

COSTLY OBEDIENCE

*“In the world you have tribulation, but take courage;
I have overcome the world.”*

John 16:33b NASB

*“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him,
but also to suffer for him.”*

Phil. 1:29

“I don’t feel like reading my Bible regularly. I’d much rather watch T.V.”

“I won’t get involved in ministering to others. It is to inconvenient and unpredictable.”

“I won’t risk rejection by admonishing. It may cause conflict and I don’t want the hassle.”

“I consider my home my personal domain to be used for my pleasure. I only invite people with whom I am comfortable.”

“I don’t like my in-laws. They are difficult people. I don’t want to be around them.”

“My husband/wife is verbally abusive and angry so much of the time. I want to divorce him/her. I don’t need this grief in my life.”

“My boss is so hard to get along with. I want to quit my job *right now*. I don’t need to put up with him/her anymore.”

“I hate being married (or single). I’m not fulfilled in my role.”

“Me, seek forgiveness of the people I’ve wronged? You’ve got to be kidding. That’s too hard!”

“I’ll charge a new outfit (or whatever) on my credit card. I really deserve it.”

“A lot of other Christians give to the Lord, so my giving won’t be missed. I would rather spend my money on things I want.”

“I won’t submit, graciously, to God’s plan for my life. He doesn’t know what He’s doing.”

The sons of Israel, who had just been delivered from four hundred years of oppressive slavery in Egypt, moaned to the Lord in self-pity that they were sick and tired of God’s provision for them, the manna. Instead of gratitude for their salvation and freedom, they grumbled.

*“We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt,
the cucumbers and melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic,
but now our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna.”*

Num. 11:5,6 NASB

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Isn't God's provision and care enough for our contentment? "No!" is the frequent response of today's American Christian. Instead of rejoicing in our salvation and the abundant gifts given us, so often the demands of the modern believer escalate: "Give me, give me, give me!" "The Lord exists to make me happy . . . along with everyone else!"

The Lord responded to the Israelites, who were grumbling and complaining.

“. . .and when the Lord heard it His anger was kindled, and the fire of the Lord burned among them and consumed some of the outskirts of the camp.”

Num. 11:1b NASB

Where did we get the idea that the Christian life was to be devoid of personal cost and suffering except perhaps, the type we can easily handle? Suffering, self-denial and persecution are biblical routes to building our character, our intimacy with our Savior and our testimony for Christ. Those who have overcome their difficult circumstances, through the grace of God, have a message to impart to fellow sufferers. That's God's design to spread His Kingdom.

As Americans, we have lost our perspective because we are such a privileged class of people. Our lack of life-threatening persecution, as well as our great prosperity, have bred complacency, apathy and a prevailing view that **costly obedience** for the cause of Christ is totally out of the question. We believe we exist to be pampered, not to be persecuted or denied what we feel we deserve. So we demand and attempt to create a pain-free life. When the unbidden trials do come, we think we have the right to walk out, eliminate them, ignore them, get depressed, get angry and/or insist that God end the difficulty – right now! We believe we have the right to focus on the great injustices we're suffering, which just aren't fair. "No more pressure, no more unlovable people, no more pain, no more heartache – I just don't deserve all this grief."

Many Christians today have little concept of costly obedience because their thoughts are fixed on their temporal existence rather than on eternal realities. We may content ourselves with certain forms of outward obedience that are relatively easy to accomplish because they are motivated and expressed by our natural propensities, inclinations and talents. At times, forms of outward godliness may push us out of our "comfort zones" to willingly take risks because of the satisfaction we receive in return. We may immerse ourselves in ministry because our ego is stroked, we are accepted in the Christian community, we "feel good" about ourselves, we become more knowledgeable, etc. These accomplishments can placate the professing believer, who continues to limp along in his Christian walk, convincing himself and perhaps others, that he has done enough in obeying God. These acts are not motivated by love of God or love of others, but rather, are self-seeking. Thus, they are not empowered by the Holy Spirit.

“People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God – having a form of godliness, but denying its power . . .”

