

Should Christians Read Fiction Books? With Dr. Marvin Newell

00:00:05:02 - 00:00:40:20

Alex Kocman

Greetings and welcome to the Missions Podcast, the show that explores your hard questions on missions, theology, and practice to help viewers think and thinkers go. I'm Alex Kocman, Director of Communications and Engagement with ABWE. We joined once again by my good friend and partner in crime, Scott W Dunford, pastor of Western Hills Church in San Mateo, California. And whether you're listening to us on your favorite podcasting app or watching us through the Wrath and Grace universe app, or maybe even watching us on NRB-TV, we're so grateful.

00:00:40:20 - 00:00:57:07

Alex Kocman

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00:00:57:07 - 00:01:23:14

Alex Kocman

We're so grateful for each and every one of you who have. In fact, if you haven't yet done so, go ahead and log in to your favorite podcasting platform. If you're one of our podcasting listeners and leave us a positive rating and review that will help other people discover the content and be blessed by it. You know, Scott, there's many ways that I think the Lord uses to bless and enrich our lives to get us thinking about his mission, his heart for the nations, the hearts of the nations that he wants us to share as well.

00:01:23:15 - 00:01:50:19

Alex Kocman

I was just listening to a podcast or who I respect a lot, and the dude is orders of magnitude more intelligent than me, which really isn't saying much at all. But he said something that grieved me. Scott, this podcaster said, and you know, he's a theologian. He's brilliant, all

these sorts of things. But he said, I can't stand reading fiction where his words and I thought about my own life, my own heart, my own reading habits.

00:01:51:00 - 00:02:11:22

Alex Kocman

I love reading theology. I love even engaging in stories of missionaries. But I think we need fiction in our lives to engage our imagination. And I would even go so far as to say, Scott, without spoiling some of the content of our guest in this interview that we're about to have, we need that to even provoke our spirits.

00:02:11:22 - 00:02:30:06

Alex Kocman

With regard to the Great Commission, I don't think that the part of your brain and your heart and your mind that you engage when you're reading fiction is separate from the part of your heart and mind that pertains to your walk with the Lord. I think that the imagination is the connective tissue of all of those things. So, I'm really excited for this discussion.

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Alex Kocman

We're about to have Scott.

00:02:31:14 - 00:02:40:02

Scott Dunford

In me as well, and so we'll talk about that more. But also, Alex, this is kind of a big deal is our 450th episode. Wow. Let's just producer.

00:02:40:02 - 00:02:41:19

Alex Kocman

So, I didn't get you anything.

00:02:41:23 - 00:02:44:03

Scott Dunford

That's I didn't get you anything either.

00:02:44:03 - 00:02:49:07

Alex Kocman

I don't even have my Branded Missions podcast mug here today, so I'm really slacking.

00:02:49:09 - 00:03:07:08

Scott Dunford

Well, anyway, to get that out of the way, I am excited to have our next guest to join us. Well, I, I became familiar with your reading, Miss Geology work. So, he's got a book called Crossing Cultures in Scripture, which is, kind of a staple in the mythological world. But also, he's done other writing. We're going to talk about that today, too.

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Scott Dunford

So, Doctor Marvin Newell, we're glad to welcome you to our show. He's currently retired ish. Ambassador at large, for Missio Nexus. Before that was a professor, at Moody Bible Institute in seminary and worked as a senior vice president for Missio Nexus. And, you know, probably, even most important, he had served as a missionary for over 20 years, and, the country of Indonesia, we'll let him tell more about that.

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Scott Dunford

But it's so good to have you, accomplished author, miss geologist, welcome to our show. We're really glad to have you today.

00:03:44:16 - 00:04:06:05

Marvin Newell

Well, Scott, thank you for that introduction. And, Alex, great to meet both of you. I know that these broadcast, podcast, get viewed by a lot of people. And so, I feel very honored to be able to be able to, say a little bit about, the mission world in general and maybe specifically about, the book that I have that just came out.

00:04:06:07 - 00:04:26:15

Scott Dunford

So, the new book that you've got, come, Come Out is, is not, a full-on Missy ology book. You've written a lot of those books on mobilization, on crossing cultures, How to Be a missionary. Those kind of those kind of books. This one you've written most recently. I know you've written fiction before, a book called Taking You Under My Skin.

