

Lost your Life? No problem! Christ has it in safekeeping

Mark 10:28 – Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”

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Note: This series was given to students at the Spanish Language Institute in San José, Costa Rica. Most of them were learning Spanish in order to serve God cross-culturally; hence the many references to missionaries and (part IV) to the stress of second language acquisition.

Outline:

- I. Lose your self, life, identity
- II. Lose your family, friends, belongingness
- III. Lose your possessions and opportunities
- IV. Lose your tongue
- V. ...*only to find them again*

TEXTS:

Mark 8³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

Mark 10²⁸ Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!” ²⁹ “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

I. Lose your self, your life, your identity

Introduction

I lost my glasses! I lost my phone! I lost my keys! I lost my wallet! I lost my car, I don't know where I parked it! I lost my train of thought! Well, such is the human condition; we probably did not lose these things, we just *misplaced* them.

But what do we do about this extreme language in Mark 10:28 – Peter said to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you!” *Jesus, we have lost our very lives.*

That will be our theme is week will be: Lost your Life? No problem, Christ has it in safekeeping

We will start by looking at Mark 8:

³¹ He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. ³² He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. “Get behind me, Satan!” he said. “You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.” [or “merely human concerns”]

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

This is the major plot twist in Mark’s gospel: Jesus for the first time predicts his suffering, death, and resurrection. In the wake of that, he shows that to be his disciple is to follow him in his suffering. There is no following of Jesus without accepting him as the Jesus of the cross. And there is no coming to him on our own terms, sacrificing here, recuperating a loss there, selecting this dish from the buffet, bypassing others, however it suits our taste.

Now, let’s be clear, the Mark passages are not specifically addressed to missionaries. “Come after me” or “follow me”, this is about being just a *disciple*. However, it is very much applicable to missionaries, as one subgroup of Jesus’ disciples.

Let’s run the jumper cables from Mark 8 to us, to see how we might make a connection.

MEANING OF “TAKE UP YOUR CROSS” and then “DENY YOURSELF”

I like the definition given by David Garland:

This vivid imagery must have sounded strange before Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection but would have communicated danger and sacrifice...By requiring disciples to carry their

cross, Jesus expects them to be willing to join the ranks of the despised and doomed. They must be ready to deny themselves even to the point of giving their lives.¹

That's "carry your cross." But this week we will focus on "deny yourself" in Mark 8:34, which has its parallel in "lose his life for me and for the gospel" in 8:35.

"Deny yourself" – a certain translation (NLT) of verse 34 reads: "If any of you wants to be my follower...you must put aside your *selfish ambition*." But this is not quite the language we want, because someone might misjudge it to mean, *Well, if selfish ambition is evil, then maybe unselfish ambition gets a free pass*. But that's not the idea at all.

That's why Today's English Version is apt, because it reveals the strength of the original: "If anyone wants to come with me," he told them, "he must *forget self*, carry his cross, and follow me." "Forget self" is not in the sense of *olvidarse* ("I forgot my self! Where did I put me?"); it's more like *olvidar* ("My self? Forget about it!"). It means to turn your back on anything that arises from self-directedness. And because it's in parallel with "take up your cross," this a sweeping loss of self to God, because we follow the crucified one.

In another place, John 12:25 uses the black-and-white language that is typical of that gospel – "Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

Paul reminds us that Jesus too "made himself nothing" (Phil 2:7). That's the wording in the NIV and NLT, a much better rendering than "emptied himself". In other words, Paul is saying, *Like master, like disciple*.

Now, let's be sure we don't slide headlong into Buddhist thought, since they happen to use similar language. Buddhism teaches non-attachment to anything that will make us happy: sensual pleasure, sure, but even our ideas, or worldly opinions. The idea is that, by renouncing self we will cut ourselves off from attachment; if you have no attachment, you'll have no suffering. (You will have to speak to a real Buddhist to get a better picture of it than this brief summary.) I suppose the Buddhist Four Noble Truths have some sort of internal logic; but this is not Jesus Christ, who affirms happiness and suffering and, for that matter, attachment.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 uses other language than the gospel does, but the point is much the same: *You are not your own. For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body*. That is: it's not that you have ceased to exist; rather, you belong to another person.

So, being a disciple – let alone a missionary! – means the complete surrender of your person and your rights to Christ. As a missionary friend of ours put it, it means to "give up the idea of

¹ David E. Garland, *Mark*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 328.

independent, self-led living.” It is leaving it up to him to decide where to deploy you and how to employ you.

MARTYRDOM

This sort of surrender has no limit: Mark 10:35 – “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.” That is, if you surrender your very life to him, he may just call that in some day. This is a major theme running through the book of Revelation: “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee the crown of life” (Rev 2:10).²

Now, if you look around, tribulation, and even religious persecution, are not unique to us: let’s not forget the Jews, in the 20th century, but also the anti-Semitism on the rise today in the US and in secular Europe; there is decent evidence that China has recently put one million Muslims in re-education camps to force them to renounce their faith;³ the followers of Bahai have their honor roll of martyrs; so do our neighbors to the north, the Mormons; and the Jehovah’s Witnesses, our neighbors to the west.

What about us? In Latin America, the odds are much greater that you will die in a traffic accident than by somebody martyring you. But that too is of God.

OR LESS THAN MARTYRDOM?

If we have the potential to literally, biologically “lose our lives” for the gospel, this means that we are willing to do everything up to that point. And in daily practice, sacrificing some part of our life might seem harder. “I’m willing to die for the Lord, yes; but please don’t let there be cockroaches or sketchy internet or giardia while I’m *waiting* to be martyred.”

