

THE LAST WORD

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I Was Scared. I Didn't Go.

In March 1975 I received an impassioned plea from an *ad hoc* committee of missionaries in South Vietnam. The letter was written and signed by a Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary representing a large number of missionaries from many denominations.

It said, in essence, "The Communists have started their final push and it is now obvious we are going to have to leave. The sad part is all we've worked for and accomplished so far will be destroyed when we pull out. The Communists will burn the Bibles we leave behind, they will turn the church buildings into Communist meeting halls, they will take over our hospitals, they will disband the churches and kill the pastors. There is nothing we can leave behind which will have lasting effect.

"As we have prayed together and searched the Scripture we have discovered Jesus faced a similar situation when He left earth to return to heaven. He did not leave anything behind. No church buildings, no Bibles, no trained pastors. All He left was His Holy Spirit.

"We are writing to ask if you are willing to come to Vietnam and impart to us the same gift Jesus imparted to His disciples; that we might in turn give this gift to those we are going to have to leave behind?"

There was more, but that was the literal essence of the letter.

I didn't know how to respond.

Our church was small at the time and did not have the money to send me. The publishing company I worked for was on the skids and had no money. Even if I had been able to come up with the money, there was another factor looming over me. I was afraid to go. This was a time when tens of thousands of people were fleeing Vietnam. It didn't make sense for me to go there. And possibly die there.

I knew of three missionaries who had been killed in Vietnam. Just the year before I had met the young widow of a Bible translator whose husband had been gunned down by the Vietcong. I had heard reports of others having been captured and tortured.

I waited another week, but the conclusion was inevitable. I knew I had no choice but to go. I could charge my ticket on my credit card. If I didn't come back someone else could pay the bill.

On Easter Sunday I cabled the mission group at DaNang, accepting their invitation and asking for directions. Tuesday morning I picked up the paper. DaNang had fallen. The nation was in chaos. My cable had been too late. Within three weeks it was all over.

Since then I have talked to several who were part of the group who issued the invitation. All have tried to absolve me of guilt by saying their letter was sent

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too late. They, too, had put off asking. The prospect of changing their theology, requesting an experience they didn't even believe in (the Baptism in the Holy Spirit), was a tough decision, even in the face of death. But eventually they were forced to drop their traditions, cling to truth, and ask God to give them the only thing Jesus gave His disciples—the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That episode in my life drove me into a period of deep introspection. Out of it came several positive things. One was a determination to define my purpose in life. I needed to know exactly *why* God had put me on earth. I suspected my fear had come out of confusion of purpose rather than the mere desire for self-preservation. But I would never know that until I had some kind of definition of purpose.

In good editorial fashion I decided to boil that purpose down to one sentence.

It was simple: To impart the Holy Spirit to the generation in which I live.

Having determined that (and I am not so cocky to believe purposes do not change, so I keep going back, about every six months, to see if the cloud has moved.) I finally understood the motive behind those men mentioned in Revelation 12:11(NIV).

"They overcame him 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."

Once you know who you are and why you're here, there's no need to be afraid. All God requires of us is faithfulness. Our times are in His hands.

I determined, back then, not to make safety, comfort or money a standard on which I made decisions for the Lord. If God wanted me to go someplace no one else would go, I would accept.

That decision has cost me dearly across the years. It has also allowed me to be in the midst of some of the most exciting events since Pentecost.

I've just returned from another of those experiences in what is quite literally, earth's uttermost part—the steaming jungles of the Indonesian state of Irian Jaya. Stay tuned. Next month I want to share what I learned in the heart of that dense, snake-infested jungle. ↵