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Scott Dunford

I'll let you talk about the title in that in a little bit. But, you know, as a missy ologist, as an author, as a professor, as a missionary yourself, there's a lot of ways to approach missions. Why spend the investment of time and energy and emotion writing a work of fiction about missions?

00:04:44:23 - 00:05:05:11

Marvin Newell

Yeah, very good question. And, you know, I never thought I would do this. Scott, but, as I started thinking about a way to portray unreached peoples to people that still in our churches don't really understand unreached peoples, I thought that by telling a story about them would be the better way to get into their hearts and minds.

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Marvin Newell

So, I thought I would promote the awareness of unreached through the parent the power of narrative. Everyone seems to like stories. Even Jesus told a lot of stories. Did he? Not to convey truths. And so, I just thought that by writing a story that would be very realistic. And yet it was fiction. It's a historic fiction.

00:05:28:20 - 00:05:43:12

Marvin Newell

It's based actually on the era of the Vietnam War and then the years following that, that people would engage in that book better than if I wrote another book about how we got to be aware of the unreached kind of a thing.

00:05:43:15 - 00:05:48:21

Alex Kocman

Well, I want to hear more about your motivation behind that, but can you just tease the story a little bit?

00:05:49:02 - 00:06:12:01

Marvin Newell

Yeah. What I did is that I took a story of a very young couple who gets engaged, who lived in, the, eastern part of the United States, actually, just a little bit east of you guys. They're, the northwest suburbs of Philadelphia. And then he gets drafted, they go to Bible school for a year, intending to be missionaries.

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Marvin Newell

And then he gets drafted into the Vietnam War. He ends up as a as an Army medic that flies in on the helicopters, the medevac helicopters to rescue wounded soldiers out. And during one of those missions, he gets captured because the helicopter gets exploded and it gets captured and taken to a village, across the border, into Laos.

00:06:36:15 - 00:06:59:20

Marvin Newell

And the people there in that village, actually, we're going to, they're very animistic, backwards. People never heard the gospel. And they were actually going to, to, to kill him, as a sacrifice to the gods and to the spirits to stop the war because, so many other people were being, put into the army.

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Marvin Newell

So, he's able to survive that. And over time he revives and then he stays there to tell them the gospel story. And, why he's trying to tell the gospel to them. They just don't understand. It's just so foreign to them until he sees a wedding ceremony take place. And in that wedding ceremony, the bride and the groom both say to each other in making their commitment vows that I am taking you under my skin.

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Marvin Newell

And for the first time, he found what he considered a redemptive analogy, a way of presenting the gospel to them. Now that was a pet phrase that he and his fiancée used. You are under my skin, is a phrase that they use that comes from a song probably most of our listeners maybe remember a song that was, back, pop popular about 20, 30 years ago.

00:07:55:16 - 00:08:20:01

Marvin Newell

And so, they these people, understand the gospel because what he does, he takes John 3:16 and he retranslated it for them. And it goes like this. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever takes them under their skin will not perish but have everlasting life. And when they hear it in those words, in that frame, they all understand it.

00:08:20:01 - 00:08:33:09

Marvin Newell

And they all just kind of come to Christ as a whole tribe. They turn their lives over to God, because now they understand what it really means to have a relationship with God. And, yeah, that's kind of a gist of the story and how it goes.

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Alex Kocman

Well, you did more than tease it and there's a lot more. And we want to encourage people to pick it up because I'm sure there's many twists and turns along the way. But then, then tell us then okay. Fundamentally just like we talked about at the beginning, you felt like it was necessary to tug on people at the level of their imagination.

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Alex Kocman

Yeah, not just the intellect. Why do you think fiction is the key to doing that? Is that the key, to doing that? Because I can see how that could excite someone's imagination and affections and give them more of an understanding of what it looks like to minister among the unreached people group. I can also see a cynical response of, that's a great story.

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Alex Kocman

It didn't happen. So why should that move? My heart at all? How can my heart be moved by something that's invented?

