

# Explore the Bible: Loyal?

April 26, 2017

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 14 focuses on Matthew 26:63-75.*

It is virtually impossible to turn on the television these days without seeing an insurance commercial for our cars, our homes, our health and even our lives. Of course, insurance has been in existence in one form or another since at least the 3rd century B.C. Insurance is an economic means of spreading out the risk of loss for one among many.

These days, the insurance industry is proving to be a very competitive and potentially lucrative industry perhaps because there has never been a more risk-averse generation than ours. It seems that lurking beneath the surface is the human obsession with avoiding risk altogether or minimizing it to the greatest extent possible.

Yet, there is no such thing as a risk-free life. To live is to take risks. The only question is which risks we are willing to take and which we tend to avoid at all costs.

## **The Way of the Cross**

Jesus didn't pull any punches when he told his disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). We tend to make the Christian life sound more attractive than Jesus did in order to attract more converts.

Jesus did promise abundance of life (John 10:10). Sadly, we are the ones who too often interpret "abundance" through the prism of American post-WWII prosperity and upward mobility. By "abundance," Jesus meant purpose and even eternal life. He then told anyone willing to listen that experiencing abundance would demand following Jesus on the pathway of

self-denial, self-sacrifice and a willingness to risk everything for his sake.

To promise a potential or longtime Christian convert good health and material over-abundance as a reward for faith is to profane the gospel and mock the example of Jesus' life. The church is growing faster in the Third World than anywhere else on the planet. Many converts in those parts of the globe live at risk every day of their lives and usually on the edge of starvation, not to mention shorter lifespans and epidemic-level deaths of infants. We're too obsessed with promises Jesus never made.

It would be interesting to discover why, in the part of the world most materially deprived, the gospel is gaining great progress, whereas in the wealthiest parts of the world, mainline denominational congregations are declining at record speed.

### **An unexamined life and failure to count the cost**

Nonetheless, having promised and warned his disciples about the risk factor of being a Jesus follower, we find Peter following Jesus to his trial but only at a perceived safe distance (Matthew 26:58). He soon discovered there is no shadow long enough to cover those who cower at the cost of faith. All of Jesus' talk about a willingness to risk one's life to follow him was about to come into clear, sharp relief for Peter in a moment of bitter grief he never could have imagined when he denied Jesus.

Even after all these years of seeking to discover the meaning of following Jesus, when something painful happens, I still find myself what I have done wrong or what I've done to disappoint God. In fact, by Jesus' definition, if life has become difficult and too risky or extremely costly, it may be because we are actually doing something right.

Parents and grandparents should take heed from Jesus as we pray for our children and grandchildren. We should not pray that they have easy lives but good lives, not lives of material wealth but of clear and meaningful

spiritual purpose as modeled by Jesus.

Peter had done what we all tend to do. He overcommitted, made a promise to Jesus before he carefully examined what keeping that promise would cost him. Upon completing his third denial, as he heard the sunrise crowing of the cock, he came face-to-face with his own unexamined life.

From my vantage point, I'm given pause to wonder if that may be at the root of our denominational decline, even as our prosperity continues to grow exponentially. We too often live unexamined lives. We don't stop to ask what it means to follow Jesus, no matter what the risk and whether we're truly willing to take that risk.

### **No one-size-fits-all cross**

There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all cross. The cross, as Jesus explained it, means whatever following Jesus will uniquely cost each of us. It takes years, even decades, sometimes our entire lives, to finally discover what our "cross" might actually involve. A sincere search for its meaning will bring it into sharper focus with each step of the journey.

Coming with each step, sincere followers of Jesus also will confront the question of whether they are willing to pay the price of picking up the cross that is theirs, even when there is no insurance safety net beneath them other than the promise of Jesus: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

It will be then, like Peter in the courtyard, when we discover whether we've truly meant it when, all these years, we sang, "I have decided to follow Jesus."

Loyalty is not a promise we make. It's the life we live—or not.

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