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Restrictions: When your Faith is Tested - from "Women Crossing Borders: Reflections on Cross-cultural Ministry"

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA

When your faith is tested

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Restrictions

Sarita Dolores Gallagher

According to Operation World, Papua New Guinea ranks ethnically and linguistically as the world’s most complex nation. Although the official language is English, over eight hundred other languages are spoken by the diverse population. Well known for its beautiful flora and fauna, which includes “the bird of paradise,” rugged terrain complicates the management of the nation’s rich natural resources, such as timber, oil and gas.

Scripture – James 1:2-4

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Story

My heart sank as soon as the words came out of the pastor’s mouth. Just days before my departure to Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a first-term missionary, what he had to say rated as the very last thing I wanted to hear. Nevertheless, there I slumped in my pew at church listening to his words: “Sarita, these verses in James 1:2-4 are from God, and they refer to your upcoming time in PNG.”

I quickly flipped through the pages of my Bible to find the verse. The words on the page engulfed me—“trials of many kinds,” “testing of your
faith," "perseverance must finish its work?" My heart groaned, and I quickly cried out "Oh Lord, please, no more trials, struggles and pain!" Just a year and a half earlier, my Mum had passed away after a painful struggle with cancer. Just a few months after, my relatives underwent another family upheaval. "Maybe, just maybe," I thought hopefully, "the pastor is wrong. Yes, that must be it. Surely my experience won't be as bad as all that..."

Six months later I recalled that scene as I climbed determinedly up the dirt path of Bethel Center's aptly named, "Prayer Mountain." From the height of the small hill I could look down upon the swaying coconut trees, vegetable gardens and makeshift houses of the Port Moresby suburb of Tokarara. The beauty of the surroundings was, however, lost on me for my eyes fixed resolutely on the steep dusty path. Pain, frustration and agony seemed to pump through my veins—my heart felt as though it wanted to leap from my body. Over and over again the words, "I can't take it anymore," thumped through my head. After just half a year in the country I felt overcome with sheer desperation.

While in PNG I expected to encounter many cultural and language differences, but nothing had prepared me for the particular difficulty that awaited me in Port Moresby. While other parts of PNG are quite safe, Port Moresby and its surrounding neighborhoods are known as "high-risk locations." Armed robberies, car-jackings and sometimes even physical attacks are common. While most Papua New Guineans find relative safety in the city, foreigners tend to be targets. Needless to say, the very real dangers of living in the city greatly restricted my life. As a young white female, my movement was almost entirely limited to the Bible school property. For a woman who had previously trekked Europe alone, and whose favorite activities included running, hiking and traveling, these restrictions soon became unbearable.

Sitting among the branches of the tallest tree I could find, I ardently poured out my heart to God. The high barbed wire fence to my right enclosed the property. It taunted me, as though it was a picture of my physical representation of my present emotional condition. I felt trapped—trapped beyond anything I had experienced—beyond anything I had ever imagined. My Western upbringing encouraged independence and had ill-prepared me for a life on a two-acre campus. "God,"
I earnestly cried out, "from now on it has to be all. I have nothing left to give." My body slumped down as I let out this final plea for help. I've heard that everyone has a breaking point, and I just discovered mine. I had barely gotten out of bed the next morning when I suddenly heard a knock on the door of my small house. When it opened, the cheerful smile of one of our school's Filipino students greeted me. She explained that she had been thinking of me early that morning and wanted to know if I would like to attend an all-day barbeque with her. God heard my cry! Relief swept throughout my body. After having stayed on the school property almost continually for six months, God worked this small miracle before my very eyes.

Continued invitations from the Filipino Christian Fellowship followed and, shortly after, an evangelistic soccer team formed at the Bible school. Within a few days my previously nonexistent social schedule filled to capacity. I actually had to turn down some invitations. Although the restrictions of Port Moresby life continued, I learned that although pressure and trials abound on the mission field, so does God's love, mercy and provision.

**Journaling Topic**

How has God used a friend to help you through a transition?

**Idea for Prayer**

Pray for meaningful friendships for cross-cultural workers.

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