2 Tim. 3:2-5

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Our rebellion may take the form of being apathetic, disengaged, uninvolved with the swirl of needy people all around us. We refuse to involve ourselves in eternal purpose by not participating in the lives of others. We anesthetize ourselves into believing we are “good Christians” because our sins are sins of omission rather than sins of commission.

We may “look good” to everyone around us at work, at school, in the church. But we are different people in our homes. The fact is that who we are at home is who we *truly* are. There, we are not motivated to perform in order to be accepted, as we are outside our home.

Obedience to God is costly in the home. It requires self-denial for the sake of others. We are commanded to obey regardless of our pride, fear or desire to protect ourselves from failure, rejection and painful situations. The husband is commanded to be the loving leader; the wife to submit to her husband with a gentle and quiet spirit. The children are commanded to obey their parents. All are commanded to forgive, to be reconciled, to love, to admonish, to speak graciously, to encourage, to be compassionate, to be involved, to be godly role models, to be thankful and grateful, to treat one another as each wishes to be treated. Biblical love is costly.

“Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say?”

Luke 6:46

Costly obedience. . .it is forfeiting our right to ourselves. It is choosing to surrender our wills to God’s will for us. It is relinquishing the right to try to control our world and the people in it. It is turning away from deciding how we will bless ourselves and allowing God to determine how He will bless us through submission to Him. It is accepting pain, persecution, hardship and deprivation, as tools in the hands of our loving Heavenly Father, to mold us for use in His Eternal Kingdom.

Costly obedience requires getting up on our shaky legs and following His commands when everything within us is crying out, “I don’t want to do this!” “This is beyond my ability!” or “This is so frightening!” But we step out to follow our Shepherd and in so doing, yield ourselves to His control. Then His grace and power transport us into realms of experience we could never comprehend when we refused to submit to Him.

“And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.

Women received back their dead, raised to life again.

Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison.

They were stoned; they were sawed in two;

they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated –the world was not worthy of them.

They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.”

Hebrews 11:32-38

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What are you refusing to do in obedience to God's commands?

- Forgive someone who hurt you?
- Seek forgiveness of a difficult person?
- Speak the truth instead of deceiving?
- Admonish someone, for *his* sake, who has the potential to cause further problems?
- Persevere, with godly attitudes, in persistent adversity?

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me.”
Gal. 2:20a NASB

Hear the words of a contemporary, Pastor Kefa Sampangi, who lived under the cruel dictator, Idi Amin, who slaughtered thousands of Christians in Uganda during the 1970's. *“It was true that we had no earthly court of appeal. There were no policemen, soldiers or government officials from whom we could seek help. We had nothing left. We had come so low only God could help us now.”*

A friend of Kefa's, Dr. K. prayed *“Father in heaven, we have lost everything, and we have no court of appeal. Only You can help us. We throw ourselves on Your mercy.”*

In his book, *A Distant Grief*, Kefa wrote about his relationship to God while living under the unrelenting threat of death. *“My concern for my own safety became secondary to my desire to witness the power of God, and I knew that as a community of believers we of the Redeemed Church were experiencing His grace now more than ever before. We were learning to live in the everlasting now, to let Scripture alone form our expectations and to pray without complaining. It was no longer the days themselves that we desired, but the forgiveness and the love of God. In the uncertainty of our day-to-day existence, we were being delivered from our reliance on methods, from the idols of self-trust and self-pity. We could no longer afford to ask converts, ‘Do you believe?’ We asked, ‘Are you ready to die for Jesus Christ?’ ”*¹

Which of these risks to further God's Kingdom are you ignoring?

- Sharing the gospel with a co-worker, family member or acquaintance?
- Giving sacrificially of your resources for the Lord's purposes: home, time, possessions, money?
- Stepping out in faith to risk ridicule, security, rejection and discomfort for the furtherance of His Kingdom?

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- Living a life that reflects eternal purpose?
- Being a godly role model to your family, friends, acquaintances?

***“Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, ...
but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God.”
2 Tim. 1:8 NASB***

***“You are the salt of the earth. . . You are the light of the world.
A city on a hill cannot be hidden.
Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl.
Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house.
In the same way, let your light shine before men,
That they may see your good deeds and praise you Father in heaven.”
Matt. 5:13a, 14-16***

Mrs. Florence Lubega, a former member of Uganda’s parliament sent Kefa this letter. Her husband had recently been murdered.