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, while the cross is always the one cross of Christ – there is no saying “cockroaches are my cross to bear” – yet we will each experience that cross as God decides.⁴ And for you that may mean a unique configuration of inconveniences, pains, injuries, grievances, stupidities, indignities, shame, wasted time, aggravations, that is ours for following Christ. Are you consciously aware what elements the cross of Christ contains for you? It is no sin to *List them out! Own them!* It’s the Christian way to affirm reality, not to invent a fantasy: Peter himself said, “We *have* left everything to follow you!”

² There is a title on the internet from the IMB, the International Mission Board: *Lives Given, Not Taken: 21st Century Southern Baptist Martyrs*. It was published only in 2005, when the 21st century was just getting started. See <https://www.amazon.com/Lives-Given-Not-Taken-Southern/dp/0976764539>

³ “China: Massive Crackdown in Muslim Region,” Human Rights Watch, September 9, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/09/china-massive-crackdown-muslim-region>

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (2nd. ed.; London: SCM, 1959), 98-99.

LOSS OF IDENTITY

One way we lose our lives, and a relevant one for us here, is. We lose our personal identity, or let's say, our name tags, our ID cards.

Among my fellow-students at ILE were a surgeon; a dentist; professors and teachers; PhD's; veteran pastors; people retired from the military service or industry – where they were pretty big deals. What happens at language school? You become just another person in the crowd: no white coat, no business suits, no secretary, no office, no staff; you arrive fully-loaded, and suddenly you are the stripped-down version of you.

Maybe we're tempted to whip out the resume and say, "I know it doesn't look like it now, but I used to *be* somebody!"

Okay, that's what we've ostensibly decided to sign up for. The question now is, how do you handle it once you feel the cross on your shoulder? By toughing it out? Sucking it up? Retreating into bitterness and resentment?

Let's put some flesh (in both senses) on these bones; here are some people you and I both know.

Have you met **Steve Stoic**? The stoical person is "one who claims to be indifferent to pleasure or to pain."



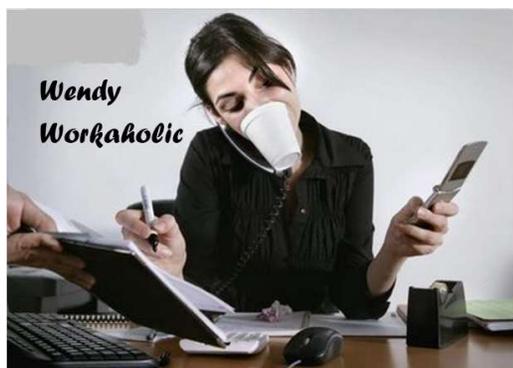
If a Stoic falls down a whole flight of stairs, he might brush himself off and say, "There, well, that's done." He is self-possessed, but beware! To be self-possessed is a form of self.

So, Steve the Stoic shrugs it off: *Sure, we miss our families, but hey, that's life, nobody said it would be easy.* If Steve is a married man, by the way, he drives

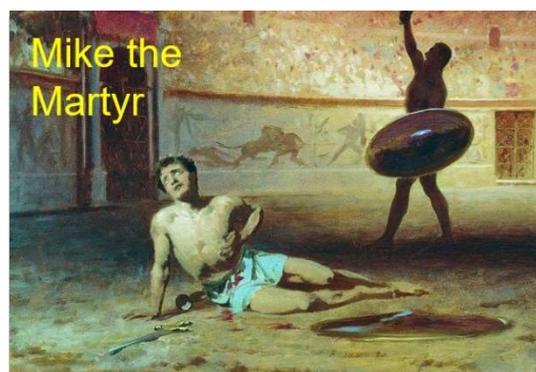
Mrs. Stoic crazy with all this.

Stoicism, if this hasn't been clear, is not Christianity. In fact, the very ABCs of our gospel say that we have a God who gave it all up in the incarnation and he didn't say, "That didn't hurt a bit". If we need a reminder, we should review the scene of our Lord in Gethsemane. And we notice that when Peter said, "We have left everything to follow you," Jesus didn't tell him to just suck it up.

Then there's **Wendy the Workaholic**. She believes that missionaries work seven days a week because, apparently, the Almighty can't keep things running without her. That too is "self", a way we try to cling on to our life.



Mike the Martyr is a pretty common sight on the mission field. His logic runs – *Missionaries should suffer; if we're not suffering we're not the real deal.* And if there isn't enough to be had, he creates some. *No Big Macs, no new clothes, kids, no fun, we're missionaries, we need to feel the burn!* When he runs across a happy missionary, his instinct is to yell, *Drop and give me 20!*



The church has always affirmed two truths: (1) that we should be willing to die for Christ if and when God calls us to do so; (2) that that is in God's hands, and we should never seek to suffer. That is, *self-imposed suffering* is of "self", not of Christ.

Let's meet **Xena Extreme!** There are people using missions as a way to seek adventure. It goes along with all this so-called reality TV with people being thrown into the desert or on an island or tossed into vats of spiders or something; there's even this show, as some of you know, where you have two people running around the Costa Rican jungle, naked. Being a missionary is not a game of Survivor, or a spiritual bungee jump. Xena, *take on real dangers if and when the gospel demands it, not for a thrill!* For thrilling yourself too is a form of "self".



Betty Bury Bitterness. Men can become embittered too, but I picture Betty as a married woman, whose husband caught this missions idea slightly ahead of her. They're like the Corsican Brothers in the novel by Alexander Dumas, where these conjoined twins are separated at birth, but each feels what the other experiences. Punch one in the nose, and the other one goes "Ow!" Betty's husband takes up the cross, but *her* shoulder feels chafed and tired. HE gets to go and do some macho glamorous missionary adventure, while SHE starts supper by rubbing two sticks together.