00:09:17:04 - 00:09:42:02

Marvin Newell

This story is a realistic historical fiction based on American history and of what could possibly have taken place. And I've had readers tell me they, after they read it since, you know, was that story really real? It just seemed that real to us. But it's not. It's just something that I pulled together. But, you know, you write about what you know, and so I put it in the setting.

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Marvin Newell

I grew up in the Delaware Valley, the southern, South Jersey area, and I placed a setting of this right there in that area there so that people can relate to, this, this, this young couple as they go on mission for Christ and then also the Vietnam War. I was not in the war, but I, I did a lot of study about it.

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Marvin Newell

I had a lot of, friends and relatives that went off to the Vietnam War and to put it in that, area there, I think, draws a lot of readers into an action packed time, that, keeps them engaged in the story. But the story also needed to have a love scene. I love, not scene, but a love theme as well, a love theme.

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Marvin Newell

And so, we had this young couple that are separated for years upon years and years never knowing if this, this, medic is still alive or not. And so, she, she is actually translating a Bible in a language in Thailand at the same time, not even knowing that he's just across the Mekong River, doing the same thing up in a try.

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Marvin Newell

But they just never see each other and never know that, and then the end of the book, brings some things together. But, yeah, I just feel that people like something that is action packed. Hopefully at page Turner. And I tried to write it that way. I keep going from scenes from the village life to the American, life and back and forth and the government.

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Marvin Newell

And what was going on in the government and so forth, and the war to keep this story moving. But the whole reason I'm doing this is to bring attention to the reader of the plight of the unreached who still are awaiting the gospel.

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Alex Kocman

Did you know that it can take anywhere from 18 to 24 months or more for the average missionary to raise their financial support? The journey to the field is an arduous one, and for some missionaries it goes by quicker than others. Other missionaries are waiting for the right prayer and financial partners to come alongside them and hold the rope for them as they go out to reach the lost.

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Alex Kocman

And so would you consider praying for and maybe adopting an AB pre field missionary, somebody that's already been commissioned and sent out from their local church, and the only thing keeping them from having a fruitful ministry on the field is simply their ability to get there. You can go to ABe.org/pre-field and find a pre field missionary.

00:12:22:11 - 00:12:42:18

Alex Kocman

Whether you just want to pray for them or whether the Lord would lead you to give to one of their ministries, find one that you can support today at ab.org/pre-field it's Scott. If I could throw something to you I mean I think this is an area where we as Christians struggle. Number one we struggle to understand what does it mean to be unreached.

00:12:42:18 - 00:13:01:04

Alex Kocman

I mean to really wrap your heart and mind around the fact that for so many in the world, more than 3 billion people, they've never heard of Jesus, right? They've never been exposed to any meaningful presentation of the gospel. I mean, that's hard for those of us that have grown up in the Christian West to grasp, emotionally what that means.

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Alex Kocman

What that even signifies. But then secondly, like, we are deficient in our imaginations. I mean, outside of, I don't know, The Chronicles of Narnia and a couple of Frank Peretti books that most evangelicals are not consuming fiction at a level that's going to stir their heart and mind towards the things of God. Or if they are consuming fiction, it's at a pop culture level that that isn't necessarily doing anything for them in their sanctification.

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Alex Kocman

Right. And imagination, I think, is an area, where we need to engage ourselves for the purpose of our discipleship. Right, Scott?

00:13:33:12 - 00:13:53:22

Scott Dunford

Yeah, I mean, I love reading fiction, and I've always enjoyed reading fiction, so I realize not everyone loves to read, but I've always loved reading it. But, as I've gotten older, I remember reading. I can't remember who said this, but they strongly encourage that anyone who's preaching should read fiction simply. So you learn how to tell a story well and how to imagine things.

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Scott Dunford

But, I've found, you know, in my life certain books at certain times just help, elevate certain emotions and even affections, toward things that I probably would never have thought of otherwise. And I've seen how a good book can be so useful in mobilization. I've shared this before, but my. I don't know if you've ever read the book, doctor, is it kind of an important story in history?

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Scott Dunford

But the way that was written was well, well, it was truth. It was historical. It was written in a way that almost felt like fiction. In fact, that you were drawn into the story as you're learning more about, Bangladesh and about missions and about the needs, about the gospel. You know, I think of a book like *Safely Home* when I was, on when, when I was, you know, I'm pre-filled for, for missions, raising support.

