

Love Costs

Jim Elliott was a brilliant young man who surrendered his life to go into the mission field of Ecuador in South America. With four other young men, he undertook this massive task to reach the unreached. One of the men was a pilot with Mission Aviation Fellowship. With some clever flying, they were able to make contact with the Auca Indians without actually landing.

After some time, and what seemed to be clear indications of a positive welcome by the tribe, they decided to land on a beach by the jungle river. Within 24 hours, the Auca Indians had killed all five of them. Jim Elliott died a martyr for the Gospel. But it was Elliott who said these words: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose."

Now that's a mouthful. The one who gives up what he cannot lose, in order to gain what he can never lose, is wise. What does this statement mean? It sums up the heart of sacrificial love in God's kingdom. It could well be the mission statement of missions itself.

Jim Elliott understood that if he gave up things in this life that were temporary anyway – comforts, health, reputation, even physical life – to gain what would be eternal – rewards in heaven, that the trade was a good one. Jim Elliott was not a fool who sought to give up good things for lesser things, simply because it seemed noble. No, he was committed to gaining – to receiving the very best outcome of how he spent his life.

Indeed, any man who lives otherwise is untrue to his own self: he is a liar, he has a divided heart. How could Jim Elliott have truly gained, though, if he ended up losing everything in a South American jungle? How does that work out? The answer lies in Christ's words in the gospels of Matthew and John:

*For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.
For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*

Matthew 16:25-26

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

John 12:25

Now don't miss an apparent paradox in these statements. God is telling us that the one who loves his life selfishly in this world, will lose it all, and the one who rejects a selfish life and is willing to lose it, will gain it all. Realise what God is using as a motivation here. God is appealing to our innate human desire to seek our own welfare and joy. He is saying that there is nothing wrong with wanting the best possible outcome.

But God knows that the best possible outcome is being willing to give up a selfish life here, and embracing all that He promises to be for us. See, God is not ashamed to offer us in His words, 'advantage, gain, profit.' This is not the talk of the health, wealth and prosperity gospel. This is simply God calling upon a human to do the best possible thing to fulfil His design instructions: give up the foolish quests of life on earth that disbelieves in the eternal, and be willing to rather seek an eternity of pleasure in God.

God is not telling us to deny ourselves as an end in itself. He is telling us to deny ourselves the lesser to receive the greater. God wants us to know that the kind of life which will glorify Him will cost. It will be one of giving things up. It will involve pain and separation. However, Jim Elliott was really re-phrasing Christ's words – if you give up what cannot be kept anyway, to gain what you can never lose, you have not truly lost, you have gained.

In fact, you have made a profit. You traded in the two-bit pleasures of sin for the surpassing excellency of the knowledge of Christ. You gave up on the immature ambitions of fame, fortune, homely comforts and sensuality, and set your heart on the highest ambition – that you may win Christ. It is gain when we give up all to seek to gain Christ. These are the very words of Paul:

But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.

Philippians 3:7-8

So the truth behind the universe is this: the one who seeks meaning and joy is not sinning. They are following their heart's design. But if they seek it in this world alone, existing in unbelief and rejection of Christ – they ironically lose everything, even if they manage to inherit the entire earth – for once they are dead, they have no claim on what they had in life.

But the one who seeks joy and meaning and is persuaded it is found in Jesus Christ – though they give up literally everything in their pursuit of Jesus, they gain it all. Because if Jesus is alive on earth, such a person tastes the sweetness of Christ here; and if they die, their fellowship with Christ continues unbroken, and perfected:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.

Philippians 1:21-24

Paul realised there was really no way to lose, since Christ was his chief joy. Christ's presence is in this world and the next, and once Christ is yours, and you are His by faith in Him, then there is no parting. Death does not separate you from Christ like it will separate you from your bank account, from your wife, husband, or children, from your position in society, from your house, car, gadgets, assets and accessories.

So the one who gives up all to follow Christ, does not lose it all; they gain it all, because Christ is all. Such an one does not give it up grimly, devoted to duty, hoping to have their name honoured in the Sacrificial Hall of Fame – no: they give up what they cannot keep, to gain what they cannot lose. They are wise. See, a sacrifice is noble not because sacrifice is an end in itself. It is noble when you give up what is valuable to gain what is even more precious.

If a man gives up his family to go mountain climbing – that is not noble. He gave up the better for the lesser. If a mother gives up her children to run off with a rich man – that is not a worthy sacrifice. If a man gives up an opportunity to serve in church because his golf club plays on Sunday – that is not a worthy sacrifice.

A sacrifice is noble because you give up what is precious to gain what is even *more* valuable. Thus, since God is the most valuable one of all, there is literally nothing we have or can have worth more than Him, or worth hanging onto instead of Him. To give up God to gain earthly things is the worst sacrifice of all – and yet that is the decision that the majority of the human race makes by rejecting Jesus Christ. To give up everything to seek Christ, is the wisest thing of all.

