

“LIKE a TRUMPET”

Isaiah 58 ¹

I’m told that there used to be a saying among frequent flyers that “if it’s not Boeing, I’m not going.” I doubt that folks are saying that at the moment, given all of Boeing’s troubles this year.

But as awful as the two crashes of the 737 MAX have been, try to imagine this headline: “One Hundred Jetliners Crash, Killing 26,500.” “Now imagine that the very next day, one hundred more planes crashed—and one hundred more the next, and the next, and the next. It is unimaginable that something this terrible could ever happen. But it did—and it does. It happened today and it happened yesterday. It will happen again tomorrow.

“But there was no media coverage. No heads of state, parliaments, or congresses stopped what they were doing to address the crisis, and no investigations were launched. Yet more than **26,500 children died yesterday** of preventable causes related to their poverty, and it will happen again today and tomorrow and the day after that. Almost **10 million** children will be dead in the course of a year.”²

Try to imagine waking up to a day in which there is no food in your house. There is no store at which to buy food, and you don’t have any money, anyway. Not only are you hungry, very hungry, but your children—four under the age of seven—are very hungry, too.

You’re going to have to spend your day looking for food in other people’s garbage, and even if you find some, there will be no water to drink. There’s no water for drinking, no water for cooking, no water for bathing. The nearest water of any sort is a mile away, and it is disease-ridden, though you don’t know that.

When malnourishment and dehydration cause your children to become ill, there is no doctor to call and no medicine to give. Even such a simple thing as a childhood earache can easily become a death sentence; and while daylight brings hunger and pollution, darkness brings mosquitos and malaria. How’s the imagining going?

“Think about your own life,” challenges Richard Stearns, former president of *World Vision*. “How successful would you or your family have been if you had lived in a place where there was no clean water and one-quarter of all children died before their fifth birthday? Imagine growing up constantly weak and malnourished, to the point where both your body and your mind become stunted.

“What if there had been no health care system . . . What if you had lived where you couldn’t go to school because you had to fetch water six hours a day—or where there was no school? Or worse, think about what might have happened to you if rebel armies had sacked your community, killed your parents, and driven you hundreds of miles from your home to live in a refugee camp.

“These are the daily realities of the world’s poor. No matter how hard they work, no matter how gifted and talented they are, no matter how big their dreams, the poor have few choices and even fewer opportunities to fulfill their God-given potential. These precious human beings created in God’s image have been left behind and cast on the garbage dump of history by circumstances they cannot change.”³

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on January 19, 2020. Martin Luther King, Jr. weekend.

² Stearns, pp. 106-107.

³ Stearns, p. 120.

It's estimated that around our world, a child dies **every five seconds** from hunger-related causes, and a child dies from malaria **every thirty seconds**.⁴ Indeed, *National Geographic* recently reported that "Some scientists believe that **one out of every two people who have ever lived have died of malaria**."⁵

Women and children in developing countries invest two hundred million hours a day fetching *polluted* water, and it's estimated that as many as one-half of the world's hospital beds are occupied by people with a water-related illness.⁶ One woman dies every minute from complications of childbirth, and AIDS has left fifteen *million* orphans in sub-Saharan Africa.⁷

In considering these realities, Mr. Stearns calculated that "the wealthiest countries, where just one-fifth of the world's population lives, spend 90 percent of the world's health care dollars, allowing the remaining four-fifths of the planet to spend only 10 percent of the money. In the United States, we spend about \$3,170 per person on health care each year. In much of Africa and Southeast Asia, the comparable figure is \$36, an eighty-eight-fold difference."⁸

When Jimmy Carter accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002, he pointed out that "the most serious and universal problem that the world faces is the growing chasm between the richest and poorest people on earth. Citizens of the ten wealthiest countries are now seventy-five times richer than those who live in the ten poorest ones, and the separation is increasing every year, not only between nations but also within them."⁹

In 1985, Steve Reynolds was working for *World Vision* in Ethiopia during the worst famine of a generation. Steve spent many dreary days in the relief camps as an eyewitness to the horrors of massive starvation and death, gathering information that he hoped would provoke people to notice and respond.

One day he got a call from headquarters asking if he would host a young European couple, Ali and Paul Hewson, who wanted to visit and learn firsthand what was happening. Steve was willing to help, and Ali and Paul stayed almost a month, rolling up their sleeves to help and showing tireless compassion.

Paul was a musician, so he entertained the kids by writing little songs. Paul and Ali finally went home, but not before they had committed to do whatever they could to help. You may know Paul better by his nickname, Bono.

