

Transformed

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CHAPTER 1

Sacrifice, sweat, and suffering

The illusion that successful media status, fame, money, or visibility will fix our lives and ministries is just an illusion. None of those things make us fruitful, they just reveal whether we have any lasting fruit to begin with.

I WAS WATCHING A CLIP of a well-known movie star, and the interviewer was talking about how great things must be for her; how many people must drool over her amazing life, her fame, and her money. As the interview continued, I noticed the face of the actress changing as the ridiculous questions went on. It was clear that the more her lifestyle was idolized, the more agitated she became, her smile fading to an angry smirk. As she listened to the idealistic interviewer, her response was sharp: "You know it is an illusion to think that just because someone has money, fame, or whatever they wish they had, that it is a picture of their life in which all is good. Just because you get something, or you know

someone, doesn't mean s**t. It's all an illusion."

I burst out laughing because of her honesty. But sadly, her statement revealed much truth about today's culture. This idolization of the outward appearance of people's lives has become a powerful illusion. This interview reminded me of what I often see in traveling and teaching around the world. The illusion and celebrity mindset is not just a world mentality; it has slowly crept its way into the church. The focus to become a teacher, pastor, worship leader, or itinerate minister – for the visibility and notoriety – has become too important. Serving in the local church, just to serve God, has in many ways lost its appeal. It seems as if bigger is better, and having more, or at least looking like you have more, proves that you're successful and living the American Dream!

Social media can create the illusion that everything is bigger or better than it actually is. These posts encourage the false beliefs that all is well, that no one truly struggles, and everyone has it better than us. These are messages that we're constantly being fed through the media. Whether we realize it or not, this kind of influence has impacted the church and what we think of ourselves, our ministries, and even our own personal lives. Time and time again, I hear from people who feel that they are "less than" others in what they do, or who they are as a person. There are many discouraged leaders, who feel that what they do isn't big enough, or significant enough, compared to what they've seen happening around the world – mostly from the Internet of course.

However, as with most things concerning the Internet, the reality is often different to what is being portrayed. I can't tell you how many times I read something about a church only to show up and find that what they say about themselves is very different

to how it actually is! It's like a bad online dating service, where people present themselves in a certain way so they get attention, yet in person, the reality is not quite the same as the advertisement! It not only surprises, but also saddens me, how often I hear the pressure people feel to keep up with others. We want to look good, telling ourselves, "at least I'm growing with Twitter or Facebook followers", and worrying about how many "likes" we got on a post – as if any of that really matters.

WHEN THERE IS SO MUCH FOCUS ON THE OUTWARD, IT IS EASY TO FALL INTO A TRAP: GIVING THE FALSE ILLUSION THAT WE ARE A DEEPER AND STRONGER CHRISTIAN THAN WE REALLY ARE.

We feed the cry for surface life by giving surface responses. Yet I find it interesting that when I ask younger generations what they love about people, especially leaders, who have followed Jesus for years, I often find the same answers. In fact, I find they are the same qualities that I love, and am attracted to myself.

Longevity, morality, and integrity are the things which attract us the most. There is a deep desire within all of us to finish well. We are dying for positive role models to represent the godly mothers and fathers who are often missing in the home. We are made to be in a family, where we can have people to look up to; not just to admire, but to model our lives on. I also believe that is why the young are so drawn to people with those deep qualities; they represent safety, and we all want to feel safe. There is a deep need, all around us, with so many searching and longing for mothers and fathers, and if the church isn't filling the need, the world is quick to offer a counterfeit replacement.

Even in our own resistance and self-reliance, we are wired for the long-term and to be called into a deep and authentic relationship with Christ. No one imagines their life will turn out poorly; for the most part everyone wants to produce a healthy life, healthy children, and a healthy deposit into society. Yet everything in and around us is fighting this. Culture is stealing our attention towards immediate gratifications, rather than the bigger picture of what has eternal value.

Eugene Peterson in his book, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, said this: “There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.”¹

In our instant, microwave culture we like things to be fast. We like things to be done for us, and to have everything at our beck and call when we want it. If people or places don’t produce what we want here and now, then we’ll find somewhere else that will. Don’t get me wrong, I love the microwave and I love it when things are quick and easy, but spiritual depth, or spiritual maturity, is not something we can just order online; if it was, we would!

There is nothing about discipleship where “fast”, “easy”, “convenient”, or even “comfortable” would be words used to describe the journey! In fact, where we find the strongest, deepest, and healthiest growth, there has been a journey of sacrificial choices of transformation behind the scenes.

THE BEST THINGS, THINGS WHICH HAVE THE GREATEST VALUE, ARE NEVER
WITHOUT SACRIFICE.

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2000, p. 16.