God has set the world up in a way that the pursuit of Him will involve sacrifice. Gaining Christ involves suffering loss. Knowing Christ joyfully and meaningfully requires giving up other things often enough. We find the reason for this illustrated for us in the incident of God requiring Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

Genesis 22:1-2

Notice the Bible gives the explanation of what God was doing. The word tempt means test. God was testing Abraham. What was He testing Abraham for? To see if Abraham loved God more than anything else. Our true affections are tested by obedience – what we do, and God wanted to test if Abraham was willing to give up Isaac in his pursuit of God.

Why does God test people? Doesn't He know everything? He does – He knew what was in the heart of Abraham. But *Abraham* didn't fully know what was in the heart of Abraham. Abraham knew that he loved God. Abraham also knew that he loved Isaac. The child of promise. On Isaac rested his hopes and dreams. As he looked at Isaac, he saw God's promises in the flesh – a physical manifestation of God's faithfulness.

Isaac was the son of Abraham's old age – raised on a lap over 100 years old. I'm sure his heart had grown increasingly intertwined with that of his only son. Indeed, God goes out of His way to comment on Abraham's affection for his son: *"take now your son – your only son, whom you love."* God is emphasising the price of the command that He's calling Abraham to obey. This is dear to Abraham. It is the closest thing to his heart. Indeed, it is probably bordering on a dangerous love.

This is why God steps in to test Abraham. Not because He does not know if Abraham loves God more than Isaac, but because Abraham needs to prove to *himself* that he loves God more than Isaac. For God to have left Abraham would be to allow the deceitful heart to grow an idol, while maintaining an outward show of God-worship. This is the same reason God uses sacrifice with us. We are eager to worship God with our lips, to proclaim Him as our first love in our speech – but if God puts His finger on what is dear to us, we squirm.

You will only know the depth of our love for God if it costs you – if it pushes through your comfort zone, if it breaks out of the circle of self loving self, for self's sake. God seeks sacrifices from us not because He needs them, but to purify our hearts from the things that divide them. God wants us to have the unpolluted joy of loving God with our whole heart, and that sometimes means the painful spiritual surgery of removing something in our life that we love more than God.

With some imagination we can picture the scene between verses 2 and 3. What wrestling must have taken place that night under the stars as Abraham tried to reconcile the promises of God to bless him through Isaac with this new command to sacrifice his son. How he must have gone back and forth. He knew God hated child sacrifice, but he knew God loved obedience. He knew God could never lie, and would perform his promises, but how could that be if the child of promise was dead? Hebrews 11 has the answer:

By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, that in Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.

Hebrews 11:17-19

While the great old saint did not get it right with regard to God's method, he did get it right about God's heart and nature. God performs His word – He keeps His promises, He works for our good.

And so, the next day, as terribly sacrificial as the deed seemed, we read that *“Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him” (Genesis 22:3).*

Abraham’s decision to sacrifice and to give up what was dearest to Him was rooted in faith. No man makes progress in love towards God without faith. You cannot love and treasure the invisible without faith. You cannot work towards an eternity that is in the future beyond this life, without faith. Abraham embraced the future promises of God as satisfactory for present-tense action.

No person has made a true sacrifice for the kingdom of God without looking forward to God’s future promises. To purify your heart of idols, you need to embrace by faith all that God says He will be for us in Christ, and obey. Give up what needs to be given up, believing the promise of God that it will gain Christ, which is unspeakably more precious.

Abraham and Isaac take their journey, and eventually reach the place. Isaac asks, ‘Father, I see the wood and the fire, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ How those words must have stabbed into Abraham’s heart! He replies gently, ‘My son, God will provide Himself a lamb.’ What a testimony to this man – down to the last minute, his trust in God’s goodness is unwavering. God will provide, says Abraham. Even though he is about to kill his son, he feels it necessary to continue discipling his son in the ways of God.

Then in the passage we read: *“And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son” (Genesis 22:9-10).*

Scripture spares us the emotional agony of what happened here. What was Isaac’s reaction when he realised *he* was the burnt offering? What was Abraham’s reaction if his son began to scream and struggle and regard his father as a murderer? We are not told. We can only imagine the agony of Abraham. But Abraham’s life’s philosophy was thus: trusting God in obedience always works things out for the best.

God allowed Abraham to go to the point where there was no turning back – where his commitment was absolute. True faith is built upon the kind of sacrifice that does not have back-up plans, emergency escape hatchets, or other crutches to lean on, should God fail. No, true faith totally disregards the notion of God failing or being unable to provide, and pushes through to a place of no turning back.

And the angel of the LORD called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.