So, Betty's under a lot of pressure to do right. She can't let herself be overtly rebellious against her husband or God (your denomination will tell you whether rebelling against God or against your husband is the worse sin). And, and so she buries her frustration, confusion, feeling of being rushed and overwhelmed, and the fears, deeper and deeper, trying to keep the trashcan lid on the whole thing.

Am I making this up, or can this happen?

Betty, *clamping down on self* is itself *a form* of self.

For all our friends here, they need to work through some things, they may need to reach out for help: but the only help that is true is framing their lives by the shape of the cross.

CONCLUSION

How do we live with losing our selves? By realizing that real identity comes not through others recognizing us, or even recognizing ourselves in the mirror – but that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ himself knows *who* we are, and *where* we are and *what* we are now, and also what he is molding us to become: someone new and fresh and more usable to him. And he knows every hair on each of our heads and he knows exactly who we are in him.

II. Take up your cross and lose your family, your friends, your belongingness...

That is, when we put our shoulders under the cross of Jesus, and define discipleship the way he does, how will this affect the network of relationships with relatives and friends that we leave behind?

We will turn to our key texts:

Mark 8 records:

³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny him or herself and take up his or her cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

CALL TO FOLLOW CHRIST

It is best to render this text something like: “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce self”, to decisively renounce self, including every life ambition that arise from self, in order to be Jesus’s disciple. There is no benefit in losing your life, by the way – only if it is in Christ.

In Mark 10, Jesus goes on to apply this to a specific – and painful – area:

28 Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”

29 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel

30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

Jesus does not mean of course that leaving your family behind will earn you eternal life – plenty of people have done so, and not always for righteous motives. But he is developing what he said earlier in the chapter to the rich young ruler, who wanted eternal life but didn’t want to follow Jesus truly.

In Matthew and Luke there is a similar teaching. Matthew 10:37 has “Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” In Luke 14:26 we find the same statement, but Luke leaves unpolished it’s raw Middle Eastern edge: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.”

All of these texts apply to all Christians. But some of us missionaries experience these texts in a way that our friends back home do not.

THE CALL AND OUR FAMILY

Let’s take a closer look at the kinds of things do missionary disciples give up. Jesus gives us a list with seven elements:

home or house

brothers and sisters
 mother and father
 children
 fields (fields used for farming, or tillable land)

Now, the first rule of Bible study, read it in context. So, in the context of the rest of Mark 10? Yes, and that context is especially rich. But there's another lens, the context of culture. That is, we should read this as a list designed for the person of the 1st century.

I had read this passage for years, and missed out on those cultural issues. But a while ago I was teaching the course on New Testament background and its social structures, when suddenly, I got this nagging thought that there was an underlying pattern here that I had been missing: *Home, brothers and sisters, mother and father, children, fields...house, brothers and sisters, mother and father, children, fields.* What was the key?

And it suddenly hit me, that I had been reading this as a 21st century North American does. Our society is relatively fractured: we have an extended family scattered here, nuclear family there, church here – or we switch churches – social life there, work there – or we switch jobs or even careers – we travel thousands of miles a year, we change houses, the kids go off to college: the symbol of the American way of life is not a family dinner, it's a buffet.

But what about the disciples in the 1st century, how would they have heard this call? For the Twelve, “fields” was not simply a real estate investment; it defined their very identity, their connectedness. In the Law of Moses, the land was distributed among the 12 tribes, and then among clans and families; it was supposed to stay within the clan. If someone had to sell land, they should eventually have it back at the Jubilee or through redemption (think Ruth and Boaz). Your field symbolizes your ties to your clan.

And notice too, that Jesus makes reference to a multigenerational family, three generations under the roof of one house, with father and mother (grandparents), their sons, the sons' wives and children, so nieces and nephews. Your adult *sisters* would be living with their husbands' families, but within a few hundred meters at most. (Many Palestinians live that way today: every time another son gets married, they add a floor to the house.) For the men at least, you might live and die under the same roof where your mother gave you birth; so it's *that* house that Jesus is talking about.⁵

For the person in 1st century Israel, then, these seven elements aren't a list of detached items. They were parts of a complex of things, a *constellation*, not just a bunch of points of light.

⁵ We might mention that, the apostle Paul went out without a wife and family. In a sense, he left behind his spouse and kids behind by never having had them; maybe some of us today have done something similar.

In Latin America, by the way, one's place in an extended family is usually more important than what you're used to.

Now, if someone asks me, *Who are you*, I usually start by saying what I do. But, the apostle John might have said, *My identity is, I am John Zebedeeson, brother of James, here is our parcel of land allotted to us by Moses, we are of the clan such-and-such, of the tribe such-and-such, of the nation of Israel. This is who I am.*

And that's one reason why the Bible has so many genealogies. For most of us, we can't name our great-grandparents, let alone these other links. And people based their life choices in great part on, what brings shame or honor to my clan. That's why the older brother was so incensed in that parable: the younger brother had brought him, his father, his clan, into public shame. So, earlier in Mark's gospel, when Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James, and John to leave their nets behind, they were not heroes, there were turning their backs on families.

For a first-century disciple: following Jesus might mean getting ripped away from this tightly-woven network of extended family, tribe, and land. This is part of what Jesus meant by "renouncing your self".

By the way, let's remember that Jesus never asked us to do what he did not do himself, twice – leaving his Father in heaven; leaving Mary and his siblings and his home behind in Nazareth. And Jesus was not a stoic, it hurt him deeply both times.

A few months ago, I interacted online with a Christian man in India. He was looking for some advice about sexual temptation, and he said he wanted to get this cleared up before he got married – married to the bride that his family had arranged for him. My first reaction was, of course, *And what concern is it of theirs, who you marry?* If we have to make a choice between our own goals and ambitions and love interest, and what the family wants for us, we feel that our choices should be given more weight. At least this is what every Hollywood movie I've ever seen told me!