Jesus modelled this for us in His earthly ministry all the way to the cross. He made it clear that we are His greatest value. We were the object of His sacrifice. We have such great worth to Him, and where we find the greatest of worth is where we find the greatest of investments. God will invest in that which matters most. That’s why every great leader we read about through the Scriptures had to allow God to put His best investments in them. God never just threw them into big missions; before He released responsibility, there was always training in the hidden place, either with God directly, or with others who could walk them through the process.

Joseph had to wait thirteen years for his prophetic promise to be revealed. God gave him a dream, yet his immaturity got him thrown into a pit; he had to walk through many trials, betrayals, and rejections before he was entrusted with the palace. David went from being a shepherd boy in the field, to being anointed by Samuel, only to be sent back into the field again. Even when he was called up for service, I’m sure it was different to how he had planned, as he had to serve crazy King Saul, and if that wasn’t enough he had to go on the run for his life for years. He went through many seasons of painful circumstances until he found himself in the role of king. Likewise, in the New Testament, we find that the apostle Paul had to wait for several years after his conversion before he was commissioned into ministry. We find story after story of God’s giants being trained in the hidden places. The hidden place is not what we would pick, but it is often the place God can do His best work in us. It’s the deepest and sometimes longest of investments and sometimes we need to remember that the best things in life are often found where we have put our greatest investments.

Psalm 1 is one of my favorites. It promises that we have the

potential to be like “a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers” (Psalm 1:3 NASB).

To prosper is God’s idea. Too often we have taken what the world sees as prosperity, and put the stamp of Jesus on it. God wants you to prosper but His ways do not follow the patterns of this world. He is of another kingdom.

THE WORD “PROSPER” HERE MEANS MORE THAN TO PROFIT AND BE SUCCESSFUL, IT ALSO MEANS TO SHOW EXPERIENCE.

I love this Scripture because it gives the picture that **wherever God plants us, it doesn’t matter what life throws our way; we will prosper in it.**

HOWEVER, TO PROSPER DOESN’T MEAN THAT LIFE IS EASY. WE HAVE CONFUSED GOD’S BLESSING WITH THINGS BEING EASY. WE HAVE CONFUSED THE BEST FRUIT OF OUR LIVES AS THAT WHICH IS QUICKEST AND TASTIEST, YET SOME OF THE BEST FRUIT TAKES THE LONGEST TIME TO GROW.

John 15 gives us the picture of staying connected to our life source, the vine. Jesus tells us: “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5 NASB). As with any fruit that grows, it cannot sustain itself apart from the vine. God’s kingdom flourishes in those who choose to stay attached to the Vine. There is not a promise of a particular length of time, only the choice to stay attached, where we can allow our roots to go deep in Christ. Our deepest strength is found in the strength of

our roots; the deeper the root, the deeper the strength of what is being produced.

SOME OF THE BEST THINGS GOD HAS FOR US TAKE THE LONGEST TO GROW. THE OLD SAYING, “**THE FRUIT OF OUR LABOR**”, MEANS JUST THAT: **FRUIT IS A BY-PRODUCT OF LABOR.**

I am sure that Joseph, David, and Paul were wondering why the process had to take so long, yet they still walked it out. They continued to give God their “yes” even though they had to persevere for years and through life-threatening problems. It was because of their “yes” that God used them greatly. God spoke to all of these men, and many others, yet they still had to surrender to the process. They had to yield, and allow God to transform them into who they were called to be.

GETTING POWER IS EASY; DIRECTING THE POWER IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, IN THE WAY IT’S INTENDED, MUST BE TRAINED THROUGH A PROCESS.

Hearing from God about your life is one thing, but getting yourself ready for what God has said is a completely different ball game. Receiving a prophetic word that you’re going to do, or be, something that you’ve dreamed of may encourage you, but that is only the beginning of your story. After the word, we often have to persevere through many problems before we get to the promise. Most people get the word and think that’s it, “here I am”, and expect every door to open – when in fact that word is just the reminder of the promise. That’s actually what the prophetic means: *to build up, to exhort, to encourage, even to bring comfort.*

PROPHETIC WORDS ARE NOT FOR CORRECTION OR DIRECTION, THEY ARE TO ENCOURAGE YOU TO KEEP FOCUSED, AND KEEP PERSEVERING – KEEPING YOUR EYE ON THE PROMISE OF GOD. IF YOU DON'T KEEP PERSEVERING, THEN DON'T EXPECT THE PROMISE.

Have you ever been under a leader who had power but misused it? It doesn't matter if it is through parenting, leading a church, driving a bus, or being a doctor; misdirected power can do so much damage. The training is not only for ourselves, the training is for everyone around us as well.

THE POWER THAT GOD PLACES IN YOUR LIFE HAS RESPONSIBILITY ATTACHED TO IT, AND IF YOU DON'T ALLOW GOD'S SPIRIT TO BREAK YOU IN THIS PROCESS, THEN THAT POWER CAN DO MUCH DAMAGE.

