

## How Expensive Is Your Religion?

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When the Church of the Great God was keeping the Feast of Tabernacles in Missouri for those many years, my family would drive there from Georgia which meant we crossed through southern Illinois. I was always amazed at the thousands and thousands of acres of corn and how precise the rows were. Not always straight because sometimes they had to go around the occasional tree or boulder, but each row was spaced the same distance from the next one and the next one and the next one and the next one. They formed beautiful patterns as they followed the contours of the land. In recent years farmers have installed GPSs in their tractors and they do some really amazing things now.

Phyllis and I were in southwest Colorado recently in Mesa Verde country and we saw plowing that defied description. Field after field, with rows stretching out to the horizon, perfectly straight and total symmetrical. It was as if they had been done with digital animation, they were so flawless.

Quite different from the day when a farmer would plow behind his mule or his horse or an ox and it took all his concentration to hold that plow upright and manage the animals in order to cut a straight line. Nowadays, a farmer can sit in an air conditioned cab and listen to his radio or play on his phone and maybe he can go in the back and make himself a sandwich. I do not know how they do this, but they can plow a straight furrow to make Harry Truman envious.

Let us turn to Luke 9:57-62 and my *New Kings James Bible* heads this section, "The Cost of Discipleship".

**Luke 9:57-62** Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

The Contemporary English Version renders verse 62 as:

**Luke 9:62 (CEV)** Anyone who starts plowing and keeps looking back isn't worth a thing to God's Kingdom.

The plowing done in Jesus' day was not with a tractor. It was behind an animal, something we have little or no experience with. Other than our gardens, I doubt that any of us has spent any time walking behind a plow. I do not think a garden tiller really counts.

I wondered what it was like to keep a plow up and follow an animal. It turns out there are videos on YouTube that show just this thing of current people filming themselves trying to learn to plow. It is a very interesting thing to watch. It does not look easy, how to hold that plow up and keep the animals moving and cut a straight furrow. It seems to me that if you took your eyes off what you were doing for even a moment the plow would fall over or the animals would wander. Certainly, you could not cut a straight line.

Maybe, back in the day, Farmer John would send his young son out to plow a field or maybe a hired hand. Maybe he would come by later to check on them and he would find the furrows were crooked. Maybe they started plowing, but they kept looking back to see how they were doing. And, of course, when you would look back you would take your eyes off whatever you were focused on to make that straight line. So, maybe they were not committed to the task at hand. Maybe they were not focused on their goal.

We do not need to turn there, but I will read Hebrews 10:39, again from the Contemporary English Version where it says:

**Hebrews 10:39 (CEV)** We are not like those people who turn back and get destroyed. We will keep on having faith until we are saved.

Are God's requirements too difficult for us? Are they too exacting? Are we committed to the way forward, or are we spending too much time looking back? We still should be in Luke so let us turn to chapter 14 and start in verse 26. Those that have been baptized know these verses from our pre-baptism counseling. They are sometimes called "The Counting the Cost Verses."

**Luke 14:26-27 (CEV)** You cannot be my disciple, unless you love me more

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than you love your father and mother, your wife and children, and your brothers and sisters. You cannot come with me unless you love me more than you love your own life. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.

In verse 28, Christ speaks of a building project and how we should sit down first and figure out if we have the money to finish it. In verse 31 a king must first look at his resources. Will his ten thousand men be able to conquer the king with twenty thousand? When embarking on a quest, we must first count the costs.

About this verse the Bible commentary Matthew Henry makes the point, "We must first consider the expenses of our religion." I liked that line so much, the way he phrased that, that I have titled this message, "How Expensive is Your Religion?"

The word "expensive" means, something that involves a high price, or sacrifice. Is your calling worth your job, your family, your life? John [Ritenbaugh] said on opening night that you must choose God or the world. Have we truly counted the costs?

Have you ever wanted something and then decided it would take too much effort to acquire it? In the end, you decided it was not worth it, it was just too expensive. Or, is there something you desired that you would move heaven and earth to acquire? You were willing to work long hours, lose sleep, maybe take another job, or skip a meal. Whatever it took.

Where does the Kingdom of God fit? Is it worth the effort? Does it merit the sacrifice? And, let me hasten to add, I am fully aware we do not earn our salvation. But, Christ said in Luke 9:62 anyone that starts plowing and keeps looking back is not worth a thing to God's Kingdom.