AMERICAN CULTURE

If we are from North America (or a place dominated by Western culture), whether we realize it or not, most of us value *individuality* and personal choices more than membership in a "tribe". To quote from an article by Allen McConnell: "When [Americans reflect] on the self, people often think about *distinguishing* themselves from others. In our culture in particular, *self-expression* is about trying to demonstrate one's uniqueness."⁶

WHAT WE LEAVE BEHIND

As humans, we have a need for what we can call "belongingness". Allen McConnell wrote: "despite this emphasis on making the self stand out from others, there is another element that exists between the self

⁶ Allen R. McConnell, "Belongingness: Essential Bridges that Support the Self," *Psychology Today* (Aug 1, 2013), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-social-self/201308/belongingness-essential-bridges-support-the-self>, emphasis added.

and others – belongingness. Here, the self seeks connectedness and harmony with others rather than distinctiveness and uniqueness...⁷ That is to say, there is an adhesion between us and some others.

And these other may be people we are biologically connected to or no.

Many of us, maybe the majority, have relationships with non-relatives that we highly value. We say: She is “like a mother”; he is my brother, she is my sister. Leave *home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for Christ and the gospel*. If we do this as missionaries in a foreign land it makes, I think, a snug fit with Jesus’s teaching here.

But what happens? Let’s say we unplug from our network, and later on we step back in. Even if you are gone for months or a year, you never quite get back into the rhythm with them. They cannot help it: your friends and family will move on without you, whether they know it or not, whether they fight it or not. And you will in the future miss private jokes, shared history, unforgettable parties, and trips.

If you have studied the history of missions, then you have a good idea of the hardships that people have faced in the past. In the 19th century, you would sail from England to China, knowing that quite possibly you will never return, never see your family again. Letters home, if you can manage it at all, might take months. I seriously admire that level of dedication, and when I see what some of my friends do in other countries today in the 21st century, I think, *Now those are the real missionaries!*

But let’s have none of this comparing and contrasting or shaming of what *you* do with what others have done in times past or in other places. God called you to do this thing, in this time, in this place, and he gives you the grace to be *this soldier*, not the grace you need to be Paul, or St Patrick, or Hudson Taylor, or Jim and Elizabeth Elliot.

And part of his grace to you will be coping with this disruption of your network of loved ones, biologically family, friends, belongingness.

This is a loss that is real and measurable.

Maybe you have a parent whose health isn’t so good, and you wrestle about whether you should be here at all. Maybe there are grandparents who are extremely let down that their grandchildren aren’t nearby. Maybe your dearest friend in the world, closer than a brother or sister, is in touch only electronically. In our case, we left behind our grandson who is now 2; if you take my meaning, that was a decision we made decades before he was born. When his father was 6 years old.

100-FOLD BLESSINGS

Let’s avoid this idea that, “Well, it will all even out in the end, that’s the circle of life.” In Christ, we follow a different path than just this common sense. Jesus said that “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a

⁷ Ibid.

hundred times as much in this present age.” In the ESV, “a hundredfold.” If the Lord said it, it’s a promise; in the KJV it is marked with, *Verily I say unto you*. So, you are 100-folders!

Pretty soon, you know, before you know it, you will be established missionaries. For someone who is just starting to think about missions, you will play the role of the wise veteran. I hope you will do what many people did for us, who when we were about to launch, said, *Go ahead and jump! We are waiting to catch you! Jump, we will catch you!*

BUT FOR TODAY, WHAT?

You probably already have some 100-fold anecdotes, and we could tell story after story.

For example, maybe you have had great friends, but you’ve never had “lay down your life” friends like you do now.

Who here has kids? The friends your kids have in school now, or in the AMCA Youth Group are very likely to be lifelong friends, and your kids will go through life with a whole slew of spiritual aunts and uncles, who would drop everything to help them out.

Peter said to Jesus, “We have left everything to follow you!” Jesus said, I’m telling you the truth: “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age” (Mark 10:29-30).

Jesus says this is the truth; yes, Lord, we believe.

Lost your family, your friends, your belongingness...No problem, Christ has it all in safekeeping

III. Take up your cross and lose your possessions and opportunities

The word, above all earthly powers
 No thanks to them – abideth.
 The Spirit and the gifts are ours
 Through him who with us sideth.
Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also
 The body they may kill,
 God’s truth abideth still.
 His Kingdom is forever.

Yesterday we spoke of what Luther called our *kindred* – our kin, our family, our dear friends, our belongingness. Today we will look at the *goods* – our present possessions and our lost opportunities.

Before our special paragraph in Mark 10, we have the set-up to understand Jesus’ words:

Mark 10¹⁷ As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good – except God alone.”¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.’”²⁰ “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”²² At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”²⁴ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”²⁶ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

²⁸ Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”

This young man *ran up*, optimistic about getting a positive, affirming answer; then he walked away, sad – one version (NRSV) even says, “he was shocked” – because his stuff was more important to him than eternal life. Let us beware of gripping on to our possessions.

Yesterday, and now, and again tomorrow, we’re tracing out some further specific implications of Christ’s call. Much of what we will say is what in logic is called an argument from the greater to the lesser: if it is true – as we said on Monday – that Christ calls on us to deny our whole lives, our selves; then it is also true, that he calls us to give up any part or section of our lives.