Romans chapter 5 says this is the road to true character and hope: “suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3–4). Power and position, without character or hope as their path, are destructive. Perseverance is always a process, and it's usually a hidden one, because God is doing a deep work in the roots of who we are; roots, and seeds, the things that give life, strength, and stability, are hidden. But if they aren't cared for and grown properly, they cannot contain what they're meant to carry. The hidden process is not popular in today's culture. No one can “like” your process. It goes against popular culture, even in the church. We often try to make things sound more exciting, or faster, than the reality; however, **God's timing and our timing are usually worlds apart.**

Can you imagine if King David was alive today? How many Facebook or Twitter fans do you think he would have, being a shepherd boy in a field? He would probably be perceived as rather boring, singing and talking to God and his sheep! The processes, especially long ones, are not popular, yet it is the way God trains those He calls His own.

Every person God entrusted with a significant task had to go through this hidden process of training. It is part of His entrustment program. If I was doing twenty-five years ago what I am doing today, I would do a lot of damage. I would hurt people. Not on purpose, but I just didn't have the maturity for what I lead today. I had to go through a much-needed process of training to learn that it's not only what I see that is important, but what I do with what I see. In other words, God may reveal things to me about people that are true, yet if I don't share those things in grace, they can be hurtful. I needed to work on the grace part.

THESE SEASONS OF BEING HIDDEN, OFTEN SERVING UNDER TRYING CIRCUMSTANCES, ARE WHERE GOD DOES HIS BEST WORK IN US. THESE ARE USUALLY TIMES THAT WE WOULD NEVER PICK, USING PEOPLE WE WOULD NEVER CHOOSE, IN ORDER FOR GOD TO WORK IN US, IN WAYS THAT COULDN'T HAPPEN OTHERWISE.

Psalm 27:14 says, “Don't give up, don't be impatient, be entwined as one with the Lord. Be brave, courageous, and never lose hope. Yes, keep on waiting – for He will never disappoint you.” In this Passion Translation, the waiting time is not wasted time; rather it is a secluded time for God to form our inner man. The Hebrew word for wait means to entwine like strands of rope

being woven into one. That is not an easy process.

God tells us that He is the potter and we are the clay. The great Creator is fully aware of what we are made to be. Isaiah 29:16 (NLT) says, “How foolish can you be? He is the Potter, and he is certainly greater than you, the clay! Should the created thing say of the one who made it, ‘He didn’t make me’? Does a jar ever say, ‘The potter who made me is stupid’?”

Have you ever seen pottery being made? It is often beaten, and even thrown to the ground, in order for it to take shape. It’s not that God is beating us up, but He is allowing us to be formed, and to be worked into His image. None of that is an easy process, yet it is vital to become what we have been made to be.

It is normal to feel as if you are the only one having to walk through your situation. These hidden times of God working in us are often lonely times because God is at work in our private places, so rarely is anyone watching, let alone applauding.

True change is not a status change on social media. True change takes sacrifice, sweat, and even suffering – three things I hardly ever hear mentioned in church, or at conferences, these days. They are not the popular topics. In fact, on more than a few occasions, when I’ve been talking about suffering, I have seen the disapproval of those who are wishing I would do more exciting things, like tell testimonies of healing, rather than address some of the realities of discipleship. It is not popular to talk about struggle. It is not popular to address the suffering we often have to walk through, or the sacrifices we must continually make in order to say “yes” to Jesus.

These things are not popular in today’s church culture. We would much rather focus on the successes of life, going from one

testimony to the next, even using the saying “it gives the devil too much credit”, as an excuse not to address hardship of any kind.

THE REALITY IS THAT LIFE IS NOT PLAYED OUT LIKE A HIGHLIGHT REEL FROM A CHRISTIAN CONFERENCE.

I love testimonies, and I love celebrating what God’s up to. But God is working in the one who has chosen to persevere through pain and loss, just as through the miracle of eyes being healed. So let’s celebrate, but not at the expense of those who are faithfully struggling on, whose testimony wasn’t as exciting as someone who was healed. Both are equally important.

It’s alright to admit that life is sometimes hard. I think it is OK to say we don’t necessarily like the season that we’re in, or even that we’re disappointed that God did not heal the person we love. If we don’t allow space for this type of honesty then the church is crippling herself.

Many of the things we go through, and others around us go through, are often very difficult, very painful, and sometimes humiliating. Where do they go for help? Where do we go if we don’t feel safe enough to tell the truth about our situations? As a leader, and as a pastor, I want people to choose the narrow road of discipleship. I want them to risk; I want them to thrive in their calling. But if my heart is for people to be honest, and if I want to reproduce a deeper church then I have to keep asking myself these questions: Am I a safe person? Is my church a safe place? Are we reproducing disciples? If we aren’t, then what needs to change?

I don’t want to keep up an appearance which in the long

run helps no one. All around the world, I see a drive to keep up appearances, and I believe it is taking its toll on the fruit of the church.