“Ever since my conversion, I have been praying that God would dispose of Amin. I have wished him dead and when I see his picture in the news I feel sick. Now, I don’t know how to pray. After fleeing from Uganda I had nothing. Everything I owned was taken by Amin’s soldiers. I lived in Nairobi for almost a year, and I slept in a garage with only newspapers between my body and the cold cement floor. I had nothing to eat. It was then I learned what I had not learned sleeping on a mattress with a full stomach. I learned to love Jesus Christ, the suffering Savior. Since then, I have come to London and still have been praying for the death of Amin. But should I instead be praising God for raising a man so evil that he took everything I owned and caused me to see the Lord? It is when everything is uncertain that God’s face becomes clear.”²

***“But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.
What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness
of knowing Christ my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.
I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.”
Phil. 3:7,8***

***“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory
that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen,
but on what is unseen.
For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal...”
2 Cor. 4:17,18***

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Are you procrastinating in these areas instead of following Jesus?

- Confessing your sin honestly and doing something concrete to turn away from it?
- Being lazy and undisciplined?
- Spending regular time with your spouse and children in ongoing communication?
- Foregoing endless hours consumed in watching T.V. or engaged in other idle pursuits, instead of ministering to your family or to others?
- Living a life devoted to Christ, even though those around you, including Christians, may be threatened or angered by your testimony?

*“... If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.”*

Luke 9:23 NASB

When people of the first century church chose to follow Christ, they knowingly chose the probability of torture and death. It is noteworthy that God set the fledgling Church of Christ, not in a pleasant, accepting environment, but in a hotbed of persecution. Nero, the emperor of Rome, **hated** Christians and systemically set forth to destroy the Church. Persecution tends to create iron saints who pass the intense reality of their faith on to others. The Church grows and flourishes during times of hardship and tribulation. Tertullian, who lived from 160 – 240 A.D., said, *“Blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”*

“People often had to choose between Him and someone they loved very dearly. Christians paid a high price in those days. Some of them were flung to the lions, while others were burned at the stake. Emperor Nero would put pitch on Christians and burn them to light his garden parties. He sewed them in the skins of wild animals and had his hunting dogs tear them to pieces. Believers were tortured on the rack and scraped with pincers. Molten lead was poured on them and red-hot brass plates were put on the most tender parts of their bodies. Eyes were torn out and parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted in front of them. Hands and feet were burned, and then cold water would be poured on them to lengthen the agony.”³

Think of our scriptural role models who paid the ultimate price to follow Christ.

Stephen: The first martyr, who was stoned for his belief in Christ (Acts 6:8-15)

John the Baptist: Beheaded for standing for Christ by speaking the truth (Matt. 14:6-12)

Apostle Paul: Imprisoned, tortured, frequently endangered and killed for his faith (2 Cor. 11:23-28)

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Apostle Peter: Tradition tells us that he was martyred under Nero and chose to be crucified upside down *because* he believed was not worthy of being crucified in the same way his Lord had been.

Are you willing to respond to persecution in a Christ-like manner?

- Not compromise your stand for Christ even if it means loss or persecution?
- Respond to an injustice graciously because it was sovereignly dispensed?
- Consider yourself “blessed” when you are persecuted for righteousness sake?
- Love your enemy?

*“For it is commendable if a man bears up
under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God.
But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it?
But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.
To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you,
leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”*
1 Pet. 2:19-21

*“Blessed are you when people insult you,
persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.
Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven,
For in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*
Matt. 5:11,12

Christians down through the centuries have given their lives to follow Christ. Others have denied themselves security, convenience and wealth to further His Kingdom. All who have given sacrificially focused their lives on eternal purpose, regarding the tribulation of this world as a means to advance God’s goals. The same call that they gladly accepted is also *your* call.

Meditate on these who **knew** their God and gave sacrificially for His cause.