Since that trip in 1985, Bono, the lead singer of the phenomenal Irish rock group U2, has traveled the globe as an advocate for the poorest of the poor. He has met with kings and queens, presidents, prime ministers, and the Pope. He has lobbied members of parliaments and congresses. He has persuaded governments to appropriate billions of dollars of aid to the poor.

In a later interview with *Christianity Today*, Bono specifically mentioned the key influence of Steve Reynolds: "All of this started for me in Ethiopia in the mid-'80s, when my darling wife and I went out there as children, really, to see and to work in Africa."

⁴ Stearns, pp. 135, 144.

⁵ Michael Finkel, "Stopping a Global Killer," *National Geographic*, July 2007; cited in Stearns, p. 143. Malaria was eradicated in the United States in 1950.

⁶ Stearns, p. 138.

⁷ Stearns, pp. 148, 156.

⁸ Stearns, p. 141. In 2019 the Democratic Republic of the Congo spent less than \$5 per person.

⁹ www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/jec/nobel.phtml, cited in Stearns, p. 98. In 1820, the wealth ratio between the richest and the poorest nations was 4:1. In 1913, the ratio was 11:1. In 1950, it was 35:1; and in 2002, it was 75:1 (Stearns, p. 122).

Thirty-four years later, Steve Reynolds still works for World Vision, working behind the scenes on behalf of the world's poorest people. We don't always get to see how God uses what we do, but Steve Reynolds has had that blessing.¹⁰

Speaking about poverty, Bono said, "Fifteen thousand Africans are dying each day of preventable, treatable diseases—AIDS, malaria, TB—for lack of drugs that we take for granted. This statistic alone makes a fool of the idea many of us hold onto very tightly: the idea of equality.

"What is happening to Africa mocks our pieties, doubts our concern and questions our commitment to the whole concept. Because if we're honest, there's no way we could conclude that such mass death day after day would ever be allowed to happen anywhere else. Certainly not in North America or Europe, or Japan. An entire continent bursting into flames? Deep down, if we really accept that their lives—African lives—are equal to ours, we would all be doing more to put the fire out. It's an uncomfortable truth."

Bono continued, "We can be the generation that no longer accepts that an accident of latitude determines whether a child lives or dies—but *will* we be that generation? Will we in the West realize our potential or will we sleep in the comfort of our affluence with apathy and indifference murmuring softly in our ears?

"Fifteen thousand people dying needlessly every day from AIDS, TB, and malaria. Mothers, fathers, teachers, farmers, nurses, mechanics, children. This is Africa's crisis. That it's not on the nightly news, that we do not treat this as an emergency—that's *our* crisis. . . .

"History will be our judge, but what will be written is up to us. We can't say our generation didn't know how to do it. We can't say our generation couldn't afford it. And we can't say our generation didn't have reason to do it. *It's up to us.*"¹¹

Before he left for service as a missionary surgeon in Kenya, my friend, Dr. Tom Boeve, gave me a book by Richard Stearns, then president of *World Vision*. The book's title is *The Hole in Our Gospel*.

As we all know, a "hole" is a hollowed-out place in something solid. Something has to be removed from something else in order to form a hole. Mr. Stearns's premise is that there is a "hole" in our "whole"; that we in the Western Church "have shrunk Jesus to the size where He can save our souls but we don't believe He can change the world."¹² I'm afraid we American Christians have settled into an uncomfortable affluence tinged with both guilt and despair. We no longer try very hard to make a real difference in the world.

Mr. Stearns points out that "It is not our fault that people are poor, but it *is* our responsibility to do something about it. God says that we are guilty if we allow people to remain deprived when we have the means to help them. It is our moral duty to help our neighbors in need. . . . Every one of these hurting people is created in God's image and loved by Him. Every one of these challenges has a solution. *Every one of us can make a difference.*"¹³

There are about 340,000 Christian churches in the United States and about 155 million regular churchgoers. According to Mr. Stearns, the total income of American churchgoers is \$5.2

¹⁰ Condensed from Richard Stearns, *Unfinished* (Thomas Nelson, 2013), pp. 152-154.

¹¹ Bono, foreword to Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: Economic Possibilities for Our Times* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); cited in Stearns, pp. 104-105.

¹² Stearns, p. 23.

