

Mission Meditations by Debbie Chisholm

*“And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe. Acts 14:23*

Sierra was only 5-years-old when I met her in the town square park in San Lorenzo, New Mexico. She and her little brother came to the park to see our puppets sing and dance. Every morning for a week we took care of 40 -50 kids at the park. We would play games, tell them stories about Jesus, and listen to their stories. Sierra loved every minute of it. Her eyes would light up when we talked about the Christmas birth and the Easter cross. She would come in the morning, and she would find me and tell me what she had prayed for the night before. On the last day she begged me to walk her home and meet her mom and dad. They lived in a broken down shack, and my stomach tightened when I first thought about her sleeping in that dump. Her parents were stoned or drunk, half asleep on the couch, and there was trash everywhere. My heart broke to leave her there. I wanted so much to take care with me.

Sometimes the hardest part of mission work is leaving to come back home. After a week of clinics and house repair in Mexico, you're house that once looked so modest now seems like a mansion. You walk through a tribal landsite in Africa, and all of sudden you realize that an entire tribe could live on the 15 acres you call your backyard. You sit down to eat lunch at your favorite restraint and realize that an entire family could be fed with the food that is set before you. It's difficult to leave and come back to your life.

Paul understood that difficulty. He went to Iconium and Antioch, where he “strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith.” He appointed elders for their churches, and then he did the HARD thing. He fasted and prayed and entrusted them to the Lord. What a difficult thing to do.

I'm not sure what ever happened to Sierra. That was nearly 30 years ago. But I know the Lord knew her and loved her long before I did, and I know that the Lord knows and loves her today. Wherever she is, I hope the stories we shared about God's love and grace stayed with her, and that she continued to walk with the Lord in whom she had come to believe.

*“We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way:”*

2 Corinthians 6:3 – 4a

When I was a youth minister I would take our youth leadership team for a weekend retreat to help promote teamwork and leadership skills. We spent the weekend in Bible Study, prayer, fellowship, and playing trust games. Trust games were meant to be challenging and required that you put your complete trust in your team mates. Sometimes you were asked to fall backwards into waiting arms, or depend on others to lift you up and over a wall. One of the games asked you to put on a blindfold and trust your partner to direct you passed obstacles on a course. Obstacles can really be dangerous. They can wound and in some circumstances can even be fatal.

This scripture isn’t talking about an obstacle course. It’s talking about obstacles that can hurt someone spiritually, one that can prevent someone from hearing and accepting the good news of God’s grace. We can all be obstacles in one way or another, but especially on the mission field we need to be prepared. Naturally if you’re going to another country, it’s important to know their customs and what might be seen as offensive. In your culture it might be acceptable for you to wear shorts, sleeveless shirts, red lip stick, or sandals. But in other cultures, only prostitutes or non-Christians dress that way. Even within the United States, what is acceptable to wear in New York City may not be acceptable in a rural town in Mississippi.

When your desire is to share God’s love with someone, you don’t want anything you’re wearing or doing to get in the way. Paul was a good missionary, and he knew the importance of not being an obstacle on the mission field.

*“I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”* Philippians 4:11f – 13

So many times we see Philippians 4:13 quoted without the benefit of the preceding verses. When the entire section is read, it changes the emphasis of this well known verse. Paul definitely had a wealth of life experience, and when he spoke of having plenty, everyone knew that there was a time when Paul was climbing the Hebrew ladder of success. A Hebrew of Hebrews, acquainted with the powerful leaders of the Sanhedrin, and taught by one of the most respected Rabbis, Paul had plenty of power and respect. Needless to say, I doubt he was in need of food or in need of anything. But much had changed since those days. Now Paul was often imprisoned, hungry, abused, beaten, and in dangerous circumstances. But that was O.K., because Paul had learned the secret. He had learned the secret of being content no matter his circumstance or condition. What was the secret? “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

There are some who may think that a missionary’s greatest need is STRENGTH. They think about our missionaries living in the jungles of Africa, or among the masses in China, and they pray that they will have the STRENGTH to eat strange foods, battle spiritual forces, and live in difficult conditions. And they are right. Missionaries need a lot of STRENGTH, to do what God has called them to do. But during the years we spent on the mission field and taking church groups on short term mission trips, we found that what we needed more than STRENGTH was the grace to be CONTENT. Learning the secret of being CONTENT, when the work is fast and furious or slow and meticulous, when meals are frequent or few, and when converts are plentiful and impossible to find, is the salvation of many mission endeavors.

