

Counting the Known (and Unknown) Costs of Discipleship

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Thirty-three years ago, I attended my first BYU devotional as an eighteen-year-old freshman. Having grown up in Southern California, I was thrilled to be living in Provo, where Ty Detmer was a football star and there were Latter-day Saint dating options everywhere! Life, including the gospel, seemed pretty straightforward. That year many of the BYU devotional speakers addressed profound religious doctrines. Although I understood these doctrines in the general sense, I had not yet had much meaningful experience with them. A full-time mission and temple marriage seemed far in the future.

Over the past three decades, I have learned a great deal about deeper doctrines by experiencing a conversion to Christ and making covenants with Him. Nevertheless, there are things I wish I would have known when I was your age that might have helped me in the years ahead. Wherever we are on the covenant path, we face spiritual crossroads with profound consequences.

This morning I have titled my remarks “Counting the Known (and Unknown) Costs of Discipleship.” My thesis is simple: Despite the escalating costs of Christian discipleship, the blessings that come from complete and total consecration are worth it! All of us are here today because someone—maybe even you—set aside the things of the world, counted the costs of discipleship, and paid both known and unknown costs to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. But that legacy requires continual renewal. The spiritual stakes are so much higher than I appreciated when I was sitting in your seat. Your choices today will profoundly shape the contours of your own future and those of your posterity.

Counting the Known and Unknown Costs

In chapter 14 of the Gospel of Luke, the Savior shared a parable with His would-be disciples that is sometimes titled “Counting the Cost”¹ in biblical commentaries:

Reid L. Neilson, BYU assistant academic vice president, delivered this devotional address on August 8, 2023.

For which of you intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have money to finish his work?

Lest, unhappily, after he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish his work, all who behold, begin to mock him,

Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish. And this he said, signifying there should not any man follow him, unless he was able to continue. . . .

So likewise, whosoever of you forsaketh not all that he hath he cannot be my disciple.²

The parable counsels people “to count well the cost”³ before entering into the Savior’s service. John Taylor, the third president of the Church, likened this parable to his own discipleship:

When I first entered [the Church], I did it with my eyes open. I counted the cost. I looked upon it as a life-long labor, and I considered that I was not only enlisted for time, but for eternity also.⁴

Like President Taylor, we are invited to count the costs before we follow Jesus Christ so that our conversion may endure. Covenants, especially those made in holy temples, help us chart our discipleship over time. In the temple endowment, we covenant to “obey the law of sacrifice, which means sacrificing to support the Lord’s work and repenting with a broken heart and contrite spirit.”⁵ We also covenant, according to the Church’s *General Handbook*, to

keep the law of consecration, which means that members dedicate their time, talents, and everything with which the Lord has blessed them to building up Jesus Christ’s Church on the earth.⁶

I made these temple covenants at age nineteen. To the best of my youthful understanding, I had counted the costs of Christian discipleship and was eager to pay the price. In hindsight, however, I have come to appreciate how little I then understood both the demands and the blessings of discipleship. How do the spiritual concepts of sacrifice and consecration differ? Jesus’s parable suggests that we sacrifice things that are *known* to us (a lower law) while we consecrate things that

are both *known* and *unknown* (a higher law)—in other words, anything the Lord asks of us.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spoke of the challenge of Christian consecration at the funeral of a young father named Joe Clark, who suffered for years from quadriplegic paralysis brought on by a brain virus:

There are in the gospel warm and cuddly doctrines, and then there are some that are just outright wintry doctrines. . . . We avert our gaze [from the wintry doctrines], because we don’t wish to contemplate them. One of them, frankly, is that we cannot approach the consecration that Joe has achieved without passing through appropriate clinical experiences [because we don’t achieve consecration] in the abstract.⁷

“Wintry doctrines” often accompany Christian consecration and reveal its heretofore unknown costs. I have learned that the Lord doesn’t necessarily want our time, talents, and earthly possessions; He wants our hearts, minds, and wills because His infinite wisdom allows Him to do so much more with them than we can ourselves. He also seeks to maximize our blessings as we follow Him. Our willingness to consecrate these intangibles indicates how firmly planted our feet are on the pathway of discipleship.

