

COSTLY COMPASSION

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In an instant of time, I had to make one of the most difficult decisions of my life. I had to choose whether or not to try to save the life of the person I had just hit with my car. But by choosing to help the injured person, I would jeopardize my own life and the lives of my family who were in the car with me.

We were missionaries in Papua New Guinea. Our family had been looking forward eagerly to a short holiday in Goroka, which was a three-and-a-half-hour drive from where we lived. The five of us piled into the mission bus. It was made to carry nine passengers, so we were quite comfortable.

We made a brief stop at our Bible College and our hospital and then headed towards Goroka. Our holiday had begun, and we were all having a good time. Everyone was relaxed and filled with anticipation.

The paved road gave way to gravel for a short stretch where the Highlands Highway was still incomplete. We were soon past it. Just after we came back on the pavement, I slowed to a cautious speed because we had entered a road bung. A bung is an open-air market held along the roadside where two roads intersect. Many people were milling around, buying and selling just off the pavement of the highway.

Suddenly, in a split second, an elderly man stepped out in front of our bus. There was no time to brake or swerve or even register it in my mind before it was over. I had hit the man with the right front of the bus just above the turn signal. The impact threw him over onto the side of the road. I slammed on the brakes and the bus came almost to a complete stop. My first thought was to stop and see if I could move the injured man to a nearby medical clinic or, if not, to go there and bring back help.

Then, feeling like a criminal, I stepped on the accelerator because I remembered what our mission doctor had told us to do in a case like this. "Don't stop, whatever you do," he had advised us after an experience like this of his own. Amid the screams of our children and the yells of the people churning around the car outside, the doctor's voice prevailed, and I kept the car in motion. I suspected that the man had been killed on impact, and as I drove on I wondered how many of his tribesmen had witnessed the accident.

To even begin to understand why a Christian missionary would do such a thing, you need to know about the "payback system" in the highlands culture of Papua New Guinea. You see, the people there are even more capitalistic than the West, in some ways at least. Every person—man, woman, or child—has a price on his or her head in a very real sense. Each individual is seen by the tribe to be a material asset to them. Therefore, the loss of a person to the tribal line is seen in terms of material worth. When a loss has been incurred, the person responsible is required to pay back to the tribe something of comparable worth.

The payback system has survived in this culture even after its explosive propulsion into modernity through Westernization. The system is based on the instinct to get even and is meant to be carried out swiftly and accurately. Fear strikes the hearts of nationals as well as expatriate Westerners because of this age-old cultural institution.

As I drove on down the highway, there was now a heavy silence in our bus, but turmoil and anxiety swirled through my head. I had done what I felt I had to do for the sake of my family, and yet I had possibly sacrificed another human life.

I stopped at the next police station, which was about one hour down the road, and reported the accident. There we were held in custody until word came that the man had died. My driver's license and passport were taken from me, and I was arrested for dangerous driving. Bail was set at K 500.00, and a court date was arranged for three months from that day. Then we were escorted to our home by armed policemen, who told us that there we would be safe from the tribe. Our holiday had turned into a nightmare.

In the days between the accident and trial, I never stopped asking myself if I had done the right thing. Friends and other missionaries tried to justify my decision by reminding me of the many stories of people who had been brutally beaten or even axed to death when they stopped at the scene of an accident. But I still see a dying man lying beside the road. I wonder if I will ever know whether what I did was right or wrong

Postscript

The tribal village court fined the author of this case K 10,000 (U.S. \$12,000) and 40 pigs, worth about K 400.00 each. This "sorry" money was to be paid in addition to any insurance coverage.

Mission leaders contested this judgment, and the final settlement reached was K 2,000 (\$2,500). This was then considered by the tribe as payment in full for the loss of their tribesman.