Polycarp: Bishop of Smyrna, who in 155 A.D. refused to renounce his God and worship the Roman gods. His judge pleaded with him to curse Christ and swear by the emperor. His reply, *“For eighty-six years I served him and he has done me no evil. How could I curse my king, who saved me?”* As he was tied to the stake on which he was to be burned alive, he prayed out loud, *“Lord Sovereign God . . . I thank you that you have deemed me worthy of this moment, so that, jointly with your martyrs, I may have a share in the cup of Christ. . . For this . . . I bless and glorify You. Amen.”*⁴

Martin Luther: Confronted the Roman Catholic Church about their unbiblical practices in 1517 A.D. The Church demanded that he recant. Luther declared, *“My conscience is captive to the Word of God.”* His stand for truth united the powers of the emperor and the Church against him.

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He was declared an outlaw, which meant Luther and anyone who assisted him, could lose their lives and property. Through great adversity, he became one of the leaders of the Protestant Reformation, which focused man on the Scriptures as the sole and sufficient rule of faith and practice and on justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ. He died of natural causes, but his uncompromising faith created much tribulation in his life. Author of hymn, *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*.⁵

John Bunyon: Imprisoned in 1660 for twelve years for refusing to stop preaching. Author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*.⁶

George Mueller: Established orphanages in England, which eventually cared for 2,000 children at the same time. He lived a very sacrificial life and supported his family and all the orphan children in a "faith ministry," appealing to only God for provision. He took God completely at His Word and never put limits on what He could accomplish and provide for so many.

*"Mueller never made an appeal for money. The children never went hungry or ill-dressed. Never a debt went unpaid. Yet there was never any security – except the faith that God knew and would provide. God did so, though often at the very last moment, when there was not a penny in the purse and no food on the tables. Mueller's homes existed by a never-ending succession of miracles of faith. Their history is largely page after page of answered prayers."*⁷

Hudson Taylor: Gave up the comforts of life in England to evangelize inland China in the late 1800's. No white man had ever penetrated this area. He looked to God to not only meet all his needs, but also the needs of hundreds of others who would eventually join him as fellow missionaries. He never solicited contributions nor made appeals for his or other's support, but instead, made his appeals known to the Lord, who faithfully provided for His work in China."⁸

Amy Carmichael: An Englishwoman who went to India as a missionary in the late 1800's. She led a life of self-denial as she cared for hundreds of children, many of whom were once used as temple prostitutes. At times, her own life was in danger because she protected these orphans. She saw each trial and obstacle as an opportunity to die to her self-will and to commit her situation to her Lord, in obedience to Him.⁹

Is God asking you to turn away from your self-centeredness to obey Him?

- Quit grumbling, complaining and feeling sorry for yourself?
- Wait, patiently, on the Lord's timing to answer your prayers?
- Give up trying to control your circumstances and the people in our life?
- Turn away from self-focus to serve God and others?
- Give up your earthly idols whether they be persons, places, possessions or activities?

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Is God asking you to *accept* some form of hardship? You need to focus on the bigger picture, **God's picture**, that He is asking so little of you in comparison to so many today and yesterday who have been called to far greater sacrifice. Quit whining! Face your adversity with the grace of God. Make the difficult choices in obedience to Him. Appreciate the great and wondrous gifts God has already given you. And reflect on those who were called to far greater cost and "considered it all joy" in doing so.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Christian in Germany who spoke out against the abuses of Hitler's regime. He died in a Nazi concentration camp, hanged by captors. He taught that costly grace calls us to follow Christ. We are to repent of sin and submit our lives to Him. He based his life on the principle, "*When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die.*"¹⁰

Corrie Ten Boom: A woman from Holland, who with her family, hid Jews during the Nazi regime in her home. When the Jews were discovered, she and her sister were sent to a concentration camp. Her elderly father died in prison. Corrie and her sister suffered great abuse and deprivation. After her sister died, Corrie, who was slated for the gas chamber, was released in a very unusual way, which was obviously God's intervention. She realized while experiencing the horrors of Ravensbruck concentration camp, "*There is no pit so deep that God isn't deeper still.*"¹¹

Jim Elliot: Chose to bring the message of Christ to the South American Auca Indians who were a vicious people. He and four fellow missionaries were murdered in 1956. With forgiveness and courage, his widow, Elisabeth, returned to minister to the Aucas and many became Christians.