The Apostle Peter and the Increasing Costs of Discipleship

During our study of the New Testament this year, I have been inspired by the ministry of the apostle Peter. His life helps us understand the known and unknown costs of discipleship. Consider his initial eagerness to follow the Savior:

And Jesus, walking by the sea of Galilee, saw two brethren, Simon called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea: for they were fishers.

And he saith unto them, Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

And they straightway left their nets, and followed him.⁸

I deeply admire the faith of these two fishermen who *immediately* heeded the Savior’s call.

They were willing to sacrifice financial gain—the known costs—to become His disciples. At this early moment of decision, however, did Peter appreciate the unknown costs of discipleship? It is doubtful he anticipated crucifixion as a Christian martyr in Rome. As with each of us, Peter’s discipleship matured over time.

Jesus later asked probing questions of Peter and his fellow disciples. Four of these questions help us better appreciate the increasing costs of discipleship.

Question 1: “Wherefore Didst Thou Doubt?”

Recall the time when Jesus invited Peter to join Him in walking on the storm-tossed Sea of Galilee. Peter briefly succeeded,

but when he saw the wind boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink, he cried, saying, Lord, save me.

*And immediately Jesus stretched forth his hand, and caught him, and said unto him, O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou doubt?*⁹

Question 2: “Will Ye Also Go Away?”

After preaching His challenging Bread of Life sermon in Capernaum, the Savior was abandoned by many of His followers:

Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?

Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.

*And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God.*¹⁰

Question 3: “Whom Say Ye That I Am?”

Later, the Savior and His apostles were at Caesarea Philippi:

He asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

*And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*¹¹

Question 4: “Lovest Thou Me More Than These?”

The final recorded question to Peter took place following the Savior’s Crucifixion and Resurrection and Peter’s denials:

*So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs.*¹²

The Lord repeated the same question twice more, giving Peter multiple opportunities to respond.¹³

In these four questions, Jesus invited Peter to ponder his willingness to consecrate all for the kingdom of God and not merely sacrifice the costs of discipleship he had initially anticipated. Peter’s answers show the maturation of his discipleship. The Savior employs the same pattern of questioning with us today. He checks in with each of us, often in times of great stress and anxiety, and especially when He invites us to learn about the wintry doctrines.

Leading the Washington DC North Mission During COVID-19

Let me illustrate through personal experience. Several years ago, my wife, Shelly, and I were called to preside over the Washington DC North Mission. Shortly after we began our service in June 2019, local Church members Brent and Meg Pratt invited us and our five children over for dinner at their home in Potomac, Maryland. Brent and I happen to be distant cousins. Before we sat down to eat, Brent showed us a painting that he had commissioned from the talented Latter-day Saint artist Julie Rogers. The painting features our shared great-great-grandparents, William and Rachel Atkin, pulling a handcart with all their worldly belongings and two infant children across the fast-moving Green River in Wyoming.

This is how William Atkin later remembered that moment from August 1859:

We again labored in pulling our cart, and when we came to Green River, we found the [handcart] train had crossed and gone; and we were alone on its banks.

We looked at the river, and I said to my wife, “We cannot cross this river alone.” She said, “No, but the Lord will help us over.” At these words, my heart seemed to leap for joy, and I said, “Yes, He surely will.” . . . [We] then knelt down on the ground, in all humbleness, and in the sincerity of our souls we told our Heavenly Father that we were doing all in our power to keep His commandments to gather to the land of Zion and now we had come to this river, and we could not cross it alone, and we knew that all power was in His hand, and we relied on Him to assist us over.¹⁴

After pleading for help, William and Rachel then experienced a miracle:

We started into the stream, and as we did so we could see the deep water just ahead of us, and the next step we expected to step into the deep water, but when we took that step, the deep water was still ahead, and thus it was all the way across, and to our surprise we had not wet the axletree of our cart, and we were truly thankful to our Heavenly Father that we landed on the other bank in safety.¹⁵

Julie Rogers’s painting kindled in me a desire to know more about the Atkins’ miraculous crossing of the Green River. But I had a mission to lead, so I pushed my curiosity to the back of my mind.

