



# Opportunity (un)limited

**I**f you falter in times of trouble, how small is your strength! Rescue those being led away to death; hold back those staggering towards slaughter. If you say, "But we knew nothing about this," does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who guards your life know it? Will he not repay each person according to what he has done?<sup>1</sup>

This scripture contains one command, two excuses and three questions. All focus on the dangers of doing nothing. *The first excuse* comes before the command, as there will always be 'times of trouble':

- It's not a good time at the moment
- My strength is so small
- I have such limited resources
- I have exams coming up
- I have a young family
- I have financial problems
- The pressure of secularism or of Islam is too strong

It will never be convenient to respond to the call of God. Paul told Timothy: 'Preach the Word...in season and out of season'.<sup>2</sup> What is the antidote to this poisonous sense of inadequacy? "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength."<sup>3</sup> In him are resources unlimited, but access requires the daily discipline of Bible reading and prayer. Of course we don't have resources in ourselves. We need to come to him.

*The command* is in two parts. 'Rescue' (save) those being carried off by forces beyond their control. Death faces us all, and before then what forces sweep us away – corruption, political oppression, religious persecution, HIV/AIDS, TB, malnutrition, war, child soldiers, refugees, trafficking, prostitution, slavery, abortion, euthanasia. As Christians we are called to rescue young and old, women and men, from these and many other situations.

'Hold back' those who through their own ignorance or wilfulness are heading for disaster. The original is a double negative – 'Do not not restrain'. This part speaks of rebellious forces within: what the

Bible calls 'sin'. Symptoms of this inner disease – sexual lifestyles, abuse of alcohol/drugs, obesity – lead to morbidity and an early death, but it is the underlying condition that requires radical surgery. 'The wages of sin is death.'<sup>4</sup>

*The second excuse* says 'It's not my job, I never realised'. But you cannot use this excuse. You cannot say 'I'll just do my medical job. Let others speak for Jesus, fight for justice, lobby for righteousness, go to the ends of the earth.' When I was a student, God arrested me with these words: 'there are some who are ignorant of God – I say this to your shame'.<sup>5</sup>

None of us can avoid *the three questions*. Turn them into statements from the Lord:

- 'I weigh your heart.' I know your hidden motives. One may be challenged to move into cross-cultural ministry in another country; another to the sometimes harder task of staying and living for Christ among family and friends.
- 'I guard your life.' The safest place you can be is in the centre of God's will for you.
- 'I repay each person according to what he has done.' At the end of the road, what will you have to give to the Lord?

'Only one life; 'twill soon be past.  
Only what's done for Jesus will last.'<sup>6</sup>

*Peter Pattison has just retired as Regional Secretary for ICMDA Europe-Eurasia and this has been edited from his closing address at the Schladming conference*

## reference

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|----------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Proverbs 24:10-12 | 3. See Isaiah 40:28-31 | 5. 1 Corinthians 15:34 |
| 2. 2 Timothy 4:2     | 4. Romans 6:23         | 6. Anon                |