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Missionaries' Temptations

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I thought I had prepared myself adequately for my first term on the mission field. I was willing to humble myself to the level of a child to learn a new language.

I hated coffee, but learned to tolerate it, knowing it was a staple beverage on the field where I would serve. I knew the Bible's teaching on the lostness of man and the uniqueness of the Christian gospel. I could give my testimony and explain salvation to others.

I was ready!

What totally threw me, however, was the intensity of the temptations that hit me in the face when I arrived on the field. Desires that lay buried and almost forgotten in the depths of my fallen nature rose up time and again, demanding to be satisfied.

How could this be? I was a missionary! And, I was in the center of God's will for my life, serving him overseas. I had come here to combat the sins of others, not my own!

It didn't take long to realize temptation is just as real on the mission field as it is anywhere else, and perhaps even more so. As time went on, not only was I appalled by the sin struggle in my own life, but I became aware of deliberate and grievous sin in the lives of fellow missionaries.

Consider these true accounts:

- A married missionary on his way to language lessons in a big city stops and buys hard-core pornographic magazines; he hides them under his Bible and school notes at the bottom of his brief case so his wife won't see them.
- A single missionary regularly locks himself in his apartment and drinks himself drunk to escape loneliness and discouragement.
- An independent missionary couple convinces two different churches to each fully support them financially, thus living dishonestly on a double salary.
- A missionary wife consistently sleeps in until 2 p.m. every day, letting her preschool children run wild.
- A single woman missionary becomes an entertainer in a sleazy night club. Of course, she doesn't tell her leaders or supporters.

All these sins (and more) are actual cases of missionaries with whom I have had direct contact. But rather than tell you about their struggles, let me talk about my own temptations.

In the country where I served, dishonesty is a way of life. Everybody lies. The trick is to do it and not get caught. One man told me that a lie was simply "a figure of speech," not really sin.

More than once, when I purchased something, the store owner would ask how much money to write on the receipt. "The amount I paid, of course," I replied. He was incredulous, knowing I could be reimbursed more than I actually paid by having him jack up the price on the receipt. Gradually, however, the insidious deceitfulness which surrounded me began to infiltrate my own fallen nature.

An exaggeration in a prayer letter. A lie to one of my children. A false declaration to a customs official.

Then, one day, a colleague asked me if I had followed up with someone who had expressed an interest in the gospel. I hadn't, but I looked her in the eye and said yes.

It was a bald-faced lie, and I didn't even blink!

Thankfully, the Holy Spirit did not let me rest until I confessed my deceitfulness to the Lord and my coworker. How could I lie? Lying directly contradicts God's character. "It is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6:18) and is completely consistent with Satan's character, "a liar and the father of lies" (John 8:44).

Knowing that, however, didn't make it any easier for me to be truthful in a society where deceitfulness was the modus operandi of everyday living.

Sexual impurity was another area that bombarded me. As a red-blooded male, to say I was never tempted in the sexual realm before I went to the mission field would not be true.

However, in the early 1970s when we began our missionary service, back home (at least where I lived), pornography was an under-the-counter phenomenon, nudity and TV didn't mix, and abstinence was still a virtue. Then we arrived in Europe, land of blatant pornography, uncensored television, and topless beaches. I was incensed at the perversion around me. But one day, while riding on a train, alone in a six-passenger compartment, I found a pornographic magazine on the seat next to me. I picked it up, slipped down the corridor to the men's room, and locked myself inside to have an unhurried and unhindered second look.

A minute or two later I tossed the magazine out the window, but not before indulging my carnal curiosity. I was shocked by the ease with which my baser instincts rose to the fore. Over and over, I asked God to forgive and cleanse me.

You say, those things can happen to anyone, anywhere. That's absolutely right. And missionaries on the field are no exception. In fact, for the missionary, the temptation to sin can often be greater. Let me tell you why.

Missionaries who take Christ's message to unreached peoples enter directly into Satan's territory. The enemy likes nothing better than to have missionaries fall into sin to nullify their witness. Could that be why Peter's warning to watch out for the devil (1 Peter 5:8) was written especially to Christian workers?

Missionaries are often under a great deal of pressure due to the cross-cultural tension in which they live. The struggle with a difficult language, different customs, rejection as a foreigner, and unresponsiveness to the gospel can lower a missionary's resistance and make him susceptible to anger, fear, impatience—even dis-honesty or impurity.

Missionaries are usually far from home, far from those who know them, far from a Christian community. If they lose their temper or cheat a little bit, no one they know will ever find out, and no local Christians will be scandalized, because there aren't any.

There is no local church, no believers, no Bible studies, no prayer meetings, not even Christian radio. These "means of grace," which are taken for granted in the Christian homeland, are absent on the field. The missionary finds himself alone across enemy lines. Sin's attraction is strong, and there is no one nearby to help him stand against it. But we can overcome Satan, resist temptation, and not let sin dominate us, even on the mission field. Here are several suggestions:

1. Get other people to pray for you every day. Readily admit to them your vulnerability to sin and ask them to intercede daily and fervently on your behalf.
2. Put yourself in a regular accountability relationship with another Christian, perhaps with another missionary who is close by. Ask your mission organization to send you out as part of a team for mutual fellowship and accountability.
3. Remind yourself constantly of the omnipresence of a holy God. God is with you at all times. Whenever you sin, he is the first to know. And your sin is first and foremost against him.

However, not only is he the first to know about our sin, he is the first to help us overcome it! He is with us at all times—even on the mission field—and is greater than the enemy. We can trust him to give us the power to resist temptation and live for him.

George Murray was general director of *The Evangelical Alliance Mission*.

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