Genesis 22:11-12

God says in effect: ‘Don’t kill him, Abraham. You have proved the content of your heart to yourself. You have removed Isaac from the throne of your heart, and made sure that I alone sit there. Now, you can take him back, safe and sound.’ Here’s the remarkable thing about the heart of God. God had every right to demand that Abraham love Him more than Isaac, because He was far more worthy than Isaac. But listen to the kind and gracious heart of God:

By Myself I have sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed My voice.

Genesis 22:11-12

In his book *The Pursuit of God*, A.W. Tozer put it like this:

The old man of God lifted his head to respond to the Voice, and stood there on the mount strong and pure and grand, a man marked out by the Lord for special treatment, a friend and favourite of the Most High. Now he was a man wholly surrendered, a man utterly obedient, a man who possessed nothing. He had concentrated his all in the person of his dear son, and God had taken it from him. God could have begun out on the margin of Abraham's life and worked inward to the centre; He chose rather to cut quickly to the heart and have it over in one sharp act of separation. In dealing thus, He practiced an economy of means and time. It hurt cruelly, but it was effective.

Abraham was now, in a sense, totally poor and totally rich at the same time. The last possible place of competition to God in his heart had been removed. He was totally surrendered. He had given up what was most precious to him, and yet he had gained it all. He had given what he could never keep – Isaac, to gain what he could never lose – the reward of God. And this is the beauty of sacrifice in the name of God. You never ultimately lose. You never come away from it saying, 'well, God owes me!' God is no man's debtor.

Anyone who gives to God gives the very things God has supplied: *"For who maketh thee to differ from another? and what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" (1 Corinthians 4:7-10)*. The more you give to God, in effect, the more in debt you become to Him. No, sacrifice to God is not so that God will pay you back. It is to find the fullest possible experience of God while in this mortal body.

Sacrifice to God is God emptying your heart of His gifts that have become idols. Again, A.W. Tozer puts it well: *"We are often hindered from giving up our treasures to the Lord out of fear for their safety; this is especially true when those treasures are loved relatives and friends. But we need have no such fears. Our Lord came not to destroy but to save. Everything is safe which we commit to Him, and nothing is really safe which is not so committed."*

Indeed, anything that competes with a Jealous God is truly in an extremely precarious position. Why does God include loss on this path of knowing Him? Very simply – He wants to show that His worth far surpasses all the things we cling to. God wants to strip us of the things that we make into gods, to show us that they were never truly satisfying in and of themselves, and never meant to be enjoyed as a substitute for God, but rather as a pointer to God. He wants to replace them with Himself.

The only way that can be done though, is to call us to give them up. In so doing, God achieves two aims in one fell swoop – He displays that He is most excellent – more satisfying than the things that became our first loves; and He gives us the opportunity to experience the exhilaration of loving Him with all our heart. When God gives us the chance to sacrifice for Him – it is not because He somehow needs those sacrifices to complete Him. He states He does not:

I will not reprove thee for thy sacrifices or thy burnt offerings, to have been continually before me. I will take no bullock out of thy house, nor he goats out of thy folds. For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof.

Psalms 50:8-12

God says, 'Bringing animal sacrifices does not meet My needs. I own everything. It's not like I am hungry, and you are feeding Me. I do not request animal sacrifices to meet My needs – they are there to meet *yours!*' And to us, it is exactly the same. God is not requesting sacrifice that gives up all to follow Christ because He needs it – it is because He wants to give us the fullest possible experience of Himself. He wants us to

experience the joy of love like in **John 3:16**: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.”* Did you ever think that the greatest commandment of all – to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength – is not there to meet God’s needs – it is there to meet yours? In loving God in such a way – you are the happiest, most joyful, most satisfied person on earth. And in this way – God is glorified. God being glorified, and you being totally delighted in God, are not two different things – they are one.

Consider God’s words in **Deuteronomy 32:39**: *“O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep all my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!”* That it might be well with them! To have a heart totally given over to God – what the Bible calls loving God with all your heart, or your whole heart, a united heart – will make it well with *you*.

Truly, you will reach the highest peaks of God’s intention for a human being if you pursue God with all your heart. Being willing to forsake all else to gain Christ is an unspeakably joyful life. God making sacrifice a part of the path was a gift to Abraham – and it is a gift to us. It frees us from allegiance to unworthy things, and gives us the soaring experience of loving God above all else.

Certainly there was deep pain and reluctance in Abraham’s heart, like there is in ours when God calls us to give up a cherished thing in our lives. But once relinquished – the battle is over, and joyful peace floods the soul. There is at once the unequalled pleasure of loving God with all the heart – with no rivals, with no competitors. There is the knowledge that the thing surrendered is only now truly safe.

Thus we can now see the wisdom of Jim Elliott’s words: He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose. How sad that so many people get it backwards. We seek to gain what we can never keep, and we refuse and give up what we could never lose – Christ and eternal rewards. May we trust Christ when He says that a man who gains the whole world, but loses his soul – has lost, and may we trust the Word when it says giving up all for Christ – is matchless gain.