STANDING STRONG DESPITE STRUGGLING

KEEPING THE FAITH
The Cost of Following Christ

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Chen Pei Fen
"Look at what you’ve done by becoming a Christian! You’ve deserted the family tradition. Your father feels like a failure. He couldn’t keep the family together."

My mother was upset. Her distress was obvious as she attempted to persuade me to forsake my newfound faith. My father, meanwhile, was quietly heartbroken. He hadn’t slept well for several days, because his daughter had chosen to abandon family tradition and follow a “foreign” God.

I was 15 and had just accepted Jesus Christ into my life. I had made this decision with great joy,
knowing I had done something significant. But now, I found myself in a storm. It pained me to see my parents so sad and disappointed.

I started thinking about why I had become a Christian and wondered if I had done the right thing. Was I not being a good daughter? Should I hang on to my new faith? Did I really want to be Jesus’s disciple? Was I ready to give up the love and support of my family? And would it be worth it?

In Luke 14:26, Jesus says: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.”

That seemed to be the challenge that I was facing now. As my mother pressured me to change my mind, I felt like I had to choose between Jesus and my parents. If I wanted to obey my parents and avoid hurting them, then I would have to abandon my newfound faith. But Jesus seemed to be asking me to “hate” my parents. Did he mean that literally? Could I not follow him and still love my parents?

Are you facing a similar situation? Does your family or your community object to your faith in God? Are you under pressure to return to your former beliefs and recant your faith, and do you wonder whether this faith is worth the pain?

Let me share my story with you.

Chen Pei Fen
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Believing the Promise

“BELIEVE IN THE LORD JESUS, AND YOU WILL BE SAVED—YOU AND YOUR HOUSEHOLD.” —Acts 16:31

I was born into a traditional Singaporean Chinese family. My parents are of Hakka descent, one of the main Chinese dialect groups. Like most Chinese families, we were brought up to worship Chinese deities. We also burned incense and offerings to our ancestors to provide for their needs in the afterlife. Such beliefs and practices are widely considered to be essentially “Chinese”—they
are seen by many as part and parcel of our culture and ethnicity.

When persons brought up in such traditions decide to become Christians, they are not only seen as abandoning their traditional faith but also as betraying their heritage. They bring shame on their family and community by following a foreign religion and putting their loyalty in a foreign god. On significant occasions—such as weddings and funerals—their parents will “lose face” and be criticized by others for raising their children badly. They also dishonor their parents because they will no longer be able to perform religious rites for them after they die and cannot properly take care of their parents in the afterlife.

For my father, these things were even more important because of his position as the eldest son in his family and as a prominent member of the Hakka clan association—a formal organization that preserves and upholds Chinese and Hakka traditions.

My father felt that my becoming a Christian would bring him shame and embarrassment. As Mum said, he felt he had set a bad example in not raising his children to properly preserve our traditions.

But none of this mattered when I was making up my mind to follow Christ. At that time, the only thing that concerned me was whether it made sense to believe in Jesus. I had been asking questions such as,
“Who am I? What is my purpose in this world? Why is the world so messy, and is there a solution? What happens after I die?” Christianity seemed to have all the answers.

It all started when a Christian friend, Veronica, explained the good news to me. She shared with me what she had learned in the Bible, invited me to evangelistic events, and showed me verses like John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

At first, this didn’t make any sense. How could it be true? The Christians around me didn’t seem to be much better off; they were still struggling through life. So what was the point of becoming a Christian? And as for Jesus, wasn’t he just another man with brown hair and blue eyes?

Although I had been asking questions about life, my own was going pretty well at the time. I had a loving family, was popular with my peers, and was doing well in both sports and studies. I didn’t feel that I needed God. While the answers Christianity gave to my
questions seemed reasonable, I didn’t see a need to make a personal commitment to follow Jesus.

But one evening, as I was lying on my bed, I felt empty. So I prayed, “God, if you are really God, can you please show me?”

Soon after, on a Saturday afternoon, I was walking towards an ice cream store when a stranger stopped me. She asked if she could share the good news with me. Trying to be polite, I agreed. By then, I had heard it so many times that I could even recite the verses. But something happened that day. When the woman shared John 3:16 with me, the verse cut straight to my heart.

It wasn’t what the woman said or how she said it. Nor was it a voice in my head. At that moment, I believe the Holy Spirit touched me, and the truth of John 3:16 went from my head to my heart. All of a sudden, I truly understood what the verse meant. I saw that “the world” God “so loved” included me. I felt the weight of sin and recognized how terrible a sinner I was and how much I needed Jesus. I finally understood why he had to die on the cross for me, and I appreciated just how much God loved me. For God so loved me, I realized, that he gave his one and
only Son for *me*, that if *I* believed in him, *I* would not perish but have eternal life.

As the truth hit me, I couldn’t stop crying. For the first time, I realized I was a sinner. At the same time, I felt grateful for God’s offer of forgiveness. That day, I confessed my sins to Jesus and received him as my personal Savior and Lord.