About nine months into our mission, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Little did we know then how it would change our missionary service. Starting on March 16, 2020, our missionaries were confined to their apartments—an isolation that ended up lasting fifteen long months. Tracting and street contacting came to an end. Online proselyting and Zoom video conferences replaced in-person meetings and interviews. Spring turned into summer with no signs of the pandemic lifting. Our lives had gone almost entirely virtual due to COVID-19.

The first quarter of our three-year service (prior to the pandemic) was close to what we had anticipated. It was challenging, but these were all known costs. But the second and third quarters of our mission presidency, overlapping with COVID-19, exposed many unknown costs of discipleship. The divine invitation was to move from sacrifice to consecration.

Three months after the isolation began, senior Church leaders met with all mission leaders over Zoom. After summarizing the very real challenges of missionary work at that time, President Dallin H. Oaks encouraged mission leaders to keep the life of Jesus Christ front and center:

Our Savior’s willing sacrifice is the example that guides us forward along the covenant path. As members and missionaries, we follow that example by sacrifices suitable to our own circumstances.¹⁶

President Oaks then shared stories from Church history in which missionary work proved highly challenging to its participants:

Encourage [your missionaries] to ponder the fact that their disruptions and inconveniences in the current pandemic are not unique in the work of the Lord or in the lives of their ancestors or fellow members. Teach them to remember the heritage of faith of those who have gone before.¹⁷

President Oaks’s invitation “to remember the heritage of faith” prompted me to revisit William and Rachel Atkin’s crossing of the Green River. I determined to create a documentary history of the day-by-day trek of their emigrant company.¹⁸ Beginning on April 7, 2021—exactly 162 years since the pioneers had left England for America—I shared their company’s daily “sail, rail, and trail” experiences with our elders and sisters. I felt that the trials of our spiritual forebears might better contextualize the missionaries’ current COVID-19 challenges.

Many of our missionaries have shared with me how meaningful it was to compare their daily pandemic experiences with the trail diaries of these handcart pioneers. The missionaries were both humbled and inspired—just as I had hoped—by “remember[ing] the heritage of faith of those who have gone before.”

My great-great-grandparents’ difficult choices to accept the gospel in England, cross the Atlantic by ship, pull a handcart a thousand miles over rocky terrain, and remain faithful to their covenants in a new home profoundly changed generations of people. The decision by the Atkins to

consecrate and gather with the Latter-day Saints, even if it meant crossing the Green River at their loneliest moment, made it possible for me, as their great-great-grandson, to be here today enjoying the blessings of the gospel.

“This Is Exactly What I Signed Up For!”

While I looked to Church history for inspiration during the COVID-19 pandemic, my dear companion, Sister Shelly A. Neilson, took a different approach. Every six weeks we would meet with every missionary at zone conference—one of the few times we were able to gather in person. During one training, Shelly gave the missionaries a pep talk:

I keep hearing a troubling phrase from people. And it's been bouncing around enough that I think we need to talk about it. So I'm coming to you as your mission mom to help me answer it. It's a phrase that President Neilson and I have heard from missionaries [and] from missionaries' parents. I [have] heard it from friends at home . . . who have children on missions right now and even from grandparents who have grandchildren out serving. You may have said it to your companions or written it in letters home, or you might have even said it through tears in the shower or on your knees in prayer.¹⁹

Our missionaries were understandably anxious to learn what complaint Sister Neilson was referring to. She then clarified the point:

*What is this phrase that has burned my ears, that keeps echoing in my mind, and that I've wrestled with how to respond [to]? Here's the phrase: “This is **not** what I signed up for!”*