WE CANNOT EXPECT TO TREAT PEOPLE, ESPECIALLY SPIRITUAL LEADERS, AS CELEBRITIES, AND THEN BE SURPRISED BY THE LACK OF DISCIPLES IN THE CHURCH.

CHOOSING OUR LEADERS BECAUSE OF CHARISMA AND MEDIA INFLUENCE MAY PRODUCE A WIDER CHURCH, BUT NOT A DEEPER ONE.

And it's only a deeper church which can outlast every season. It is the narrow road. It has never been the popular road to follow. Growing true character, and allowing God to do His best work in us, is a choice, not a popularity contest. The narrow road is the road less travelled for a reason. Even though it's not the popular road, it is the road where longevity in true depth of discipleship is found. There is no truth to someone's life being better than ours, or the theory that the grass is greener on the other side.

THE GRASS IS NEVER GREENER WITH SOMEONE OR SOMEPLACE ELSE, THE GRASS IS GREEN WHERE YOU CHOOSE TO WATER IT.

I want to encourage you, as I often have to encourage myself: let the Master do His work in you. Allow Him to mold and transform you into your destiny. Do you realize that no matter where you're at today, God can do something with your "yes"? God can move in you, He can change you, and His promise is to complete His work in you. But you have to give Him your "yes".

Every choice you make is either transforming you into the likeness of Christ and leading you into your destiny, or stealing your purpose and what God has created you for. It's one choice at a time. Don't waste time focusing on how long it is taking for you to get through the season you're in, or looking for a way out. Instead ask for God's strength to empower you to stay. If God is working in you, then no matter what it is, it's for a reason. Every training session has purpose which will save us down the road. This is not a path you want to cut short.

There is a story about a man who was watching a moth trying to break out of its cocoon, and he felt sorry about the effort the little guy had to make, so he grabbed some scissors and cut it out. But as the moth began to move he realized it didn't have the strength to fly. In this man's attempt to help the little moth, he actually crippled it. The moth needs the struggle because the struggle builds in it what it needs in order to fly. This is what it looks like when we try to take shortcuts. In the long run it hurts us, and sometimes others as well.

There is no such thing as quick maturity. If you want your life to show experience, you must face, head on, where God has you today. If you want to prosper, you must plant yourself, attach yourself to the Vine, and allow your roots to go deep. I want to encourage you to fight for the things that last long-term, the things that matter the most. Ask yourself, what will be important 100 years from now? What are the things that truly last in one's life and ministry? What are the things that have lasted and benefited family life from generation to generation?

Then ask yourself, is my life connected to, and invested in, such things?

CHAPTER 2

What Jesus did I say “yes” to?

You have to know the Jesus you said “yes” to, because the Jesus you said “yes” to, is the Jesus you’ll end up following.

LOVE SEASONS. It wasn’t always like that, as growing up in southern California we have two seasons: hot and hotter! However, as I’ve traveled around the world I have grown to love the seasons, even winter, although that’s probably because I don’t live somewhere where I end up having to dig my car out of deep snow every day! When I was a child one of my favorite things to do when it was really hot, was to sit inside the sweltering car without turning the air conditioning on. Crazy, I know. It’s a wonder I survived. If I did that now, I think it would kill me!

Seasons are a way of life, and part of the natural world that God created. They are also part of our spiritual life. In the book of Ecclesiastes, we learn that, “there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens” (Ecclesiastes 3:1).

The chapter continues to explain those seasons; some of them wonderful, and some very difficult, but each one is important. Each time has its purpose and meaning. Our God never wastes anything; even the things that we would rather forget or discount, He has an amazing way of using for a purpose.

Often, especially when we find ourselves in a season we would rather avoid, God is working out His plan for good. It's just who He is.

WE HAVE ALL BEEN IN SEASONS THAT WE CAN'T WAIT TO GET THROUGH, BUT NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT, THERE IS PURPOSE IN IT. MANY TIMES WHILE WE ARE PLANNING OUR ESCAPE, GOD IS PLANNING HIS PURPOSE.

Seasons are not something we need to just “get through”; each season matters because they are part of the world God has created. They affect every part of life; in fact, you may start this book in one season of your life, and end it in another.

There have been many seasons in my life where it was beautiful, and thoroughly enjoyable: when my children were born, when I have seen people meet with Jesus for the first time, or when I've watched God doing what He does best, bringing healing and restoration to people who were at the end of their rope. I've walked through seasons of grace, where God has come through on personal things, and without His intervention, I would not have made it. I have countless, wonderful, memories of relaxing with my family; watching my children grow up, graduate from school, and especially watching my daughter get married, are seasons and moments that are deeply imbedded in my memory. I can even look back at times of deep sorrow, when I've watched those I love pass from their physical

life to their eternal life with Jesus, and see those too as seasons of God's grace. Watching someone you love become at peace, seeing their countenance at rest, is a gift, a moment of grace. All of these moments, and all of these seasons, have formed who I am. You all have your own seasons and your own memories, but no matter the joy or difficulty of those times, each of them formed who you are.

