

Living Unto God

By Lois J. Stucky

A small cemetery lay directly behind the little building which served as the classroom where I was teaching about twelve children of American missionaries in Sierra Leone, West Africa. Occasionally I visited the cemetery and thoughtfully studied the simple, aging gravestones that marked the burial sites of some American missionaries who had come with the Gospel to this nation fifty or sixty years earlier. The dates on the stones revealed that the flame of some young missionary lives had blazed only a few years in this disease-ridden land before their bodies were laid in the graves. Buried with them were their bright, impassioned hopes of rescuing souls from the intense spiritual darkness of this land. My heart was always touched as I silently honored them for their brave devotion and obedience, and wondered what a faithful God had in store in eternity for these who, in following their Master, fell as a seed into the ground and died to bring forth fruit (John 12:24).

And I heard from the lips of Grace, an elderly missionary lady serving God there, that when the Young missionaries passed away, back in the homeland the mission board issued a solemn call to the students in the training school. Who would take the place of those who had fallen? What a heart-searching time it must have been for the students. Then word came to the student body that a young lady had volunteered to go. "Who could it be?" the students asked one another. Who was willing for Jesus' sake to hazard her life – or as we say today, put herself "in harm's way" – for love of Jesus?

In due time, that young lady volunteer, Grace, sailed for the land of God's calling, and for many years she served faithfully. God joined her and a fellow missionary in marriage and in time gave them the privilege of welcoming the first white baby born in Sierra Leone. Later God gave a second son to the family. At maturity, both of the young men responded to the calling of God to serve Him in "dark Africa," where they had learned the language and many of the customs as they grew up. They served long and well. A granddaughter and a grandson also growing up there, devoted some years to God in what seemed homeland to them. God is building His Church throughout the world. One may sow, even his or her own life, while others reap. God has a place for each one of us to fill in His great plan of the ages.

"For Service or for Sacrifice"

An early missionary motto we may have heard is, "For service or for sacrifice." We can fully trust the heart of God, who determines which it will be. This is a motto fit for all of us who seek to follow in the footsteps of our Lord. God Himself calls us to it through the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans, when he beseeches us "by the mercies of God" to present ourselves "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is [our] reasonable service" (12:1). While the call is to all, the application will be very personal for each of us. "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). God repeated this word through Mark (8:34) and Luke (9:23). Voluntarily denying ourselves of whatever God asks of us personally in order to serve in His appointed

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place, should seem a reasonable, even a gladsome response in the light of Christ's utter sacrifice of Himself for us, and the eternal benefits which are ours as a result.

How we need God's help in order to reach life's finish line without abandoning or compromising our cross. It is easier to pick up the cross than to carry it to the end. Blessed is he who endures. Bearing the cross may involve crossing an ocean with the Gospel to some lonely and difficult place. Or as in cases of which I know, it may mean spending one's life in a wheelchair, handicapped in body from birth, but becoming a faithful worker with God through prayer. Most of us are somewhere in between, but "there's a cross for everyone and there's a cross for me."

In the words of the Scottish hymn writer, Elizabeth C. Clephane (1830-1869), we glimpse the heart of one who took her cross to selflessly, cheerfully serve the poor and those with disabilities regardless of her own poor health:

"I take, O cross, thy shadow for my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than the sunshine of His face;
Content to let the world go by, to know no gain nor loss,
My sinful self my only shame, my glory all the cross."

It is not just in life's momentous decisions but in small, daily matters that we face telling choices. It is the Spirit-filled Christian who is able by the Spirit to mortify selfish desires and plans. Often it is a choice between good – better – best. What is it that I need to put aside of personal interests in order to invest more time, talents and finances for the Lord and the souls He loves and wants His people to reach for Him?

Paul pled with the Corinthians not to receive the grace of God in vain (2 Cor. 6:1). All praise to our Savior who did not consider it in vain to come to earth and suffer and die for us! Now, He is rewarded. "We see Jesus...crowned with glory and honor" (Heb. 2:9). Might the full purpose of His great sacrifice for us be accomplished in and through us. That will happen as we present ourselves as continual, living sacrifices. As I write this, I sense with regret how far short I fall in living this out daily.

The apostle Paul's great zeal for the Lord and His Kingdom was proof of God's love in His heart: "The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that He [Christ] died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14). Paul was furthermore mindful, as we read also in his second letter to the Corinthians, that "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad [worthless] (5:10). How much consideration we ought to give to this, if we want to stand before God unashamed in that day, and surely we all do!