Let's reread Mark 10:28-31

Mark 10²⁸ Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!" ²⁹ "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel ³⁰ will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Jesus (and later Paul) used some traditional Jewish terms here: the rabbis divided human history into two periods: *olam hazzeh* and the *olam habbah*. They are this (present) age and the age to come. This present age is the age of sin, ruin, conflict, oppression. The age to come is Paradise, the life of the resurrected saints, and is partly parallel to the kingdom of God, as in Mark 10:24 – "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!"

WE HAVE TO SURRENDER THINGS

The Lord calls on us to surrender our things, our stuff, for the sake of the gospel. As we have said repeatedly, this is presented to us here as regular discipleship, normal Christian life, nothing unusual. But, being a missionary – that is, a disciple who happens also to be crossing borders of geography, language, and culture for the sake of the gospel – might mean a particular loss of possessions. These might be current possessions, or they could be potential future earnings.

Many Christians, when they buy a house, pray and dedicate that house to the Lord. But some of these same disciples are caught off guard when he in effect says, *Hey thanks for the house; I think I'll sell it*. Maybe we would like our surrender to be more spiritual and symbolic, less to do with the real world of real things or real estate.

In our case, in '94, after praying and scheming, we bought an old farmhouse that we'd had an eye on for a long time. A century earlier, they had cleared the adjoining field and made the house out of its timbers. I set myself up a woodshop. We modernized the kitchen, put in a dishwasher and redid the laundry room. My favorite part was, there was a glassed-in porch that overlooked the creek. The big field was still there for the kids and for the first time, we had lots of room for the six of us.

We owned it maybe 6 months something happened, a long story, when we suddenly realized that we might be called on to give it up for the gospel. We didn't have to then, but eventually we did have to.

OTHER, MORE ABSTRACT, POSSESSIONS

Surrender to Christ could also mean narrowing our options.

North American society is all about "choices". When we are in the States, my biggest culture shock is going to the grocery store and seeing those long aisles; your eye can follow the aisle

almost to the vanishing point on the horizon. Especially the salad dressing aisle. For a lark, I just looked up the Walmart website for salad dressings, and they had a whopping 923 different ones, not at one store of course, but they are available for delivery.⁸ It looked like a couple of hundred of them were variations on Ranch dressing. That's a lot of dressing on a lot of lettuce. *Well, I don't need 923 salad dressings, one might think, but I guess it's a comfort to know they're there!*

Once we choose to follow Christ's call to one location, we are closing off other options, and that makes North Americans feel a bit closed in.

And this brings us to a particular temptation. It's easy for the average Christian to rationalize: *I don't have a fancy house; a muscle car; the latest fashions; the gold and jewels. That kind of material stuff just doesn't interest me.* And so we look at the rich and famous and congratulate ourselves how grounded we are by contrast. The human soul seems to work this way, that we are have a craving to define ourselves in our own minds, to tell ourselves, this is the kind of person I am or am not. And very frequently we reach the conclusion that, whatever anyone else is doing, we are alright. But this is a dead end: the rich and famous are not our yardstick.

Jesus doesn't call on his disciples to give up stuff they don't have and probably will never have; he calls on us to loosen our grip on what *does* divert our attention from Christ. I think I can prove my point this way: I recall taking Introduction to Psychology years ago, and the teacher posed the question: *If you could have any amount of money, how much would you ask for? Jot it down, and turn it in.* Of course, my classmates named huge amounts. My answer was, *Not too much, just enough to live on.* And suddenly I was the center of attention for writing such a modest amount. Does this prove I had shaken off the bonds of materialism? I say, No! Another illustration: Last night there was a lottery drawing in the US, the Mega-Millions jackpot was worth \$1.6 billion. I have no interest in this kind of money, and I know myself enough to know why: because it would mean so much hassle! That's not deep spirituality on my part, it's just natural, human common sense. And so people we run into, if they are more sensible might not wish for \$1.6 billion, they would phrase their wish as: *I want just enough money to have no worries. I want the freedom to find my 'true purpose'. I want enough resources so that my work is not to just pay the bills, but to be personally meaningful.* Those are wishes I appreciate; thus these are the temptations I must turn my back on.

WHAT THINGS HAVE WE LOST?

When we give up possessions, it's not the literal price tag that matters, it's the price tag that our heart assigns a thing. To become a missionary, I gave up things that meant a lot to me: my favorite coffee shop, where everybody smiled and waved when I came in, but nobody interrupted me when I got out my laptop to write; I miss being able to do research in a top-notch library at a nearby seminary; I miss the County Theatre, the renovated movie palace where they show classic

⁸ https://www.walmart.com/browse/food/salad-dressings-toppings/976759_976786_1001365?max_price=20&page=1#searchProductResult

films on summer nights; I miss a culture where people are not daily tapping at my *portón* gate. I miss that I can say to myself on Wednesday that *I need to read this book*, and on Thursday Amazon drops it off. Every time October rolls around, I miss autumn in New England. These are things that are worth no more than, let's say, a few hundred dollars. Another person might not understand how valuable they were for me. But remember: it's not the object in itself, but what it represents to us; it doesn't have to be the One Ring of gold for it to be My Precious.

If we cling to our precious things, they will eventually break our heart. But our losses will lead to tremendous gain, because Jesus Christ himself said so. Let's look further in the Mark 10 passage. Jesus speaks very plainly: for his followers, no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.” That is, there is eternal reward; but there's also reward in this life along with the trouble (only Mark mentions the persecutions).

SO, SHOULD WE BE OPTIMISTIC ABOUT OUR LOSSES?

I want to back off and think about how our minds process our situations. Specifically, Is it true in Mark 10 that Christ is calling us away from pessimism to optimism? Is the cure to our loss as simple as saying, *Well, I guess the glass could be thought of as half full?* There are different *dichos* about whether you are an optimist or a pessimist:

- The optimist sees the doughnut; the pessimist the hole.
- The optimist admires the rose; the pessimist glares at the thorns.
- The pessimistic child looks under the Christmas tree and says, ‘All they got me was a pile of manure.’ The optimistic child looks at the same thing and says, ‘Oh boy, I'm getting a pony for Christmas!’