The hardest thing about a life of seasons is that we don't get to pick which season we are in, or how long it lasts for. We only get to pick how we choose to respond to the season we're in, knowing all the while that God always has our “yes”. My last season has been a winter season for me, where I have felt extremely frail and exposed. Although I knew God was at work, and fruit was being produced, it was really hard for me to see it. I don't think I did anything particularly wrong, but every time I thought it was coming to an end, something else would happen – often something very painful to me personally, or to someone I love.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE DOING ANYTHING WRONG TO ENCOUNTER HARDSHIP. WE WANT TO BLAME SOMEONE OR SOMETHING, EVEN OURSELVES, BUT SOMETIMES OUR GREATEST HARDSHIPS COME WHEN WE ARE DOING EXACTLY WHAT GOD HAS ASKED US TO DO.

For me this last season was full of non-stop opposition. Each time I turned around, I could barely catch my breath before another hit came. I wish these seasons didn't exist, but they do, and they happen to all of us.

These are the times when I appreciate that God has wired me in a way that I seem able to handle a lot of opposition without it distracting me too much. This has been a God-given strength

for me, but as with any strength, it has been a weakness as well. Sometimes I have the ability to handle *too* much. The season was starting to wear me down, and even though it takes a lot for me to get discouraged, facing *so many* discouragements all at once was taking a toll on my soul. I felt as if I was coming to a breaking point.

We all have something that breaks through our resistance, and for me it has to do with my kids. My “mom” hat overrides everything, and can bring me to my knees rather quickly. If either of my kids are hurting or struggling I feel it deeply. In particular, my son John has dealt with health issues his entire life. I don’t understand why. I don’t understand why it hasn’t stopped, and more specifically, I don’t understand why God hasn’t healed him, especially when I personally have prayed for people with some of the same conditions he has suffered with and I’ve seen *them* healed. This is one of those things I’ll have to ask Jesus about one day. For now, however, this is what we deal with, sometimes non-stop, and when we do, it brings me to my knees, wishing I could take his place.

One of these difficult moments came when we were already facing tough opposition in other areas, and now here my boy was suffering again. I was sitting in a hospital room, watching him, and I could tell that my heart was starting to feel the effects of the season. I was angry. The previous day, on my way back to the hospital, I was involved in a four-car pile-up. I was bruised and discouraged, and began to question many things about my life and ministry. I had been facing serious harassment by the landlord of our church, with hundreds of false accusations and ongoing battles over a two-year period. Every time I returned home from a trip there would be yet another list of accusations, and the effort and

the cost to continue defending myself and my church were beyond exhausting. Relationally I was hurt deeply. I had personally invested in and trusted people, who were now going sideways, or choosing not to follow through on agreements. Although I was feeling the weight of these things personally, I was more concerned how these people’s poor choices were going to affect those I was leading. To call this season a nightmare was a massive understatement.

In the midst of the chaos I was trying to hear God, and I felt overwhelmed at the thought of missing Him completely – what if I am going through all of this for nothing? Have you ever tried to hear God, yet the noise around you seems to be drowning Him out? It’s a very frustrating season to walk through. As I was lying down next to my boy in the hospital room I just began to tell the Lord about all my frustrations, discouragements, and disillusionments. My list was longer than I realized, and I was quickly sliding into self-pity. Yet I sensed the Lord was just listening to my battered soul. After releasing my long list of complaints, I felt the Lord simply remind me of what He had spoken to me at an earlier time.

I had been doing a conference in late 2015 and during one of the breaks I had gone on a walk to rest and talk to the Lord about a few things. There was something that I didn’t quite understand at the time, and His response surprised me: “Christy, what Jesus did you sign up to follow?” What Jesus did I sign up to follow? I kept asking myself that, because it felt like a challenge as well as a reminder, and it still does, every time I think of it.

WE HAVE TO KNOW THE JESUS THAT WE SIGNED UP TO FOLLOW BECAUSE THE JESUS WE SAID “YES” TO IS THE JESUS WE WILL END UP FOLLOWING.

If we said “yes” to Jesus believing everything was going to be easy, or that it would all turn out how we want, then disappointment is sure to follow.

I’ve heard people say “yes” to Jesus because of a moment of excitement at a conference or because He makes them feel good, or because of the experience of being prayed for. None of these things are bad, but if you say “yes” to Jesus because of an experience, or a feeling, what happens when the feelings aren’t there? What happens when the feelings change? I think on some occasions, the church has done a disservice to people by offering them a different Jesus to the Jesus of the Bible. You have to know the Jesus you said “yes” to.

