

"Learn to do good; seek justice; rescue the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow." - Isaiah 1:17

Hi,
I was **struck** this time in Cuba.

July 2022

It was like I was hit so hard; that I could not stop weeping. I was moved to great tears. Tears of humility that I was standing in the presence of saints as I realized how little I have suffered compared to them and how much greater I have complained. Tears flowed from hearing the personal stories of the hardship, tears of sadness, sorrow, and utter grief of the suffering of people – the despair of a nation.

It amazes me what we complain about. First world problems regarding our rights surrounding the vaccinations; our inability to travel and possibly relax on a foreign beach, enjoying the sun while being entertained by those who live in poverty; living life under the 'oppression' of mandates; the frustration of being required to wear a mask; supply chain interruptions, the rising cost of fuel, the inefficiency and "tyranny" of the government, the list continues.

COVID-19 has indeed polarized our nation, but it has also blinded us; It has blinded you and me from seeing beyond ourselves and feeling the suffering of other people in the world. We have been desensitized from the needs of those who genuinely suffer by being so focused on our situation, on our needs, wants, and rights.

Having recently visited Cuba, choosing not to stay in the comfort of a resort, but desiring to understand more of the culture, the people, the needs, and the opportunities that exist, I had a glimpse of 'The Other Side of Cuba.' It all started one morning when I went for a walk – I was looking for a place to purchase bread. I was hungry and simply wanted to take advantage of the peanut butter and honey I had brought to make a cheap breakfast. But the walk was futile. After walking over 2 km, I gave up. Empty-handed, I was still hungry. I returned, shocked, but I got a taste of what everyday life is like for present-day Cubans. So, I sat. I ate peanut butter off a spoon. I pondered.

The average monthly wage in Cuba now stands at 2,600 CUP (Cuban Pesos), equivalent to USD 104 or CAD 135. This is a **significant increase of 5 to 7 times** the previous base salary in the new reordering of the economic system, which took place in Dec 2019. Sadly, what then transpired was **escalating inflation at the rate of 10 to 20 times**. What was a country filled with people barely surviving became a country full of hungry and starving people where 80 to 90% of the population eat one meal a day. And I thought, 'just a few months ago, we were complaining about the mandates and masking restrictions!'

As I continued to hear stories of hardship and toil over the next few days, I realized that the other side of Cuba was losing hope. It is living in a quagmire of uncertainty, fearing what tomorrow might bring. A future filled with increasingly fewer opportunities, fewer commodities, less hope, and less light.

When life is bleak, it is always astounding how there are a few rays of light that shine through the cracks in the darkness, revealing a glimmer of hope. While many stories of desperation were heard, sprinkled within them were stories of hope. Stories intertwined with miracles of grace and lives being touched and transformed. Stories of people coming together to learn, love, and serve. It is hard to imagine how hope can shine in such immense suffering, but character and faith are formed in the dark trenches of life. And so, I wept. I wept for my own soul that consistently complains when faced with trials and difficult times – and I pray, hoping that someday, I too may have what these people have – a formidable spirit and faith.

I hope I live a life worthy of the priceless gifts of life I have received. Pray with me, as I fall on my knees and implore for hope to stay alive in the heart of this nation.

Yours Prayerfully

Brad