¹³ Stearns, pp. 123, 151.

trillion. That's more than **five thousand billion dollars**.¹⁴ Think of the possibilities! Ponder the potential to change the world if all of us raised our commitment to love our neighbors to a higher level.¹⁵

The average giving of American church members in 2018 was a paltry 2.50 percent of their income. But this is just the first part of a sad equation. Of the money that American churches receive, only about 2 percent goes to overseas missions of any kind, whether evangelistic or assistance to the poor. The bottom line is that we, the wealthiest Christians in all history, are contributing only about 2 percent of 2 percent—about five ten-thousandths of our income—to meet the needs of those beyond our shores. What might God do if we actually did “*bring the whole tithe into the storehouse*” (Malachi 3:10)? What might God do?!¹⁶

Well, in spite of these statistics, there's actually quite a bit of good news here. For one thing, we've gained a lot of ground on these basic issues in our own lifetimes.¹⁷ For another, there is no lack of funding. We American Christians, who make up about five percent of the global Church, control about half of the global Christian wealth. We have no lack of resources, and God invites us to experience the wonderful, amazing, life-changing privilege of being the channels through which God will transform the world.

Do you worry about the growing threat of terrorism around our world? Would you like to know how to be victorious over it? Well, try to imagine a world in which the Gospel has no gaping hole in it, a world in which the poor are helped by the rich, the powerful protect the powerless, the hated are loved, the brokenhearted are comforted, the oppressed are liberated, and the downtrodden are lifted up.

Try to imagine how stunning it would be for American Christians to give so generously that we brought an end to world hunger; solved the clean water crisis; provided universal access to drugs and medical care for the millions suffering from AIDS, malaria, and tuberculosis; ended the daily deaths of more than twenty-six thousand children; provided education for all the world's children; and provided a safety net for the world's tens of millions of orphans?¹⁸ The Bible tells us, “*Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good*” (Romans 12:21). Can you imagine that?

Can you imagine the questions that would follow such transformation? ***Who are these people so motivated by love? Where did they come from? Why do they sacrifice so to help those the rest of the world has forgotten? Where do they find their strength? Who is this God they serve? Can we serve Him too?***¹⁹

¹⁴ Stearns, p. 216.

¹⁵ Stearns, p. 237.

¹⁶ Stearns, p. 217. Sadly, as our incomes have increased, our giving has significantly declined. In 1933, at the height of the Great Depression, giving averaged 3.3 percent, 27 percent more than we gave in 2018.

¹⁷ For example:

- The life expectancy in developing nations increased from 46 years in 1960 to 66.1 in 2005.
- The under-five child mortality rate has been cut in half since 1970.
- Preventable child deaths have fallen 50 percent since 1960 from more than 20 million per year to fewer than 10 million.
- The percentage of the world's people classified as hungry has been reduced from 33 to 18 percent over the past forty years.
- The percentage of people with access to clean water in developing countries went from 35 percent in 1975 to 80 percent in 2007.
- Polio has been almost eradicated from the globe.
- Adult literacy has risen from 33 to 77 percent since 1970 (Stearns, p. 163)

¹⁸ Stearns, p. 219.

¹⁹ Stearns, pp. 278-279.

A world such as this is what God has had in mind from the very moment of creation, and God has shaped and prepared us for a unique role in this Plan. “What do you see when you look at the pain and suffering in the world?” Mr. Stearns asked. “Do you see a malnourished child—or a future farmer? Do you see a child without schooling—or a potential teacher? Do you see a frightened child in a refugee camp—or a prospective leader?”²⁰ The light of even one candle challenges the gloom, but the light of all of us together could *obliterate* it. We are the answer to their prayers. **We are the revolution.**

Now it takes transformed people to transform the world. You and I have either placed our lives in God’s service without reserve, holding nothing back, or we have not. Jesus calls us to a faith commitment in which “nothing is held back, no price is too high to pay, the farm is bet, and the deed is signed over. If Jesus is [really] Lord, then nothing He asked us to do is optional.”²¹

So what part are you supposed to play? What shape is your piece of the Plan? It really is true that God intends for you to use your uniqueness and the resources He has placed in your stewardship to help the Kingdom come. As President Carter memorably put it, quoting John Wesley, “My faith demands—this is not optional—my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I can, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference.”²²

The apostle John wrote that “*If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth*” (1 John 3:17-18).

In the end, God is calling you to do that which He created only you to do. Can you hear Him calling? I can.²³

*Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice **like a trumpet**. . . . if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The LORD will guide you always . . . you will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail* (Isaiah 58:1a, 10, 11b).

Amen, and Amen.

²⁰ Stearns, pp. 275-277.

²¹ Stearns, p. 83.

²² Stearns, p. 263. I think this quote originally came from John Wesley.

²³ Stearns, p. 279.