Once you start down this road, you have to keep moving forward. You cannot spend time looking back. We are all aware that salvation is a gift. It is not earned by anything we do or could do, but we also know that God requires our full obedience to receive this gift. If we did not understand that, if we did not believe that, we would not be sitting here now.

In Matthew 10, Christ here warns His disciples that there will be persecution. There will be hard choices that have to be made.

**Matthew 10:34-39** Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not

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come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it.

To answer God's call will, in some cases, involve leaving family and friends behind. Perhaps symbolically, perhaps literally. I knew a man 25 years ago in the Worldwide Church of God. He had a very interesting story. Very early in his marriage he saw a Plain Truth magazine, I do not know where, but he picked it up and began to read it. One thing led to another and he eventually came into the church and was baptized. His wife never had the least bit of interest in the church and she was a constant pull and tug on him. They went on to have children and he became very successful in business. It was as if he led two entirely separate lives. When the Worldwide Church of God broke apart, it was just the excuse he seemed to need, at least it seemed to me, for him to quit church and have the peace that was important for him and his family.

I happened to speak to him awhile back, and as near as I can tell, those church years had never happened. I do not believe he was really converted. He and his family will have their chance later. I do not tell the story to disparage him in any way. He was a very fine man. But, at least at this time, his religion was too expensive. It was not worth the sacrifice.

There was a woman I knew with a similar story. She too had not been married all that long when she heard Mr. Armstrong and the World Tomorrow broadcast back in the mid-1950s. She eventually came into the church. She too was baptized. Her husband was never interested, and over time became increasingly antagonistic, to the point that he yelled at her, cursed her, and beat her in an attempt to get her to give up her beliefs.

One time he gathered all her church materials and burned them in the back yard. All the Plain Truth magazines he could find. All the Good News magazines. The Envoys. The co-worker letters. The booklets. All of it went into the burn barrel. He was a pretty smart man, but I do not think he thought this all the way through. It was like he was thinking, so if I burn this copy of the *United States and British Commonwealth in Prophecy*, surely there is no more, this will be end of it. Not knowing there was over six million of that particular book alone in print.

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But, this woman would not turn back. She counted the cost. The religion was worth bruises, black eyes, and constant humiliation. Her religion was more expensive, I would say, involved a higher price, than that of the first example.

We all have similar stories. People we know, people we have known, or even in our own lives. We have experienced separation from friends and family due to our beliefs. The Bible is full of these examples, as well. Not just in one or two places, but from start to finish.

I was thinking about this awhile back and I did a little exercise. I began going through the Bible and picking out the examples where God had His people choose Him over family or the world or how their sins separated them from God or family. The little exercise surprised me. It might interest you as well.

We are going to go through the book of Genesis very quickly. Just a quick survey. We only have time for the one book. We are going to go through Genesis to see some of these sacrifices that were made.

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve sinned and they were sent away. They were sent out of the Garden. God did not abandon them, but certainly separated from them, in a way, because their sin changed the relationship. In chapter 4 their firstborn Cain murdered his brother Abel and was sent away. Adam and Eve lost two sons and a daughter because one of the daughters married Cain. God respected Abel's offering (that is in verse 4), and we can infer that Abel was striving to live a godly life. Cain not so much, and his jealousy drove him to kill his godly brother. Abel's religion was very expensive. His was the ultimate sacrifice.

In Genesis 5 there is Enoch who walked with God in verse 24. According to Jewish tradition, he was killed by Lamech, a member of his own family. Did Enoch's preaching upset Lamech to the point he ended up killing him? Quite possibly. Did Enoch count the cost? Did he know that he could die? We do not know, but it is entirely possible that he knew his beliefs upset his family, yet he did not look back from the plow.

I am not saying he deliberately antagonized Lamech or the family, I am not saying that at all. It could have simply been his example. His striving to live a godly life bothered Lamech the same way Abel's example bothered Cain. But, again, he paid a high price for his religion.

How many millions or billions were lost in the Flood? Noah was 600 years old at the time of the Flood. Did he only have three sons after those 600 years? Did he leave

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behind any other children? In Genesis 7:1 "The Lord said to Noah, "Come into the ark, you and all your household." Maybe there were older children not part of his household living on their own, we do not know. But certainly there were aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews that he had to leave behind to die. I wondered if he received death threats in the hundred twenty years it took him to build that ark.

II Peter 2:5 calls Noah "a preacher of righteousness." How much persecution do you think he and his family endured? If the world was so bad that God was forced to destroy it and only save these few people, then I would think that he and his family faced death more than once. Did Noah realize when God called him that it would be this hard? He must have come to see that as time went on. But, he did not turn back from the plow.