In her book, *The Mark of a Man*, she speaks of her husband, Jim. "*He who is fully a man has relinquished his right to himself. 'Have my blood,' Jim wrote in his college journal. 'Have It all. Let it be poured out for the life of the world.' When the chance came to take a big risk in obedience to God, he took it at once – he went 'gaily!' I doubt that he remembered the words of that prayer, but the matter had been settled long before. The route to Life had to be the way of Death.*"¹²

Francis and Edith Schaeffer: An American couple who moved to Switzerland and devoted themselves to welcoming people from around the world to share their home which they called L'Abri (the Shelter). Their desire was to demonstrate the reality of Christ through daily living out God's truths in their open home. Their dependency on God included seeking Him alone for their provision and allowing God to sovereignly develop the ministry, which grew to many homes around the world. Their willingness to allow thousands of people over the years to invade their "private world," paved the way to salvation for vast numbers.¹³ Francis wrote, "*L'Abri is costly. If you think what God has done here is easy, you don't understand. It's a costly business to have a sense of community . . .*"¹⁴

What is Christ, the Suffering Savior, calling you to do?

- Allow Him to fill the void left by a loss in your life?
- Take a risk to do something difficult or uncomfortable in obedience to God?
- Quit demanding a near-perfect life and submit to His will?

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- Relinquish you perceived rights?
- Demonstrate a gentle, consistent love of Christ to a difficult spouse?

***“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men,
so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.
In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted
to the point of shedding your blood. Endure hardship as discipline...”***
Heb. 12:3,4,7a

Natasha Vins wrote of the persecution of the Church of Christ in the Soviet Union. In the summer of 1962, her father told her and her little brother that they would no longer be able to go to church. The government forbid all children to go to church with their parents. The following is excerpted from Natasha’s newsletter. She and her father now devote their lives to serving Christ in Russia.

“Very soon after the believers began meeting in the forest, my father started preaching in the services. Eventually he was arrested, and I became a “P.K.” – prisoner’s kid. My childhood memories include trips to the concentration camp to visit papa, house searches, police raids on our worship services, and interrogations at school. All this was very hard. And once our church started meeting in the forest, all of us children could go to the services, too! Our heroes were the Christian prisoners who were standing for God, just like Daniel, Stephen, Peter, and Paul in the Bible. Many of us were getting saved. . .and we dedicated our young lives to serve Him right there in the land of atheism.

Now I can look back. I was a member of the generation that was condemned by atheistic officials and compromising leaders of the registered churches to grow up without God. But how I thank God for the faithful men who wouldn’t let this happen, who courageously chose to obey the Lord, even if it meant prison, because Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me!’”

***“Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.
However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed,
but praise God that you bear that name.”***

1 Pet.4:12-16

Your brothers and sisters in Christ, who have considered it a privilege to submit in costly obedience to their Savior, march down through the ages into the present day. Christians in different parts of the world continue to be terrorized, persecuted and killed. Many experience severe deprivation. Others step out of comfortable lifestyles to advance the cause of Christ, turning their backs on easy choices and softening things.

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Oh, fellow Christian, rejoice that your suffering and hardships are so minimal compared to so many in the world! You need to praise God that He has protected you from life-threatening persecution and has given you such bounty! Accept your trials, accompanied by His abundant grace, “considering it all joy” to suffer for the sake of Christ. Take the risks needed to further His Eternal Kingdom. Obey the commands of the One who sacrificed Himself for you. And experience the blessed reward that comes to those who abandon themselves to Him ~ the sweetness of His fellowship, the fullness of His life!

*From prayer that asks that I may be
Sheltered from the winds that beat on Thee,
From fearing when I should aspire,
From faltering when I should climb higher,
From silken self, O Captain, free
Thy soldier who would follow Thee.*

*From subtle love of softening things,
From easy choices, weakenings,
Not thus are spirits fortified,
Not this way went the Crucified,
From all that dims Thy Calvary,
O Lamb of God, deliver me.*

*Give me the love that leads the way,
The faith that nothing can dismay,
The hope no disappointments tire
The passion that will burn like fire,
Let me not sink to be a clod:
Make me Thy fuel, Flame of God ¹⁵
Amy Carmichael*