In Acts 16 – you know the passage – Paul and Silas cast a demon out of a fortunetelling slave girl, and for their troubles they are mobbed, beaten senseless, and thrown into prison.

If I had been in the Philippian dungeon, and Silas had turned to me and said, *Well, we just have to look at the bright side*, I would be tempted to punch him in the nose, that is, if my hands weren't chained up.

No, Paul and Silas weren't optimistic – they were *trusting*. Two different things. Optimism might deny reality; faith accepts reality and says, *But God is greater than this*.

In fact, part of God's work in us is to strip us of all illusion and rationalizing and to replace it with true faith in him. Optimism is just putting a positive spin on our circumstances, it's a *natural* human ability that some people are born with. But true joy is a *supernatural* ability, a spiritual and mental and psychological state, given by God's grace through the Spirit, a platform from which we interpret our life events from his perspective.

So, gloomy pessimism can lead to defeat, but sunny optimism can be just as toxic. The trick is to say, *Here is reality as God gives me the light to see that reality; now where do we go from here with trust in him?*

IT'S NOT A GIMMICK

Let's have a small footnote here: in the opinion of many, the most lethal false teaching in the church today goes like this: *if you have faith, you will be able to speak aloud what you want and it will surely come to pass*. Most people choose health and money. If you are going to be working in Latin America, it is saturated with this teaching. If that gospel were true, then logically speaking, Paul and Silas never should have landed in that dungeon, not if they had faith; and your kid should never get Zika or dengue; and your car should never break down. And in theory, you should be able to declare in faith, *I speak perfect Spanish!* And behold it would be so. But no! That's not really faith, it's some else that just happens to resemble faith.

There is no formula to prove that you are mathematically better off on the mission field than you were before, because this isn't one of those Ponzi schemes where you invest 1000 dollars and you get 2000 back: it's not a mechanism. It is a life of confidence in God.

CONCLUSION

And yet, it's the truth that we are and will be way better off: "we will not fail to receive a hundred-fold, that is, a hundred times as much *in this present age*." A hundred times as much! I can't get my mind around even ten times as much; or five times; or two times. If he had just said, "AS much," that would already have left me stunned. But there it is, we are 100-folders! in this life, because Jesus promises.

If it were the whole story, that we would be *in the end* rewarded many-fold, that would be just fine and more than a good deal, a great deal. But, above and beyond the end-time blessings, he smiles upon us right now. We could say that our future blessings are leaking into today; or we could say that today's blessings are but a glimpse of the future ones. But the current ones are already incredible, so what must the age to come hold for us? And as Luther say, *His kingdom is – will be – forever*.

Lost your possessions? Your opportunities? No problem, Christ as them in safekeeping.

IV. Take up your cross and lose your tongue

Our text in Mark 8 speaks of “he must deny him or herself” and “lose his life”. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that, “every Christian has his own cross waiting for him, a cross destined and appointed by God. Each must endure his allotted share of suffering and rejection. But each has a different form...”⁹ That doesn’t mean that language acquisition is our cross to bear, but we pick up our cross and find that language might be part of the mix.

The apostle Peter is our point of reference this week. Peter probably never had to learn a new language, he seems to have grown up with the Middle-Eastern language Aramaic and *Koiné* Greek. He preached in Greek on the Day of Pentecost, although I suspect over the years he needed to keep improving it.

LANGUAGES TODAY

In Paul’s day, the rabbis took a look at the list of nations in Genesis, and they stated that there were 70 nations in the world, then there must be 70 languages, no more and no less. They were way off, although given the data they had available, you could hardly blame them. So, a century ago, experts suggested that there were 1000 languages. The actual figure is that there are just over 7000 languages in the world today. Europeans and many others typically grow up with 2-3 languages – one of my colleagues at ESEPA is Dutch, he is quite fluent in English and Spanish, and he says he can do German if necessary. For Americans it’s usually not the case. That means to follow Christ across a border means we have an extra burden to bear.

Now, a few weeks ago, the *New Yorker* ran a fascinating article, “The Mystery of People who Speak Dozens of Languages: What can hyperpolyglots teach the rest of us?”¹⁰ It speaks of one man from Peru who has “a command of twenty-two living languages...He also knows six classical or endangered languages... [including] Selk’nam, an indigenous tongue of Tierra del Fuego, which was the subject of his master’s thesis.”

Well, I know the answer to the title, “What can hyperpolyglots teach *me*?” They teach me to be really, really annoyed at hyperpolyglots; I suppose that’s a valuable spiritual lesson.

But how about the rest of us?

LOSING OUR TONGUE

⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (2nd. ed.; London: SCM, 1959), 98-99.

¹⁰ Judith Thurman, “The Mystery of People who Speak Dozens of Languages. What can hyperpolyglots teach the rest of us?” *The New Yorker* (Sept 3, 2018). His languages are Spanish, Italian, Piedmontese, English, Mandarin, French, Esperanto, Portuguese, Romanian, Quechua, Shawi, Aymara, German, Dutch, Catalan, Russian, Hakka Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Guarani, Farsi, and Serbian; Latin, Ancient Greek, Biblical Hebrew, Shiwilu, Muniche [both from Peru], and Selk’nam.

