

# The Real Deal About Following Jesus

## *Letter to the Colossians*

For those of you that are not married, let me tell what it means to be married. Marriage is about moonlight walks beside the lake and toasting marshmallows together over a roaring fire on cold winter nights. It's about deep conversations, being able to bare your soul to your partner, and not have to be guarded in what you say. It's about the closeness of sharing projects, like restoring old houses together. It's sharing the indescribable joy of holding your own newborn baby in your arms and knowing it came from the two of you. It's about waking up in the morning in the same bed as your spouse and being overcome by an amazing sense of love for that person, and thanking God that He brought you together.

Some of you that are married are listening to all this in wide eyed wonder and asking yourselves what planet I've come off. You are saying "hold on a minute". That's not marriage!

Marriage is about wet socks and little children with dirty nappies. It's about refereeing kids fights and trying to scrape up enough money to pay the bills. It's about teenagers rooms that look like a bomb site. It's about going for weeks without having a deep and meaningful conversation together. It's about falling into bed so tired and exhausted that being loving to each other is about the last thing on your mind. Marriage is about husbands that belch, wives that pack too much on around the hips, bad breath in the mornings, kids that whine on forever, and hard work that never seems to be finished.

Often when preachers like me present the gospel message we give this glowing picture of what life is like with Jesus Christ. We talk about the peace that Christ brings to life, and the purpose and direction he gives. We talk about the pardon for sin that we receive when we believe the gospel message. We talk about the amazing sense of joy that seems to bubble out from the centre of our lives that sustains us through difficult situations.

All of that is true, but it's not the whole truth. There is another side to that coin. Here's the real deal of what it means to follow Jesus. Jesus calls us to be His servants. That word servant has connotations of 18<sup>th</sup> Century England, where the Lords and Ladies were busy with life upstairs, and the servants lived downstairs in the servant quarters. But even that doesn't do the original language justice. In Bible times, they weren't servants, but slaves who served. Listen to what Jesus said about the life He has called us to.

***"Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:25 NIV)***

### **1. Slaves.**

That's what we are – slaves of Jesus Christ. Being a slave of Jesus Christ means that we don't have any rights to do what we want. Because Jesus purchased us with his blood on the Cross, we belong to Him. He is the Boss. He is the owner. It's no longer what I want, but what He wants that matters. What I want has to take second place to what Christ wants. That message runs completely counter to today's culture which says we are to do everything to find our own fulfilment. The message we have grown up with is "Whatever makes you feel good, do it!" But that's not what Jesus said. He said that when we follow him, we become like him. We become servants and slaves.

Perhaps the person who had the best grasp on the life Jesus called us to be was the Apostle Paul. When he was writing to the Christians in Colossae, he spelled it out for them very clearly what it was like for him to be a servant or a slave of Christ. He talked to these new Christians about what to expect in following Jesus:

***"Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness-- the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone***

***with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me". (Colossians 1:24 – 29 NIV)***

## **2. Suffering**

Who wants to be a follower of Christ if they know it's going to be a life of suffering? Paul knew what suffering for Christ was like. He lived in a battered body. His body was covered in scars from beatings, stonings, rocks thrown at him, hard work, sleepless nights, hunger, imprisonments, being in chains, held in stocks. The body he lived in was pretty battered. It's a wonder Paul didn't have an ambulance trailing around after him. Much of his Christian life he spent recovering. Not all the letters Paul wrote are in the New Testament. I wouldn't be surprised if there isn't a letter Paul wrote called "Hospitals I have been in".

Now who wants to follow Jesus Christ? We shouldn't be surprised if we have to suffer for Jesus sake. Jesus promised it, and much of the New Testament is written to Christians who were suffering or were about to suffer. People, we need to get it into our heads that suffering is part of the deal of following Jesus. The deal goes like this - Suffer with Christ now and enjoy a life free from pain and suffering for all eternity. The alternative is to reject Christ, live a life that won't be entirely free from pain and suffering, and live a life in hell for all eternity.

But Paul said, "I rejoice in my suffering". "I'm glad I've suffered on account of the gospel". Was he a masochist? Was he a bit of a nutter? Who could be glad about suffering? Paul was saying, "My suffering helps complete the suffering of Christ" What did he mean by that?. You see Christ's suffering is not over. His suffering for sin is completed. The work of the cross is finished. But Jesus still suffers for the church.