Watching how people respond to life’s circumstances reveals very quickly which Jesus they said “yes” to. On one hand it’s been a good reminder, because it has always caused me to be sober about the reality of how easy it is for *any* of us to follow the Jesus of convenience and comfort. One thing I noticed was that there were people who were surprised by having to walk through difficulty – strong believers, who had walked and prayed with others in similar hardships, but the moment *they* were faced with such difficulties, it seemed to sweep them off their feet: *“Why me; why am I having to walk through this? I’ve done what I thought was right, I’ve tried to obey God, so why is this happening to me?”*

Could it be that deep down, we feel that the Jesus we said “yes” to, and the Jesus we are willing to follow, to serve, and to risk for, is OK – as long as He works inside our idea of what life should look like? I call it the “as long as ... I will say ‘yes’ to Jesus” theory. As long as I have money; as long as the kids are healthy; as long as I don’t have to change too much; as long as my friends come along;

as long as ... We all have our lists. These “as long as” reasons have derailed many wonderful people.

Jesus doesn’t work within our “as long as” ideas of Christianity. He even forewarned us, “if you say ‘yes’ to me, it will cost you. It may cost you some friends, it may even cost you some of your family relationships, but don’t be surprised if people hate you because of me” (based on Luke 21:16–17).

THE COST IS HIGH BECAUSE THE BENEFITS ARE HIGH. EVERYTHING THAT JESUS WARNED US ABOUT INVOLVES AN ELEMENT OF LIVING UNCOMFORTABLY.

So why then do we get surprised when things turn out differently to how we expected? Why do we get surprised when we encounter hardships, or when people don’t like us? God even warns us of persecution, of rejection, and of the ongoing choice to leave comfort behind. But Christ is all-provisional: in life and in ministry. He has promised us His Spirit, who is our comforter. As believers, we are meant to live in the uncomfortable places. Otherwise, why would we need to be comforted? We know the “Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). This tells me, in fact, that if I am comfortable, something is wrong.

It’s not always the distractions of hardship that cause people to disengage. One of the greatest reasons for distance in our walk with God, and others, is when things are going really well! It is so easy to get so busy with work and with family, that we have not allowed any room to rest. Sometimes we feel that because we only

have a limited amount of time after we have done all these things, we have to eliminate something, and often what we cut out is community and church.

"BUSY" IS THE NEW EXCUSE, BUT IT CAN BE FATAL TO OUR WALK WITH GOD. I HAVE FOUND THAT IF I AM TOO BUSY FOR THE RIGHT THINGS, THEN I AM JUST TOO BUSY.

Our relationship with God, as with any relationship, must get our time, and our energy, or it will not work. Your relationship with God won't strengthen itself without your daily involvement. One of the most powerful protections you have is the power to say "no". You have to be able to say "no" to the wrong things, to make the needed time, space, and energy to say "yes" to the right things. Being too busy has been one of the biggest distractions in my own life.

We often think it will be the big disappointments of life which will take us off course, yet I have found through the years in pastoring that it is often in the busyness and distractions of life that people begin to distance themselves from God and church. It's the ongoing distractions of daily life where distance from God and His church takes place. Add success in business and you've got another layer to deal with. The enemy will try to steal your time with success, just as much as with the temptations of sin. The enemy is alive and well, not only quick to discourage and distance us in hardship, but also waiting at the door of success. The devil is waiting for you after God uses you. Keeping our heart clean wherever God has placed us, in life and in ministry, is important, but being alert after ministry saves us. I have found that I am the most vulnerable after God has used me in great ways. I am more

prone to pride, taking credit for things only God can do. There is an intimacy in exposing yourself, when you are ministering to others.

MINISTRY IS NOT JUST ABOUT GETTING MY HEART READY TO GO AND MINISTER, BUT ALSO PROTECTING MY HEART FOLLOWING ANY MINISTRY IS JUST AS IMPORTANT.

I can easily retreat into myself, and become distracted by what's been successful. Isolation from God and church is never an overnight process but rather a slow, daily choice, to give our time and our belief systems to things that cause distance. The retreat is just the final step of a slow process that has been happening in someone's life over time. Everyone has to fight against feelings of retreat.

Retreating doesn't even mean that we have to leave the church – some have found it easier to retreat within the church, where all looks fine, but the heart is cut off from anything new. I can think of many times where I've had to fight the desire to hide in the corner under the false illusion I am protecting myself. Many of you reading this are fighting that feeling now, and some of you feel like you fight it all the time.

THE ENEMY'S TACTICS ARE TO ISOLATE US, AND RETREAT IS ONE OF HIS CONSISTENT METHODS. ISOLATION KILLS, AND THE ENEMY UNDERSTANDS THAT – WHICH IS WHY HE USES IT.