In New England one of the legends of winter is that if you lick a pump handle or flagpole, your tongue will instantly freeze to it; everyone probably knows about this from that Christmas movie. A friend of mine, as a kid, was waiting for the school bus and he decided to lick the mailbox handle to see if the legend were true. It was; the bus came along, and the driver began yelling and honking, and in a panic, he tore himself away – with most of his tongue still intact. “What’s the matter, cat got your tongue?” “*A mailbox.*”

Then there’s a nightmare that probably everyone has: the one where you want to cry for help, but you open your mouth, and nothing comes out.

Or if this works better for you, try to imagine Darth Vader running a galactic empire with a halting, hesitant voice. “Um, let’s like, we’re are wiping out, no, will wipe out that rebel *alianza*, so, now *vámonos!*”

ILE has a whole treasury of legends of people going wrong in Spanish. You all know, I suppose, about how the guy said he made his friend’s wife *embarazada*. I am guessing it’s an urban legend; it always happened to a guy “a few years ago”, but the story has been circulating for at least 20 years. But one of my favorite goofs is, when the waiter asks me how I want my meat cooked, my instant reaction is to convert it literally to *medio rara*. No, it’s *medio roja*. I want my burger medium rare, not semi-weird.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND THE CROSS

Your first language is a huge part of who you are. In English you’re witty, expressive, articulate; in Spanish you will probably always be, let’s say, *medio-choppy*. In English you’re a regular Oscar Wilde: “My dear man, experience is simply the name we give our mistakes!” but in Spanish you’re that guy who says, “Mai, este...mmmm...parece que he metido la pata.”

That is, this might be a fitting application:

Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If any want to follow me, they must renounce their lives, including if necessary, their assured and self-sufficient ability to express themselves verbally.”

It also probably means – and there are several schools of thought on this point – that when you think in another language, your way of perceiving the world will change. The Czech proverb say, “Learn a new language and get a new soul.” Well, when I hear that, I think, “But I don’t *want* a new soul!”

What happens when you can’t speak the language where you are? As we have seen all week, there is a loss of identity and dignity and status which is very much like a loss of adulthood. Like a small child you keep asking what things are called; and like a child you laugh when they laugh, because you know that’s what you do, not because you got the joke.

PAUL

We spoke about Peter; the apostle Paul also makes an interesting case study. The NT explicitly says that he communicated in two languages: like Peter, Aramaic and Greek. But additionally, as a Roman citizen he almost certainly knew some Latin.

Now, Paul clocked up maybe 10,000 miles on foot or by sea. By my calculation, Paul in theory could have communicated the gospel to over 1/4 of the global population of his day, without going beyond these three languages he grew up with. Let's remember that factoid when someone tries to tell you, "Hey the apostle Paul didn't waste the Lord's time in language school!"

LANGUAGE IN PRACTICAL TERMS

I love the English language, to read it, to write it. I write a lot of non-fiction and a bit of fiction. And putting that aside to work in Spanish is part of losing my life, my person. I don't know about your ministries, but mine is almost completely verbal, whether it be speaking, listening, mentoring, reading, committee meetings, teaching, or writing.

At ESEPA my classes run 4 hours, with two half-hour breaks. My first year of teaching full-time, I would come home and go straight to bed, to sleep for a few hours. Teaching in a second language is like trying to run laps in waist-high water. I also teach Greek and Greek exegesis, so there I'm working in two foreign languages. As a professor there are only so many times I can use the word "*chunche*".

AN ASIDE ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING

Can I add something here? If you are serious about serving the Lord in Spanish, then invest heavily and early in Spanish learning, you'll be glad later. I know, people are impatient back home, people in your future field are crying out for you to come *right away*.

Why limp along for the next, what, how many years? when you can walk. My advice is think in the long term: don't spend a shortened time here, move to the field, then have to leave the field to come back to Costa Rica, then return to your field, it's a lot of uprooting.

The Lord is never impatient, and besides, his future job for you can await your arrival a few extra months.

LOSE YOUR TONGUE TO FIND IT AGAIN

Lose your life to find it in our case will mean, lose your tongue to find it again. Más o menos.

When Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" in chapter 8, he had already demonstrated something in Mark 7, a miracle found only in Mark's gospel –

Mark 7:32 They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. 33 He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. 34 Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." 35

And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly [or, clearly].

Lose your tongue to find it again. And I can pledge to you, if it hasn't happened already, it will very soon: that you will be speaking to someone in Spanish about what *el Señor Jesucristo* has done for you, and the person will begin to nod and will say, *¡Sí, entiendo!*

Christ who made a man talk is the same Christ who tells us, *lose your speech for me and the gospel, I have it under control*. He can make you too speak, if not beautifully, but like the man in Mark 7, “clearly” enough.

Lose your tongue? No problem! Christ has it too in safekeeping.

V. Take up your cross and lose your self only to find it again in him

Mark 8³⁴ Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ³⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.”

Mark 10

28 Peter said to him, “We have left everything to follow you!”

29 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel

30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

INTRODUCTION: JESUS IS NOT A CULT LEADER

Jesus demanded that we follow him, and that we lose our lives for him and for the sake of his gospel.

Of course, history tells us: beware when you are invited to join a religious group, and they keep putting more and more pressure on you to turn over control of your property, to lose your personal identity, to yield your power to make decisions, to obey the leader without question; to get loyalty to the leader and loyalty to God all mixed up. You have run across a cult; run, don't walk to the nearest exit.

But then, of course, we have our leader, Jesus Christ, who makes extreme claims: that faithfulness to God is measured in your loyalty to him; that to glorify him is to glorify God.

This why I am baffled when people say, *Jesus? He was a good man!* that is, just a good man. No, if he were not who he claimed to be, but went around breaking up families and demanding complete servitude to him; well, I'm sorry, if he is not the Son of God, then he was the most despicable breed of cult leader.

But since he is the Son of God, we take him most seriously. And we take him at his word that if we lose our lives for him, we will find them again; and receive 100 times as much even in this present age.

