Southeast Asia: Jesus, the cross-cultural worker

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I've been serving in Southeast Asia more than three weeks, and I've learned a lot of things. But one of the biggest lessons I've learned is that being a cross-cultural worker is hard. You arrive in a new culture where everything is different, and those differences can be overwhelming.

At first the newness is exciting. Trying new food, meeting new people, seeing new sights is fun. This is the "honeymoon" stage of culture shock. I served in England last summer and stayed in this stage the whole time. But this summer, the newness and excitement already started to rub off after a couple of weeks. I got tired of trying new food, sitting in traffic for a long time, and not speaking the same language as the majority of the population.

Energy drain

I get tired easily and run out of energy before noon. Because of that, four-hour shifts teaching English seem to drag on. When I try to turn the conversation to the topic of Jesus, the students at the center get distracted or are totally not interested. Some people call this the "flight" stage of culture shock because this is the time you want to get on a flight back home. Jesus has been teaching me a lot in this stage.

 As I was walking to my house today, I had some time by myself to think about Jesus. While I've never really thought about it before, Jesus was kind of a cross-cultural worker. He left Heaven, a perfect sinless place, to come to Earth, an extremely broken and sinful place—two totally different cultures.

I know there must have been times when Jesus got frustrated when people did not understand what he was trying to teach them. I bet there were times when he thought it would be easier to just go home. Living on the Earth wasn't easy. He was mocked, hated and spit on. It was hard, but he still walked in obedience to the Father's will. The Bible even says "for the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb 12:2). That is such a profound concept, and when I was a new follower of Christ, it was a confusing verse.

It was hard for me to see how there could be joy involved in the crucifixion. But now I can see the joy that was in the crucifixion was that Jesus was providing a way for anyone who believes in him to spend eternity with him, and there is unending joy in that.

One of my all-time favorite verses says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). I love having a Savior who knows how I feel. And now that I've realized Jesus knows what it's like to be in a new place and understands my culture shock, it makes it easier to run to him when I'm having a hard day.

Ministry in prisons and to prostitutes

Jesus has been doing great things in Southeast Asia. My team has been able to share the Good News with quite a few people through teaching English. We have helped with a prison ministry and a ministry to prostitutes.

So, why take the time to share about culture shock? One day when I was having a rough time, I found a letter in my suitcase my sister placed in without my knowledge. She is a long-term cross-cultural worker in Africa and was on furlough in Texas before I left for Southeast Asia. In the letter she wrote: "Here's a sad truth about cross-cultural work; cross-cultural

workers often do a disservice to other people by not mentioning the hard stuff." There's so much truth in that.

Sometime as cross-cultural workers, we only want to talk about the good thing and all the cool things Jesus is doing. We don't want to open up about our struggles or doubts. I'm learning if I pretend everything is perfect, I'm not doing anyone any good. It's OK to have a hard day and need to cry. In those moments, we are meant to run to Jesus with our brokenness and doubts. He will be there with open arms to sympathize with our weakness, just like his word says.

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