I think President Neilson probably felt it as he was riding his bike in the snow and knocking on hundreds of doors of uninterested people in Hokkaido, Japan, as a young man. I know that my dear friend who served in Guatemala and walked unpaved roads between villages in the hot sun only to discover no one home despite an appointment felt it. Or missionaries who slept on the floor being eaten by bugs all night and who had to boil their water before they could drink it said it. . . . The list goes on with all the hardships and difficult parts of a mission. And the thought “This is not what I signed up for” comes out of our minds and mouths.²⁰

Watching the nodding heads of missionaries assembled in the chapel that day, I knew that Shelly was onto something significant. She then got to the heart of the issue:

When you put in your mission papers, when you sent in your signed acceptance letter to the First Presidency, when you entered the Missionary Training Center, what exactly did you sign up for? Did you list any conditions, limitations, or stipulations to your service?²¹

Shelly then led a discussion on this question. The missionaries concluded that they had signed up to trust in the Lord, follow His prophet, invite others to come unto Christ, and endure faithfully to the end. Pandemic or not, this is what they had signed up for.

After the discussion, Shelly handed out specially made stickers for our missionaries to affix to their water bottles, notebooks, journals, or any other object to help them remember “This Is Exactly What I Signed Up For!” This hopeful phrase became a rallying cry across our mission both during and after the height of COVID-19. We all sought for more consecration and less grumbling. My heart was filled with gratitude for these faithful elders and sisters who persevered and learned so much about themselves and their Savior during these trying times. Our missionaries—like the apostle Peter and like my ancestors William and Rachel Atkin—were moving from living the law of sacrifice (or paying the known costs) to living the higher law of consecration (being willing to give anything the Lord required). As a result, they received unanticipated blessings that will ultimately surpass anything they gave.

Spiritual Storm Clouds and Silver Linings

Midway through our final year in the mission field, after the pandemic had largely passed, our family was invited to eat at the home of a local Church leader. After dinner, as I sat alone with this dear friend, the conversation took a surprising turn. A former mission president himself, he suggested that personal turbulence might be ahead for me. With a grandfatherly smile, he said that most of the mission presidents

he knew—himself included—had experienced very real challenges as they returned to their former lives and professional careers and that my so-called fourth year of mission leadership may well prove to be the most trying. I silently wondered, “How could life get more difficult than leading a mission during a pandemic?” I left that evening subdued by his comments.

A few weeks later, an unanticipated trial not of my own making came into my personal life. This unforeseen challenge left me grasping for understanding. Like my missionaries, I had planned on sacrificing specific things, but this turn of events was totally unexpected. In my anguish I grumbled to my wife, “I’ve tried to do everything right! I’ve willingly sacrificed and consecrated and given my heart and soul to the Lord and His missionaries! How can things possibly go this way? This is a cost I never imagined paying when we accepted our assignment.”

I am somewhat ashamed to admit that I began to loathe my wife’s cheerful mission stickers. There were times when I wept as I walked in the woods near our mission home. After my tears dried, I would counsel with and uplift struggling missionaries, smiling outwardly while sorrowing inside. “This is not what I signed up for!” I lamented in my personal prayers.

Ultimately, it was my Savior and a handful of His disciples who rescued me. My dear wife and missionary companion, one of the few who was aware of my trial, reminded me of the goodness of our Father in Heaven and the Savior. Special friends ministered to me in meaningful ways and created a new path forward for me to follow. I was buoyed up by reading about the experiences of ancient Saints such as the apostle Peter and of modern Saints who had consecrated their all when called upon. My daily study of the Book of Mormon especially helped me remain spiritually centered on the Savior. Transcribing, annotating, and sharing the personal records of William and Rachel Atkin and their fellow handcart pioneers soothed my soul. Like them, I wanted to be faithful to my temple promises and remain on the covenant path. Ultimately, the meekness the Savior demonstrated during His mortal ministry

inspired me to be increasingly humble and forgiving. I learned a great deal about the majesty of the character of Christ during this wintry season of my life.