JESUS PROMISES MORE THAN HE TAKES

We have said that Christianity is not Buddhism, nor is Jesus a grim, demanding master who wants to see us slogging through life with gritted teeth.

When you are talking about this theme, a C. S. Lewis quote is nearly mandatory:

The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and to take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire.¹¹

That is, lose your life, to find it! Lose everything, Jesus tells you, is happy to inform you, and you'll get it back a hundred times over, and eternal life!

For that and other reasons, taking up our cross is not a favor we do for God; the cross is a gift of God's grace, he favors us by giving us this invitation.

Lewis again:

...if we consider the unblushing [unapologetic] promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak.¹²

Now, after seeing many wannabe disciples drop out, Peter says, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." (NRSV) When Peter made this comment, Jesus put it in perspective, but he didn't say, "Oh don't be such a baby!" Our Lord does not tease us or minimize our feelings of loss. He didn't tell Peter the maxim about, "I cried because I had no shoes, until I met a man who had no feet." The Christian gospel says that when you have to say goodbye to your *cat* for Christ, and it cuts like a knife, then you go and tell your sympathetic High Priest.

We've been spending a few minutes this week on Mark, with its themes of losing your self, your identity, your identity; losing your family, friends, belongingness; losing your possessions and your possibilities; losing your tongue; and you'll lose a hundred other things, most likely.

Now, as we pull things to an end, let me leave you with two warnings and then we will turn our eyes back on Christ.

SOME WARNINGS

First: it's a mistake to look at this call of Christ and try your best to work up enough courage to accept it. It is your job to ask God for courage, not to try to make yourself feel brave.

A second warning, for when over time you get the hang of this missionary thing. Let's not congratulate ourselves on how sacrificial we've been.

¹¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, originally preached in 1942.

¹² Ibid.

And that leads to a third warning: Part of your spiritual discipline is to know who you are, and who you are not. To not “think of yourself more highly than you ought” (Rom 12:3), but it’s also true, “not more lowly than you ought” – rather, Paul prescribes, “think of yourself with sober judgment.” False pride and false humility have this in common: they are both false.

LET’S THINK OF ABUNDANT GRACE

Another anecdote, one which I think reveals something amazing about how God treats us during this age of the 100-fold blessings.

During our deputation, I learned a lesson: long story short, I realized that the Father, the Almighty God, beyond running the universe, managing each subatomic particle in, at last count, 100 billion galaxies, calling people to faith, redeeming the bride of Christ, establishing his kingdom, hearing billions of prayers, and still, he took the trouble to ease my children’s transition to the mission field? See, God is not some heavenly accountant, who just makes sure we get back our 100-fold in the “gains” column; he shows personal and unpredictable kindness to us all, and beyond measure.

Don’t deny your losses exist. Feel your losses, grieve your losses. You’re not dead sacrifices, you’re living sacrifices, right? But for every measure of loss you feel, throw in measures of gratitude for what you now have.

A GOOD MEASURE, PRESSED DOWN, SHAKEN TOGETHER AND RUNNING OVER

Jesus said: “You will receive a hundred times as much in this present age and in the age to come, eternal life.”

That makes me think of another promise –

Genesis 15:18 – On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the River of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.”

And it turned out that the seed of Abraham, by faith,¹³ will inherit not just that strip of land, but all the Middle East, all of Asia, all the planet, all creation.

The Lord Jesus told us that even in our dealings with other human beings we must be generous; he uses the image of a jar that you just jam full of grain at the local *feria*:

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:38)

¹³ Romans 4:12 – And [Abraham] is then also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also follow in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

If that is the generosity he demands we show toward others, imagine how he follows the same policy with us: “A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap.”

When Paul tries to describe God’s generosity to us, he has this tendency to stumble over the words. Not even Paul can get his head around this:

Rom 8:18 – I consider that our present sufferings are (less than? No!) *not worth comparing with* the glory that will be revealed in us.

Rom 8:37 – No, in all these things we are (conquerors?) *more than conquerors* through him who loved us.

And when he praises God in Ephesians, he can barely get it out:

Eph 3:20 – Now to Him who is able (to bless us? To bless us abundantly? To bless us really abundantly? To bless us as far as we can imagine? No!) able to do *exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us*

God did not give his Son just to spring us out of hell, but to give us that kind of life abundant in this age, and eternal life in the age to come.

One of the strongest human instincts is self-preservation. If you are struggling in the ocean, and someone swims out to save you, your instinct to go on living will be so strong that you will almost certainly panic, even to the point of drowning your rescuer. But with our savior, we rest, we relax, we willingly *lose* our lives in his hands.

And now, when we apply this truth to being disciples, especially disciple-missionaries, God is saying, *In this new step in your life, can you not trust me once again?* And if you cannot, or will not, can you at least say to the Lord, *I want to have that level of confidence in you but I can’t seem to muster it up – so will you re-write me, will you transform me?* That is what pleases God: not our promises to try to do better, but a prayer that he make us over.

CONCLUSION

Once more, Peter, say it again! “We have left everything to follow you!” Yes, Peter, that’s right! And we will do that too, we will follow the Lord who went to the cross for us. Let’s take up the cross as well; let’s lose our life to find it; loose the hold on our stuff; loosen our grip on our human connections; allow ourselves to stutter in Spanish, and all willingly, happily! The Lord will see that every loss will turn up again!

Multiplied over and over, 100 times more, pressed down, shaken together and running over, a cascade of blessings, so much poured out you cannot begin to gather it in, exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, and all that, not even worth beginning to try to compare with the infinite multiplication in the kingdom come!

Lost your Life? No problem, Christ has it in safekeeping!