?” (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23)

Let’s begin with what Jesus didn’t mean. Many people interpret “cross” as some burden they must carry around in their lives: a strained relationship, a thankless job, a physical deformity, an unpleasant mate. With self-pitying pride, they say, “That’s my cross I have to carry.” Such an interpretation is not what Jesus meant when He said, “Take up your cross and follow me.”

When Jesus carried his cross up Golgotha to be crucified, no one was thinking of the cross as symbolic of a burden to carry. To a person in the first century, the cross meant one thing and one thing only: death by the most painful and humiliating means human beings could develop.

Two thousand years later, Christians correctly view the cross as a cherished symbol of atonement, forgiveness, grace, and love. But in Jesus’ day, the cross represented nothing but torturous death. Because the Romans forced convicted criminals to carry their own crosses to the place of crucifixion, bearing a cross meant carrying their own execution device while facing ridicule along the way to death.

Therefore, “Take up your cross and follow me” means being willing to die in order to follow Jesus. It involves self-denial. It’s a call to absolute surrender. After each time Jesus commanded cross-bearing, he said, “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself or be cast away?” (Luke 9:24-25). Although the call is tough, the reward is matchless.

Galatians 2:20, “With Christ I have been crucified.” In the Greek sentence, “with Christ” is placed first for emphasis. The verb (a perfect passive indicative) implies that something happened in the past with abiding results and was accomplished by an outside agent. It is the focus of Romans 6 and 7.

It is important to remember that once we have died with Christ, we are alive to God. “Nevertheless, I live!” This concept

is emphasized over and over again as our responsibility to walk as he walked; and that we ought to walk worthy of the calling wherewith we have been called. (Ephesians. 4:1,17; 5:2)

Once we know Christ in free forgiveness, it is important that we live a life of responsible servanthood.

In the well-known parable of the talents in Matthew 25, we find two extremes: successful risk-taker and worthless risk-avoider. Pretty much, those are our only choices — risk-taker or risk-avoider!

The Old Testament is full of stories of risk-

apprehensive, having been a revenge-based society for generations.

Taking the initial risk, while difficult and certainly frightening, was followed by lifelong submission to the perfect will of God. For sweet Rachel, that meant 36 years of jungle living, serious health issues, language development, Bible translation, care giving, and self-sacrifice. But her deep commitment to Christ overflowed in a joyful countenance.

To make the wrong choice and spend one's life avoiding risks would surely result in truly a sad and fruitless life. A byproduct of avoiding risk is that the risk-avoider tends to

fullness of joy are not necessarily connected to the calendar.

Have you ever heard this phrase? “The safest place in the world is in the middle of God’s will.” That is downright goofy. Actually, sometimes being where God wants you to be and doing what God wants you to do is not at all safe. But risk-taking, cross-bearing obedience is the way to fulfillment.

Missionary, pastor, church member, all of us as Christ-followers must count the cost, bear the cross, take the risk. Obedience is the path we must choose.

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takers. Moses at the Red Sea. Joshua outside Jericho. Elijah on Mount Carmel. Daniel having morning devotions.

It is obvious that Jesus values and rewards risk-taking.

If we follow Him, He will lead us through our adventure of faith. If you are obedient to the Lord, you know that this new life is indeed an adventure of faith. Risk is born out of our intimate walk with the Savior. Risk is demanded of the servant of Christ.

Is it possible that some of us are trying to find a “comfort zone” instead of the “danger zone?”

Our dear friend, Rachel Saint, told us on more than one occasion of the courage that was necessary to go into the Waorani tribe that had killed her brother and his four friends. The Waorani themselves were fearful and

be judgmental. To those on the front lines, risking everything, the risk-avoider looks like one who in the comfort and security of his suburban home, sits on his couch and criticizes others who took some risks and got injured, heartbroken, or attacked. We like what one pastor said, “Jesus didn’t say, ‘Pick up your mattress and follow me.’ He said, ‘Take up your cross!’”

Is it possible to be a true Christ-follower who avoids risks? We think not. Courage is necessary. Courage is demanded.

In a video titled, “Letter to Zac” produced as he faced death, Zac Smith encouraged Christian young people to “choose the harder path” (<http://www.hello-righton.com/2009/08/13/letter-to-zac-video>). When we face the reality of the brevity of life, the risks seem trivial. The abundance of life and the

**A great deal more failure is the result of an excess of caution than of bold experimentation with new ideas. The frontiers of the kingdom of God were never advanced by men and women of caution.** -Oswald Sanders