May your mission work be blessed with the sweet peace of CONTENTMENT!

*“He left that place and came to His hometown, and his disciples followed Him. On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded.... Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not His sisters here with us? And they took offense at Him.” Mark 6:1-3*

Sometimes it's really difficult to break away from our childhood identity. Our family and neighbors, teachers and coaches, look at us and still see us as we were rather than as we are. It matters not that we've graduated from law school or medical school, or if we're married with children of our own, in the eyes of some we will always be ten-years-old. But Jesus was much more than a physician or a scribe. Jesus was working miracles, healing, preaching, attracting thousands of Disciples, followers, and believers. It was said that He could even raise people from the dead. Now Jesus stands before the hometown Synagogue and doesn't just read the sacred passage, but reads it with power and authority. Suddenly they are offended. “Who does he think he is?” “He and Joseph made my dining room table.” “Isn't he the boy that ran around the neighborhood with our sons playing with sling shots and making entirely too much noise.” “Who does he think he is?” Unfortunately, the scene escalated until Jesus was taken to the edge of town and nearly stoned.

When we go to minister to other people in other lands and far away places, we worry that we may not be well received and accepted. Actually, sometimes we are received better in a new place among people who don't know us or have history with us. When we go on a mission trip or volunteer for an extended period of time to serve on the mission field, not only do we have the opportunity to be received without the baggage of the past, but we also get the chance to remove the distractions of hometown life. Here we have the opportunity to lay down the remote control, unplug our i-pod, and turn off our computer. We have a chance to focus on others, rather than focusing on ourselves. Mission trips take us away from our family and friends, and the habits of our daily living.

Jesus leaves the familiar streets of Nazareth without doing any miracles or healing any illnesses, and goes to another place, another town, and continues to teach, preach, and heal with power and authority. May you do great things as you minister to new people in new places.

*“He answered; I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” John 9:25*

I had only been a Christian for a few months when I traveled from Mississippi to New Mexico to serve as a summer missionary. Not only was I a new Christian, because I was raised in a family that didn't go to church. I knew little to nothing about Bible stories, VBS songs, and all the other things people learned growing up in Sunday School. I was scared that I wouldn't know what to say. I worried that someone might ask me something about the Old Testament that I had never read. There were so many dates in church history, theological turning points, and doctrinal facts that I was unacquainted with. How can you be a missionary when you haven't graduated from seminary? In order to be an effective witness, don't you need to have a variety of scriptures memorized, and know how to answer questions concerning the origin of evil and the doctrine of the trinity? I learned very quickly, that although knowledge is a wonderful tool when teaching and preaching, most people just want to hear your “story”.

Here was a man who had been blind since birth. I'm sure he had heard many explanations about why he was cursed in this way. Some probably told him that he had to have done something wrong to warrant this malady. Others might have suggested that if had enough faith and offered an acceptable sacrifice, he would be cured. Like the Disciples, the majority more than likely believed that his blindness was the result of the sins of his parents. Regardless of the reason, he was blind. That was, until Jesus came along. Jesus comes with the gift of sight . . . an unexpected gift at an unexpected time. Before he had the time to celebrate his healing he and his family were brought before the Pharisees to be questioned, accused, and examined. His answer was simple. “All I know is once I was blind and now I see.”

I couldn't explain the Trinity, or defend creationism, or teach systematic theology, but I could tell my story. “Once I was lost, alone, unloved. But now I am found, adopted, and loved.” Be faithful in sharing your own spiritual journey, and you will find that's all you really need to be a missionary.