I don't know if it's a good thing to remember those who have gone before me, and their trail of choices which haven't

turned out well, but what it has done is remind me that no one is above anything at any time. I have had to work through the disappointment of watching many who I grew up with, and did life with, slowly retreat into their own lives of busyness or even bitterness. It is difficult to watch people who were once full of passion for God, choosing instead to be too busy for God. Even sadder, has been watching people get bitter with life, bitter at the church, or bitter at God. To this day I hear from those who are still blaming God, or the church, for their difficulties.

I don't think we talk enough in the church about the reality of the battle that we're in. We need to remember that there is a real enemy, and he has one goal in mind with each of us: to take us out. So whether it is through life's circumstances being difficult, or people disappointing us in various ways, if we are not on guard, we too can easily retreat into safe zones.

We should not be surprised by our lack of understanding, yet often we are. It's literally a waste of time and energy to try to figure it all out. Yet, we still try to figure everything out. If God says: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8), it clearly means we will not understand most of what we walk through. Many times I have been caught off guard by what I've had to encounter, but I've been even more surprised to realize that I am not trusting God as much as I thought I was.

EVERY TIME WE STEP FORWARD IN DISCIPLESHIP, IT IS ANOTHER CHOICE TO TRUST GOD IN A WAY WE MAY NOT HAVE HAD TO TRUST HIM BEFORE.

Responding to the Lord

The Jesus we said "yes" to always gets revealed by our responses to life. It's where we find out what we truly believe. Isn't it frustrating when you see something come up in your life that you thought was long gone? We dread the mirror's reflection, being faced with our own weakness, especially weaknesses we thought we'd already dealt with. Every step of trust brings another weak area to the surface. Every season we face, we need another level of God's comfort that we may not have needed before. God has no problem touching areas in your life which have to do with control and insecurity. It is not to shame you, but rather to reveal an area of your heart where you may not have trusted Him before.

With trust, we often don't realize how much – or little – we are actually trusting, until we encounter new areas of life where more is needed. Every time I think I'm fully trusting God, He shows me an area where I have placed my trust in myself or other things.

WHEN GOD REVEALS THINGS TO US THAT NEED TO CHANGE, IT'S NEVER TO DISCOURAGE, BUT RATHER TO ENCOURAGE US INTO PURPOSE.

God never wastes anything, even those times that we wish we could forget. To surrender to Christ means that He can take whatever we've faced on our journey, and use it for tremendous purpose. He always takes the ash of our lives and turns it into a thing of beauty. But beautiful things only come when we give God access to the areas of our life that we have never given Him access to before.

We often ask for more of God's Spirit, thinking it's to see the dead raised, forgetting that the dead person is often us. When God's moving on me, I don't see how great I am, or all that I can do. I see how evil my heart actually is, and experience again the shock and awe that God would not only have mercy on me, but also chooses to use me. It rattles my brain every time I am reminded just how many times God has had mercy on me.

In order for us to see the greatness of our God, we first must recognize just how sinful and lost we really are. There are only two options in our response to Christ; we are either running into Him, or away from Him. We are either moving forward, or going backwards. There is no such thing as being idle in the kingdom of God. His kingdom is advancing, it is moving forward. Often we take three steps forward and two steps back, and feel like nothing has happened, or nothing is changing. But that's not true! Advancing is advancing, even if it's one step at a time. No person walks through life without having setbacks. In fact, **setbacks are truly a good sign as it means the enemy is trying to shut down that area where you are changing. He is fully aware that if you trust God in that area of your life, it will do damage to his kingdom. The enemy doesn't waste his time on things that don't affect him or disrupt his world.**

Kingdom life is about occupation. We know who won the battle for our lives, and we know who wins in the end. So the battle isn't about the destination, the battle is about who gets to occupy you, and the places where God has put you. When the Spirit of God is moving, He begins to reveal areas in us that must die, sometimes things that we would rather not have exposed. The

exposure to what needs to change, the unknown territories we visit, the prodding and probing of God drawing us, and desiring us to go deeper into Him, can make us feel like God is asking too much of us. I have felt this numerous times in my own walk with God, and also in praying for many who are surprised by what God is asking of them. The choice to yield to the unknown, or the uncomfortable, is not often what people are thinking about when they say "yes" to Jesus.

In this kingdom journey we are learning to yield every part of who we are, so God can use us to occupy others for Himself. The enemy doesn't make it easy. Occupying any new territory in our own heart never happens without a battle or resistance. When God is at work in us, you can bet the enemy is close by trying to distract, discredit, or discourage us from going forward. We often forget that to have more of God means that we will encounter more of the same things that Jesus Himself encountered during His earthly ministry. Reading through the Gospels, we find what Jesus lived with. We often highlight the miracles, forgetting that every miracle was surrounded by opposition of some kind. There is no great move of God in us, or around us, without the enemy doing all he can to shut it down.

The important thing to remember is that as long as we are saying "yes" to Jesus, then things are happening. It's a process of growth; it's a journey where only in His grace and His mercy are we truly able to see what He wants us to see. Every circumstance, every trial, every encounter, is an invitation to more of God.