I want to speak to the women for a moment, because women are going to understand this truth quicker than the men. You women who are listening who have had children, I want to ask you a question. Has your suffering for your children finished? If the birth of your children was anything like normal, you would have experienced some pain. But has that been the end of your pain? Physical pain is not the only pain you feel for your children. When your child is ill – you suffer. When your child rebels and gets into trouble – you suffer. When your child marries and goes through a messy divorce – you suffer.

That's what it's like for Christ. He suffered on the Cross that our sins would be forgiven. Now he is suffering the pain of bringing us up. His pain is suffered through His body on earth. The pain of bringing up others in the Christian faith is Christ's suffering. But he feels that pain through other people's bodies. Paul suffered that Christ could be formed in other believers.

The problem today is that so many Christians want a painless Christianity. They don't want to suffer for the sake of the church. In fact they think getting out of bed to come to church is enough suffering.

One of the greatest leaders the Salvation Army had was Commissioner Samuel Logan Brengle. When he was assigned to the Boston Corps, someone threw a paving stone at him from just ten feet away. He took the full force of that brick on his head and almost died. His rehabilitation took 18 months, and from then on he suffered from excruciating headaches and bouts of depression. During his recovery, he wrote his best book, called "Helps To Holiness". One of the things he wrote was this: "God does not make pets of his people, and especially of those whom he woos and wins into close fellowship to himself, and fits and crowns for great and high service. His greatest servants have often been his greatest sufferers."

Its costly being a servant of Jesus. If you become a Christian it's going to involve suffering. Understand that.

## **3. Struggle.**

Another thing Paul says in this scripture is that he struggles and sweats to preach Christ to everyone, to present everyone mature in Christ Jesus. Wherever did we get the idea that being a servant of Jesus was a cruisy ride? It involves effort, and hard work. The effort is ours, but the energy is His. Do you get this point, people, because it's an important distinction. Sometimes I find Christians who are just worn out, trying to do the work of God in their own strength. They are beavering away trying to help God grow His kingdom, but they are not seeing any results, and they are just getting so tired in the process. Then I see other Christians who are sitting back believing that they don't have to do anything, but that in some magical way, the power of God is going to magically fall and their nation is going to have revival.

Don't get me wrong, I would love to see the nations of the world experience revival. I want to applaud those of you that pray for a revival in this land, and if God chooses to sovereignly do something by His Spirit that brings this nation to repentance, I will be the first to cheer. But it seems to me that Jesus called

us to be his witnesses, to go into all the world and preach the gospel and make disciples, not just to sit back and wait for Him to do something that He told us to do. I believe the Kingdom of God expands one life at a time, and that God wants that to happen through people like us. We are to put in the effort, and in the amazing way that God works, he works through our efforts with His mighty power. As we strive, the energy of the Holy Spirit is poured in so that the work is supernatural and not just our own effort.

One of the most remarkable ladies I ever met was a member of a church where I was pastor. Her name was Elsie Barton. If you Google her name you won't find her. She never wrote a book or earned a degree. When I first met her she was a quiet elderly widow in her late 70's. But I discovered in Elsie a remarkable servant of Christ. Up until a few months before she died at 88 years of age, she would pray every day for two hours before breakfast, praying for missionaries and those training for missions. It was a struggle to do that every day. That was hard work for an old lady. But Elsie had been doing that all her life. She knew what struggle and sacrifice was for the sake of Christ. When she was younger she wanted to greet some returned missionaries who were coming off a ship at the Auckland wharves. She couldn't afford the bus fare, so she bundled up her small children, and walked about 5 kilometres from her home to the wharves and back again.

When she was 25 years old, she went to share the gospel with people in Ethiopia. For 11 years she and her husband sacrificed, and suffered so that believers could be built up in Christ. When they left Ethiopia in 1936, there were handful of believers they had poured themselves into. When missionaries got back to Ethiopia in the 1940s, that handful of believers had grown to ten thousand people. Then, when Elsie Barton got home, she began writing letters to missionaries. In her life time she wrote twenty thousand letters by hand to encourage missionaries in the task. Two hours a day in prayer praying for missions. And 20,000 letters written by hand. For Elsie, that was what it meant to serve Jesus.

Jesus called us to be his servants. The way to greatness in the Kingdom of God is by being a servant. It's going to involve suffering and struggle. That's the real deal about following Jesus. But can you think of a more satisfying way of spending your life?

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