

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Debriefing

You may say, “I already know about debriefing because I’ve been through it several times. As I left for home, the field director asked me to rate the adequacy of my housing, whether or not I felt overworked, how my kids got along in school, how many people came to Christ under my ministry...” Then I did nearly the same thing again at headquarters with someone there.

That is one kind of debrief, an organizational debrief. That is necessary for the agency to gather information, and it is done primarily for the good of the agency. However, even more important is a personal debrief, one done primarily for your own good. This debrief may be done individually or as part of a group of people who have been through similar experiences, such as a traumatic experience or returning to your passport country. It is an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of personal experiences as well as changes within yourself and your family.

Jonah, an early cross-cultural missionary, had just been part of a city-wide revival in Nineveh, but he was filled with anger. God himself debriefed Jonah, asking him, “Do you have a right to be angry?” Jonah apparently did not reply but went off to sulk a while. After more things went wrong, God again asked, “Do you have a right to be angry?” This time Jonah finally let all his anger out so that God and he could deal with it together.

Of course, debriefing is also good after a great experience. When the 72 returned from their evangelistic campaign (Luke 10:17), they were filled with joy and enthusiastic that even the demons had submitted. At this point,

Jesus cautioned them not to get carried away with the power they had experienced, but with the fact that their names were written in heaven.

Why Debrief?

This personal debrief is particularly helpful in times of crisis or transition to help bring closure to an earlier chapter in your life and to help you leave behind any emotional “baggage” that accumulated during that time. The debriefing time helps you do three things.

- **Verbalize.** Expressing your thoughts and feelings verbally clarifies both. As you talk with others, you may find that you do not like what you hear yourself saying.
- **Normalize.** Whether in a group or with someone who understands your situation, you are likely to find that you are not alone in what you think and feel. You will come to realize that such thoughts and feelings are normal, that others have the same ones.
- **Contextualize.** A good debrief helps you put your experiences into the context of your life. You can relate those experiences to earlier events in your life and see how God is using them to prepare you for the future.

You may not be angry like Jonah was, but your experience may have left you frightened, discouraged, exhausted, emotionally drained, or any number of things. Here are several questions that will help.

Where are you?

God asked this question of the man in the garden in Genesis 3:9. Since God knew where the man was, why ask the question? To get the man to express where he was—not where he was geographically, but where he was psychologically and spiritually. Note that the man answers by telling what he

experienced (heard God), what he felt (was afraid), and what he did (hid).

Ask yourself the following BASIC questions.

- **Behaviorally.** Are your actions what you want them to be?
- **Affectively.** Are you satisfied with your feelings, your emotions?
- **Spiritually.** Is your relationship with God alive and growing?
- **Interpersonally.** Are your relationships with your family and/or colleagues positive?
- **Cognitively.** Can you concentrate, thinking clearly and logically?

What have you done?

God asked this question of the woman in the garden in Genesis 3:13. As with the man, God knew what the woman had done. However, he wanted her to say it, to confess. She did, but she blamed the serpent for her wrong actions. If you have done bad things, God wants repentance, not rationalization or projection.

In Luke 9:10 we find the apostles returning from their first short-term evangelistic assignment and reporting to Jesus what they had done, good things. Again, Jesus did not stop them from reporting what had happened because it was good for them to talk, to verbalize it. It was also good for them to hear what the others had to report as well, to normalize their own experiences.

After the first long-term cross-cultural missionary assignment, Paul and Barnabas told their sending church and other churches they visited on the way to Jerusalem about the conversions taking place under their ministry (Acts 14:27; 15:3).

Where have you been?

An angel asked Hagar, “Where have you come from?” (Genesis 16:8). The angel was not puzzled about finding this woman along a road in the desert and was not simply wondering what village she was from. The angel wanted Hagar to know where she had been emotionally, and Hagar realized that.

Hagar replied, “I am running away from...” Sometimes missionaries run away from people who mistreat them when they try to help. In fact, it is often those you help the most that turn on you and hurt you the most.

After you have talked about it, you may find that sometimes God wants you to shake the dust off your feet and leave, and at other times he will say, “Go back...and submit,” as the angel told Hagar. However, God always wants you to verbalize (confess) it and submit it to him.

As you think about where you have been, consider how these past events fit in with your life story. How is God using them to make you into the person he wants you to be?

Where are you going?

The angel went on to ask Hagar, “Where are you going?” (Genesis 16:8). Hagar did not even attempt to answer this question. However, the angel told Hagar where she should go and what she should do. Hagar obeyed.

At the end of Acts 15 Paul suggested to Barnabas that they return to the towns they had visited on their first term of missionary service to see how their converts were doing. Paul had some ideas about who to take, where to go, and what to do. However, as you know, the future was dramatically different. He took

Silas, went to Europe, and planted more churches.

It is good for us to think about where we are going and make plans for the future, but we must remain open to other plans God may have for us. If he wants us elsewhere doing other things, he will stop us. Then he will send us to a different place to do something different. In chapter 16 the Holy Spirit stopped Paul from going particular places and gave him a vision of where he was to go.

What has God done with you?

This question is not one we find directly asked by anyone in Scripture, but it is a question we find returning missionaries answering to particular groups.

- When Paul and Barnabas returned to their sending church at the end of their first term of missionary service, they “reported all that God had done with them” (Acts 14:27). During missionary service God works in people’s lives and changes them. The Greek word “meta” is used hundreds of times in the New Testament and is the simple word for “with.” Just as Jeremiah talks about what the potter does with the clay, we need to become aware of what God has done with us. (Unfortunately, a few modern translations have translated “meta” as “through,” but it basically means “with.”)
- When Paul and Barnabas reached Jerusalem, they again “reported all that God had done with them” (Acts 15: 4). They had seen God work and were firmly convinced that anyone could be saved by grace, even without following all the Jewish customs.

Note that Paul and Barnabas reported this to their sending church and to the leaders

at headquarters, but they did not report this to the people in the churches they visited along the way. Some things are better shared only with others who understand what God does with people who serve him in other cultures.

Take a break!

Finally, a time of rest is important at the time of the debriefing, whether after a crisis or during a time of transition

- When the apostles came back after their first evangelistic assignment (Luke 9:10), Jesus and the apostles withdrew by themselves a while. Writing about this Mark noted that after they had reported to Jesus what they had done, the crowds descended on them all. They were so busy that they did not even have time to eat. So Jesus told them to come with him to a quiet place and get some rest (Mark 6:31).
- Likewise after they had reported to their sending church, Paul and Barnabas “stayed there a long time with the disciples” (Acts 14:28).

Such times of rest around the time of debriefing are very important. Give yourself time during the transition or after the crisis to get the rest you need. Today, as in New Testament times, many things will come up that will put demands on your time. For your own good and the good of the Kingdom, make getting away to a quiet place and getting some rest a high priority.

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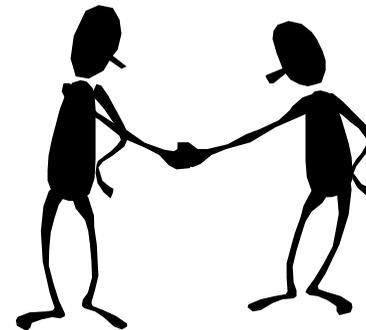
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