There is a medieval French rabbi named Salomon Isaac Geddes and he had an interesting take on Noah. I thought I would include this. He thought that God stretched the building of the ark over such a long time in order that people could repent. I think we all agree on that, that God is indeed merciful, and thankfully so. But, he goes a little further in Genesis 5:29, where we read that Noah's father named him Noah saying at that point, "This one will comfort us concerning our work and the toil of our hands, because of the ground which the Lord has cursed."

Because of this verse, Rabbi Isaac Geddes felt Noah ushered in a new era of prosperity after the Flood. The rabbi says, "There was an easing of the curse of Adam and Eve when the earth produces thorns and thistles where men sowed wheat and that Noah then introduced the plow." I would think there was a plow before the Flood, but he gives credit to Noah. I think that fits in, because this plow, both physical and metaphorical, Noah did not look back from.

Then in Genesis 11 there was the Tower of Babel. There would have been a few people living at that time that God was working with. There always is. How tough was it for them swimming against the tide? And then even more separation when God confused the languages. Any of the called people at that time would have had to seek out those speaking a similar language, and then go further and try to find someone who had a similar belief. Not an easy thing. Genesis 11:9 says in the latter half of the verse, "and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth." This scattering may well have included some of the called out ones.

In Genesis 12 we begin the story of Abraham.

**Genesis 12:1** Now the Lord said to Abram, Get out of your country, from your kindred, and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you.

A man in his seventies, well established in his home with, I am sure, lots of family and friends, and God says, leave. He does not even tell him where he is going. He says, I will show you that.

Genesis 12:4 says, "So Abram departed." He took his family, some of his possessions, and off they went. His religion was worth leaving behind everything that he knew, everything he had grown up with, everything he was comfortable with. It was probably even harder on Sarah (or Sarai at that time) his wife because they tend to be closer to home and family.

In Genesis 13:9 there is more separation for Abraham. After reaching Canaan, he and Lot, his nephew, has too much livestock between them and he says to Lot, "Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me."

In Genesis 21:14 Abraham has to send Hagar and Ishmael away. How hard was that? Maybe he did not have a truly loving relationship with Hager, we do not know. They certainly shared the bond of a child together. Ishmael was his son, his first son. How do you send your son away? In this case, with no more than bread and water.

**Genesis 21:14** So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba.

Hagar had to be a little confused here. I am sure she thought that having the baby of Abraham she was solid. Now suddenly she finds herself wandering in the wilderness, son in tow and little to show for her efforts. Ishmael would have been about sixteen at the time. Verse 11 reads, "And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son." That is an understatement. He had to send his son away and it grieved him. Some translations render it "grieve".

**Genesis 21:12** But God said to Abraham, Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called.

It would help all of us, I am sure, if in the midst of some of our trials God would speak to us like he did here to Abraham. But, even with God speaking directly to Abraham, he

still had to send his son away. Heartbreaking and expensive.

We often compare the sacrifice of Isaac to that of Christ, and rightly so. But, this example of sending Ismael away we often skip over. Very seldom is it mentioned. I think this is a mistake. I think it does a disservice to Abraham. Sending Ismael away grieved him. Speaking of Isaac's sacrifice, this is about 20 years after sending Ismael away, Abraham has to do it again. I am not going to go into this. We have had many messages on this, but think of the commitment involved that you are willing to sacrifice your son.

Remember what I said expensive means, "something that involved a high price or sacrifice." Abraham's willingness to obey at the expense of his son or sons certainly fits that description. Let us stay with Abraham a moment and go to Genesis 25. This is after the death of Sarah. Abraham has married a women named Keturah. The name Keturah means "covered in perfume." Abraham was 137 when Sarah died. We know for sure they were married at least 62 years. Some people think as many as 110 years. He would have been very lonely after Sarah's death.

Then Isaac and Rebekah moved a little away from him, a little to the south, so he would have been even more lonely. He still had 38 years of life to live at that point. He may not have known how many, but he knew he had life to live. After three years of grieving, he married again. In verse 2, remember Abraham is 140 at this point, we see he and Keturah has six sons together and probably several daughters. In verses 3 and 4 many grandchildren. Let me just say, she must have had some really nice perfume. I do not know how else to put it.

**Genesis 25:6** But Abraham gave gifts to the sons of the concubines which Abraham had; and while he was still living he sent them eastward, away from Isaac his son, to the country of the east.