Since those challenging days, a silver lining has emerged in my personal life that continues to brighten. I am regularly reminded that just as there are known and unknown costs, there are also anticipated and unanticipated blessings that far surpass any cost we are asked to pay. I am grateful for a patient Savior who allows me to count and recount the costs of my discipleship. The Lord seems to probe my heart as He did the heart of the apostle Peter two millennia ago: “Reid, wherefore didst thou doubt? Will ye also go away? But whom say ye that I am? Lovest thou me more than these?”

Conclusion

More than three decades have passed since I first sat where you sit now and listened to a campus devotional. The questions I faced then are the same ones you face today:

- Will I make and keep sacred covenants?
- Will I stay on the covenant path beyond my BYU graduation?
- Am I willing to pay the known and unknown costs of discipleship?

Mortality presents all sorts of unexpected challenges, yet this is *exactly what we signed up for*. How we react to these challenges largely defines the measure of our own discipleship.

My friends, your choices today have tremendous consequences for your children, grandchildren, and beyond. None of us would be here today without someone in our family tree whose consecrated acts made our lives possible. Just as William and Rachel Atkin made my life possible, you and I can perform the same function in the lives of those who follow after us.

Now striding through my middle-age years, I am determined to consecrate—not merely sacrifice—as a Latter-day Saint Christian. As my son Johnny entered the MTC earlier this summer, we read one of my favorite scriptures together:

*Behold, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I have been called of him to declare his word among his people, that they might have everlasting life.*²²

May the Lord view you and me as followers who have counted the costs of discipleship, such that we can exclaim: “This is exactly what I signed up for!” In the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. James E. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1916), 452; see also 452–54.

2. Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 14:29–31, 34. The Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament adds several meaningful words to Luke’s teachings; see also Luke 14:28–30, 33, in Thomas A. Wayment, ed., *The Complete Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament: A Side-by-Side Comparison with the King James Version* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2005), 195.

3. Talmage, *Jesus the Christ*, 453.

4. B. H. Roberts, *The Life of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1963), 48.

5. “The Endowment,” *General Handbook: Serving in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, August 2022 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ, 2022), 27.2 (p. 229).

6. “The Endowment,” *General Handbook* (August 2022), 27.2 (p. 229).

7. Neal A. Maxwell, quoted in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 20; see also 19–20; emphasis in original.

8. Matthew 4:18–20.

9. Matthew 14:30–31; emphasis added.

10. John 6:67–69; emphasis added. For the Savior’s Bread of Life sermon, see John 6:24–59.

11. Matthew 16:13–16; emphasis added.

12. John 21:15; emphasis added.

13. See John 21:16–17.

14. William Atkin, “Handcart Experience Continued,” *Union* 9, no. 42 (10 October 1896): 3; punctuation and capitalization modernized. The Atkin “Handcart Experience” series in the *Union* started in the May 14, 1896, issue and ended in the November 21, 1896, issue.

15. Atkin, “Handcart Experience Continued,” 3.

16. Dallin H. Oaks, in streamed mission leadership seminar, 27 June 2020; quoted in Scott Taylor, “President Oaks at Mission Leadership Seminar: ‘Sacrifices Suitable to Our Own Circumstances,’” *Leaders and Ministry, Church News*, 1 July 2020, thechurchnews.com/2020/7/1/23216406/president-oaks-mission-leadership-seminar-sacrifices-suitable-circumstances.

17. Oaks, 2020 streamed seminar; quoted in Taylor, “President Oaks at Mission Leadership Seminar.”

18. See Reid L. Neilson, ed., *Pushing and Pulling to Zion: The Eighth Handcart Company Trek Day by Day in 1859* (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2023).

19. Shelly A. Neilson, “This Is Exactly What I Signed Up For!” zone conference address, Washington DC North Mission, 15 August 2020, unpublished.

20. Shelly A. Neilson, “What I Signed Up For”; emphasis in original.

21. Shelly A. Neilson, “What I Signed Up For.”

22. 3 Nephi 5:13.