God's routes

He is a “lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path”, Psalm 119:105 (KJV) tells us. One of my favorite reminders about God's leading is found in Exodus 13. The Israelites had been in slavery for over 400 years and now they're finally about to set out for the Promised Land. Moses has the new directions, and he goes back to the people to let them know what God has said. They're about to cross the sea. When they were first set free, they didn't realize the path would be different to what they had in their mind, they just said “yes”. It's clear because they responded in fear every time new directions came.

You have to picture this: here they are, all gathered, and the cloud starts to move. They begin to march, but then as they look, the cloud is heading in the wrong direction. At least in their minds it's the wrong direction. The Promised Land is one way, but the cloud is headed the other way. I can imagine how Moses is feeling. I can hear the people begin to grumble, something they did so well, especially when things turned out differently to how they expected. Now the big question arises: Will the people be able to follow? If the directions are different to what they had in their minds, will they still keep going? Will they obey God's words?

This chapter is incredibly revealing about how our God knows just how fragile and insecure we are. Here the people set out, but because of God's great love for them, He chose to take them on a different route. This is the God that loves them so much that He refuses to lead them in the way that would be the easiest. He refuses to take them the way that would make more sense, at least to them. What's even crazier is that there is another route

that's shorter. But that's not what God was doing. Instead He was taking them a different way. Would they follow?

When God leads you in a direction that is different to what you had planned, how do you respond?

What looks like more hardship for the people, is actually the deep love and mercy of God. In verse 17 it says that God chose to do this because he knew if they saw war, they would run: “If they face war, they might change their minds.” Another version says, “lest the people change their purpose when they see war” (AMPC). In other words, they would go back into slavery.

GOD KNOWS US ALL TOO WELL. MANY TIMES WHEN WE FACE HARDSHIP WE TEND TO RUN BACK INTO WHAT'S FAMILIAR OR WHAT'S EASIER.

See, the people knew that at least back in slavery they would get fed. At least in slavery they knew what their days would look like. At least in slavery there weren't a lot of surprises. God knew that they weren't strong enough to face the unforeseen hardships and if they did, they would turn from Him and lose their purpose. So what seems like God being harsh is actually Him showing great mercy. He knows the people don't have enough faith, and they don't yet have what it takes to face war. Even though they are no longer slaves, they still have to learn what it means to live and think like a free person.

I've found many times that God will take us on a track that although in the natural it doesn't make sense, it could in fact be the road that will save us. We want the shorter route, we want the easier route, yet God knows our weak areas, and the places within us that need to be strengthened for the next season. If you

are being rerouted, it's the mercy of God on you. It may not feel like it, but if it is God's leading, it's always the best way. We will never understand all of God's ways, and we don't see everything that God sees. It is only the sovereignty of God that is able to see our past, and where we have come from; our current situation and what we need now; but also our future.

GOD IS THE ONE WHO KNOWS THAT OUR GREATEST DESTINY WILL BE FOUND NOT ON THE EASIER ROAD, BUT ON THE ROAD WHERE WE ENCOUNTER WHAT WE NEED, FOR STRENGTH, TRUST, AND PERSEVERANCE TO DO THEIR WORK IN US.

This is why we have to know who the leader of our lives is. Knowing this in advance leaves no room for options or negotiations, only willful obedience. If God has you on a road less travelled, you want to stay on that road until He takes you elsewhere. To bail out from a direction that God has ordained will only keep you on that road, even if the surroundings look different. I don't think the destination, or our comfort, is as important to the Lord as much as our trust and dependence upon Him. There is always purpose in where God has you. Don't waste the road you're on trying to find out why, but rather focus on the purpose in being on the road, and keep going until the work has been completed, and God gives you new directions. God will never lead you and then leave you. He promises to be with you forever. He is Immanuel, God with us. So on your journey, even if you feel alone, you never are.

I've found that no matter what road we're on, if we go in the direction that God is leading us, He'll take us where we need to go

at just the right time. His timing is always perfect. Proverbs 3:5–6 reminds us to, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (NKJV). This is a great promise of God's provision in direction. As long as we're acknowledging where the Holy Spirit is leading, He will always put us on the right path; even if it is not the path we were expecting, we can rest assured of this truth, no matter what season we find ourselves in.

The reality of life is that there will always be seasons of change. There will be wonderful memories with special people, where love and peace abound. And there will also be other seasons: of pain, of grief, and times where much forgiveness is needed. There will be circumstances that we must let go of, and people we must face who have hurt and disappointed us deeply. You will face times when God is doing a great work of planting things deep within you, and times where the growth and harvest have surpassed your wildest dreams. Some of these seasons are glorious, and some are very painful, but no matter the season, you have to make the ongoing choice that in spite of what you encounter, Jesus will always get your "yes".