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Scott Dunford

I would run into a lot of people who had been reading *Safely Home* and while, you know, some things in that book are very dramatic and, you know, and, and, sensational, in some ways, there was an element that caused people to realize that there are Christians in other parts of the world who aren't dealing with our situation, or there's people who are completely lost and would be able being able to enter into that world, through the lens of, of fiction allows us to think and imagine things that we wouldn't otherwise.

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Scott Dunford

I could see that how that could be so important for, for causing people to even think about what, what might missions life look like. So I really appreciate you putting the energy. Into this. What do you what do you hope, hoping that this book does in the hearts of minds of readers as they go ahead and read this book?

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Marvin Newell

Well, I'm hoping for a couple things that take, to take place, like people reading this. I'm hoping that the reader will feel more compelled, than ever before, to serve God in whatever circumstance they have. But, he has put them in. That will be an impetus for them. And I've had readers tell me this. I had one of my proofreaders say that once she finished reading the book, she says, boy, I just I just came away feeling like, what can I do more for God?

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Marvin Newell

Whether it's in the mission setting or not, it makes no difference to me, but that they just feel touched that God has something for them to do in life. Because of the devotion that you see through this story that, that unfolds in this book. And secondly, I'm hoping that readers will become more aware, of the plight of the unreached peoples and their lived living circumstances and how they, they get completely transformed from darkness to light when the gospel, comes into their area and they can see that through the story as it unfolds and they themselves want to do something about it, whether they go, and

00:16:57:22 - 00:17:25:19

Marvin Newell

commit themselves to actually going and, the same way as missionaries, because you have a lot of places that these unreached are found or whether they become, supporters of those that go that they actually, you know, just stand behind those that are willing to go to the unreached. I'm hoping that the story helps. Just bring that kind of commitment out and that kind of knowledge out to the reader as they go through the book.

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Alex Kocman

You know, story in general is the thing that awakens our imagination and our affections. You know, it's interesting to me that God has given us not just abstract propositions in Scripture. He's given us stories many, a universe, a multiverse of stories, all interconnecting in special revelation. And when we want to point people's hearts to the global need that exists to bring the gospel to the unreached story, whether fictional or non-fictional, it has to be a part of that as well.

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Alex Kocman

That's really what drives and compels us. To many of us, only engage aspects of the faith that are just those abstract ideas and propositions by themselves. That's why missionary biographies matter as well. I something that I regret is I've not engaged as much missionary biography as you did growing up, Scott. And it did what you're describing. It gave you the ability to see yourself in the shoes of people going to faraway, hard places, doing hard things for the Lord, because part of aspiring to serve the Lord in those ways is being able to see yourself in the shoes of those people, right, Scott?

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Scott Dunford

Oh for sure. I mean, I'm just thinking a couple of books that I had, you know, sitting here in front of me and recommended to a young student through Gates of Splendor, you know, you read the story about.

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Alex Kocman

00:18:40:05 - 00:19:04:13

Scott Dunford

I don't think anyone ever called Jim Elliot normal, but he was normal in a way. You know, like, he was, an active, athletic, good looking guy, you know, Elizabeth was and, you know, an active, engaged mind, you know, they were, but they were serious about the Lord and how God used them. And they didn't expect to be at the center of one of the most famous missionary stories of all time.

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Scott Dunford

And they would not have probably chosen that in their own flesh. But God use that and the to read the pages of this story, that it reads like a novel, you know, or to read like the story of Hudson of at around Judson. It is not death to die, you know. And you find yourself. I just happen to have them sitting here on my desk and recommending them to a young man I'm discipling.

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Scott Dunford

But you dive into those stories and you start to see, like, oh, you know, these are aren't superheroes. These are people that had a life before God called them to the mission field. And then how did God use them? So I love that. And I think fiction is so necessary, especially because there's so much of the work of missions that that we can't tell the story.

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Scott Dunford

For lots of different reasons. And to be able to kind of use that device to be able to help people imagine more.