It is unfortunate phrasing here. Keturah was very clearly his wife, but I want you to notice that, yet again, he sends his sons away. I am quite sure Abraham loved Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah along with his daughters and grandchildren. Yet, he did the hard thing, he did the expensive thing, and he created separation so that God's plan could move forward. He gave them gifts, the New King James calls it, money, cattle, whatever, to set them up in the new place and to give Isaac, the son of promise, the space he needed.

There are many other examples of the separation of God's people in Genesis. In



chronological order we skipped over Lot so that I could stay with the flow and talk about Abraham. We are very familiar with the story of Lot. God, in his mercy, took Lot and his family, literally by the hand, and pulled them from their evil city. Lot's wife would be a prime example of someone looking back. She felt that what she left behind was worth more than what was ahead. What was ahead was not worth the price.

If we had time we could speak to Jacob. He had to leave home. Later he had to flee Laban. Isaac and Rebecca lost their son in a matter of speaking. Really, they lost both sons because Esau married three different pagan women just to spite them.

We could speak of Joseph. Sold into slavery as part of God's plan. Separated from his family, taken from everything he had ever known, sent to a strange land, and yet, he kept the faith, so to speak. He loved God more than father, mother, sister, and brother. Granted, he did not have a lot of choice initially. He was thrown into a pit. He was sent away as a slave, probably in chains.

It was not his choice, but in a manner of speaking, he did not look back. I am sure he mourned his loss, of course he did, but he knew God was working with him. He accepted this. He made the sacrifice.

Then there was the loss his father Jacob went through thinking he had lost a son. All of these examples just in the book of Genesis and the rest of the Bible continues with this. The point is, God's people have always been different. Our beliefs, and the conviction of our beliefs, set us apart from our family, our friends, our coworkers, and our neighbors.

It is not an easy thing to swim upstream, is it? To explain to teachers why you must take your kids out of school to go to a religious convention. To ask your boss for time off to go to the Feast. To be here right now and face going home maybe without a job to go back to, because you are here, right now.

It is a sacrifice not to be on the same page with your family and the world and not be able to share Christmas dinner and Easter dinner and things of that sort. Or, for your kids to go to school the day after Halloween with no stories to tell. Looking back over some of the things I have gone through after being associated with the church for over 45 years, I see that some of the huge obstacles, what I thought were huge obstacles, are really not, or were not because they just seemed so big at the time. They were not as expensive as I thought, but they were sacrifices and each one accumulates so that as God molds us we develop the character that He wants in us. Each step behind the plow moves us a step further from where we started.

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I lost a summer job at age 16 over the Sabbath. I was fired by a Jewish family, no less. It was frustrating and it was difficult, but it is not quite the same as losing a job when you have a family to support. Telling your teacher you cannot exchange Christmas gifts with your classmates is hard. There is no doubt that it is hard, but it prepares you for later telling your boss something along the same lines.

There are dozens and dozens of examples we could go through, but the point is we have been called *out* of the world. We are on a different course than those of us around us.

I read Hebrews 10:39 early. Let us go there, please, and start in verse 35.

**Hebrews 10:35-39 (CEV)** Keep on being brave! It will bring you great rewards. Learn to be patient, so that you will please God and be given what he has promised. As the Scriptures say, "God is coming soon! It won't be very long. The people God accepts will live because of their faith. But he isn't pleased with anyone who turns back." We are not like those people who turn back and get destroyed. We will keep on having faith until we are saved.

Saved from what? The second death? Certainly. From this evil world? Yes. From not knowing? Yes. The world at large does not know God. They are ignorant of His plan. They are deceived. Very fine people in many cases. Diligent in what they know, but deceived, nonetheless.

We do not deserve this knowledge. We do not deserve forgiveness. We do not deserve the future laid out for us, but, nonetheless, here we are. If we can keep the plow upright and true and not look back, what are those great rewards that it speaks of in verse 35 of Hebrews 10? What are these great rewards? What could possibly make this religion as expensive as your life?

I am not nearly eloquent enough to paint a word-picture of all that God has promised. Seeing our loved ones again. Teaching God's way to those that do not know it. Creating, building, laughing, and loving, and with no Satan and no demons to contend with.

We have heard several times this Feast of someone's favorite verse or chapter. So, I would like to end with my favorite verse in the Bible. This is speaking of a time in the future when the holy city, New Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven from God prepared as a bride and adorned for her husband.

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**Revelation 21:4** And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

Is this a worthy goal? How expensive is your religion?