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Marvin Newell

There's a famous kind of quote from Pluto where he said, writing is like throwing a seed over the wall. And what he meant by that is that you can argue to your black and blue with people and give them arguments and be polemic and, apologetic and so forth, but it doesn't do the same effect as a story, as a, as a, something that you throw the seed over the wall.

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Marvin Newell

And I think the interpretation is that after a while it's going to germinate and it's going to make a difference, and people are going to, are going to change because of that. And that's what story does.

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Scott Dunford

So I want to highlight one other part of the, of the book that we talked about a little bit, but a lot of work needs to be done in the area of Bible translation, and you bring that whole idea of Bible translation right into the story. Obviously that was a pretty strategic move on your part. What did you hope people kind of understand about the need for Bible translation and the work of Bible translation, that that you would bring it into the story in this way?

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Marvin Newell

Yeah. And actually I have two people doing Bible translations in the story, both the, the, the, the, main character, Mike, and also his fiancée, Lisa, who's waiting and waiting, but she's not wasting our time. She decided to go off and do a Bible translation. In Thailand at the same time. And so actually two different Bible translations come out.

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Marvin Newell

But the reason why is because obviously the Bible is the basis for all we believe in practice. And without the written word of God, no culture will be able to understand the will of God. And therefore we need to be translating the Bible. Whenever, the gospel enters into a new area there, into their language, their heart language, so that they can understand it and feel it for themselves.

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Marvin Newell

So that makes sense for themselves. And so I do kind of labor through that a bit in the book of, these two translations going on. In the end, Mike's translation gets miraculously saved from, being, discarded by the government. And, and it finally makes its way back into the village. But we find that, the Bible is the root of all that we believe in practice and therefore it's translation in a heart.

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Marvin Newell

Language is so vital in.

00:22:15:01 - 00:22:36:13

Alex Kocman

By the way, I'm over here furiously googling things that that quote you mentioned about throwing a seed over a wall. So, yeah, Plutarch, I believe, and, said that and it really is a reminder, that. Yeah, when you, when you write, when you throw ideas out there, it is like throwing a seed overall. You don't see what the outcome of that is.

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Alex Kocman

Story is again, what tugs at the imagination, which engages not just the intellect but also the heart, the seat of the affections as well. And I think what we need to do by way of an exercise is just consider, not just what it means at an intellectual level to be without, reach, outside of the access of missionary efforts, without the Bible in your language, having never heard the gospel and not just to ponder.

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Alex Kocman

Okay. Does that mean I feel hopeless? Does that mean I'm just blissfully ignorant? But to think about the sights and the smells and the sounds of what you're describing, for instance, a tribe that's willing to sacrifice humans. This isn't hypothetical. Groups like these exist in the world. I think that's what's striking about your book, is that it is fictional, but it could be true.

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Alex Kocman

And there's real missionary accounts that probably mirror large chunks of the narrative. More of if people wanted to find real missionary accounts that echo elements of the story that you've arranged here, whose missionary biographies should they engage?

00:23:45:06 - 00:24:09:04

Marvin Newell

Well, I like the ones that Scott just, showed us. They're a great I love the story, to the Golden Shore, which is a story of an arm. Judson. To me, that's my favorite missionary book. And it's about his life story. And I just really, really love that that book. And that's really motivating. You know, the publisher of my book is William Carey Publishing.

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Marvin Newell

And just at the same time, my book has come out, they published a book entitled, Jesus in the Buddhist Belt, which is, live Stories of, what took has taken place in Myanmar, really up to date stories. So that's a, that's a good book that's brand new out there as well. So there is a contrast between an older book and a brand new book that tells the stories.

00:24:34:01 - 00:24:34:21

Marvin Newell

Yeah.

00:24:34:23 - 00:24:36:17

Alex Kocman

Where can people get a hold of. Oh go ahead.

00:24:36:23 - 00:25:00:09

Scott Dunford

I said it's not death to die of added. I'm just but it's actually a Hudson Taylor. I'd also encourage reading journals like if you, I don't know if you've read any of Jim Elliott's journals. I mean, there's a lot of it. And, it's not easy to just read plow through like a novel or, or even a biography, but seeing the process of their mind as they're going through this.

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Scott Dunford

And then I came across William Carrie's journals, which don't go very deep into his life, but especially covers, his journey across the ocean and in those early days in India. And it it's just, it's a little overwhelming, but it's also encouraging because you think these guys out all, like, just spiritual giants, they never had a bad day and need him over and over again.

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Scott Dunford

Talk about just spiritual devastation and struggle and depression and work and exhaustion. And, you know, it's been several days since I've been in God's Word or I've been in God's Word, but I don't and didn't enjoy it at all, you know, and you're like, okay, that's actually really encouraging to me, you know, that. Yeah. These were real flesh and blood people that love the Lord and, were faithful to the end.

00:25:47:22 - 00:25:53:19

Scott Dunford

But it wasn't it wasn't up into the right type of situation. It was ups and downs. It was like, I have.

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Marvin Newell

That's what stories do. Help bring that out. And you said they never had a bad day. They had many bad days. Both of them lost two different wives, you know, and so it was really, really tough. And it's just a, testament to fortitude when you read about them and what they're doing and just staying the course.

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Marvin Newell

And I'm hoping that my book brings that out, too, about staying the course of staying with one's calling and, and just seeing the importance of walking with God through all these circumstances.

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Alex Kocman

Again, that's what a good story can do. But you've also written more than just fiction. You've been writing for years on topics to get people to recognize the need for more gospel access around the world. So, before we break from our main episode here and invite people who are a part of our subscription family to join us for our bonus segment, which we'll tell you more about in just a moment.

00:26:51:08 - 00:27:02:18

Alex Kocman

Marvin, where can people go to find more of your other writings and, what else have you written? Just briefly. You know, there's the book. A third of us. You want to just give us a summary of that and where people can get Ahold of you in some of your other writings on these topics.

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Marvin Newell

Yeah, probably the best place to go is, the website Missionbooks.com, where three of my books happened to be. Also, Moody Publishers did my book on, the martyrs of Moody, which are true stories of 21 martyrs that were missionaries of, Moody Bible Institute. So those are good places to go if you just go to Amazon and type in my name as an author, you can find the other books as well.

00:27:29:23 - 00:27:51:07

Alex Kocman

Very good. So be sure to check out those resources we have here. The Missions podcast belongs to ABWE, which is a global family of ministries. We've given out hundreds, at least, maybe thousands, but definitely hundreds of copies of A Third of Us, which is talking about the fact that a third of the planet is unreached with the gospel.

00:27:51:07 - 00:28:15:03

Alex Kocman

And of course, more of your involvement in that book, has been a blessing to many people as well. But, for our bonus segment, which is something that we offer as a thank you to those who financially partner with this ministry at \$9.99 per month at missionspodcast.com/premium. Or if you're an Apple Podcasts listener, you can subscribe directly now through Apple Podcasts app.

00:28:15:03 - 00:28:34:10

Alex Kocman

And for your gift, we, regularly thank our subscribers by giving them access to our bonus show, the overtime segment. And for that, Scott, we're going to be diving into fiction books that need to be on the shelves of every Christian and of every missionary. And so we look forward to that conversation as well. But, Mark, thank you for joining us.

00:28:34:10 - 00:28:39:20

Alex Kocman

And, remind people how they can get a copy of this book, as well as it on Mission Books. Is it.com?

00:28:39:22 - 00:28:43:13

Marvin Newell

Missionbooks.com is, the best place to get it?

00:28:43:15 - 00:29:02:21

Alex Kocman

Very good. And of course, the missions podcast, is a ministry of ABWE, to learn more about ABWE go on over to abwe.org. We're a global family of ministries with workers reaching 90 nations with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And to take your next step in the Great Commission, come on over to a website, check them out.

00:29:02:21 - 00:29:21:03

Alex Kocman

But to get more content, go to Missionspodcast.com. And if you'd like to leave us a note or a suggestion for a future topic of conversation. Alex@missionspodcast.com is the email or scott@missionspodcast.com. If you want to complain about me to Scott go behind my back. You're more than welcome to do that. You wouldn't be the first one.

00:29:21:05 - 00:29:27:00

Alex Kocman

And we're grateful to each and every one of you for listening until our next episode. Go make disciples.