The joy I felt, however, soon gave way to trepidation. I thought about the implications of my decision and immediately realized how my parents would feel and react. *What have I done?* I thought. *What will my parents say when they find out?*

But the woman assured me that being the first in my family to become a Christian was a significant spiritual event. She reminded me of how Paul and Silas, after being freed from prison by a miracle, reached out to the jailer (*Acts 16:30–31*). When he asked, “What must I do to be saved?” they told him, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.”

Of course, Paul and Silas did not mean that the jailer’s family would be saved simply because he himself believed in God—salvation comes through a personal, individual response to God; it cannot be “passed on” or inherited. However, the gospel can gain a foothold in the lives of a family through the first person to turn to Christ; it opens the door for the rest of the family to hear and see the gospel in action. *Acts 16:32* tells us that after the jailer had believed,
Paul and Silas “spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house.”

These verses gave me hope that one day my parents and siblings would also come to know God. I had the opportunity to become the first messenger, the first witness of the gospel to my family.

But first, I had to face their objections.
Facing the Challenge

“IF ANYONE COMES TO ME AND DOES NOT HATE FATHER AND MOTHER, WIFE AND CHILDREN, BROTHERS AND SISTERS—YES, EVEN THEIR OWN LIFE—SUCH A PERSON CANNOT BE MY DISCIPLE.” —Luke 14:26

For the first few months, I kept silent about my newfound faith. I didn’t dare tell my parents, for fear of what could happen. The only person I told was my twin sister, who I could trust to keep my secret. She looked at me in shock and wagged a warning finger at me, “You’re going to be in trouble when Mum and Dad find out!”

I also didn’t dare go to church, but was sustained spiritually through constant prayer, reading the Bible, and regular meetings with Christian friends who
taught me about God after school. Every morning, I spent time praying to God and reading the Bible, but hid it after I finished so that I would not be found out. My secret, however, didn’t last long.

One day, I forgot to put my Bible away and left it on the table. My father spotted it and recognized what it was. Being a traditional Chinese father, however, he did not confront me directly, but asked my mum to question me about it. Soon after, she sat me down and went straight to the point: “Why is there a Bible on your table?”

There was little else I could do but admit that I had become a Christian. My mum didn’t know what to say, and could only shake her head in dismay. For the next few days, nothing happened. Both she and my dad kept quiet about the matter, but I felt the tension in the air. I knew there would be more to come.

Days later, my father personally handed me a handwritten letter and left for work without saying a word. In it, he wrote of his disappointment and sadness at me becoming a Christian. He spoke of his failure as a father to keep the family together and of the possible consequences of my actions. “How can we have two different gods in the same household?” he pointed out. Having pledged our loyalty to one set of deities, my family believed that we would have peace, harmony, and security—everything that my parents desired for us. But now, by turning my back on my family’s beliefs and
following Jesus, I would anger the deities and put my family’s well-being at risk.

That same afternoon, my mother sat me down and followed up on the letter. This time she was visibly agitated. “Your father hasn’t been sleeping well,” she told me, her voice rising. “He’s very disturbed. He feels like a failure. Look at what you’ve done! You’ve not been a filial daughter—after all we’ve done for you, is this how you repay us?”

My mum also pointed out what my decision would mean for the family. “What if your siblings were to do the same thing? Who will perform the funeral rites for us? Who will offer us incense? What will your father’s family say? You have brought shame upon us!”

She also spoke about some of the concerns she and Dad had for me personally. Was I being led astray? Who was this person who was telling me all these things, turning me away from the family tradition? What kind of beliefs were these?

I didn’t try to defend myself or argue with her, but just listened in silence. Perhaps Mum was hoping to change my mind there and then, but since I didn’t respond, she gave up after a while. I went back to my room to think about what she said—and to seek God’s help.

“Heavenly Father,” I prayed with a heavy heart. “I’m so sad because of how this has affected my family, but please help me to stay strong in the faith. I know you are real, but I need strength to endure.”
I faced a dilemma. I felt as if I was being asked to choose between God and my parents, yet both were important to me. My parents wanted me to give up this “foreign” God, yet I knew I couldn’t. At the same time, I didn’t want my parents to think I was deserting them.

Jesus spoke about this challenge in Luke 14:26: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.”

Jesus wasn’t asking his disciples to hate their families in the literal sense. He was challenging them to weigh the cost of discipleship and ask themselves if they were ready to make him the Lord of their lives. Immediately after saying these words, he went on to tell several parables about people who were not prepared to finish what they started. There was the man who did not calculate if he had enough money before starting to build, and the king who did not consider whether he had enough troops before going to war. What Jesus was really asking was this: How far are you willing to go to follow me? Are you ready to put me before your family? Are you prepared to give up everything you hold dear, including your life?

I now faced this challenge. How far was I willing to go to follow Jesus? Was I willing to face my parents’ displeasure for making him Lord of my life? And how was I supposed to reconcile and “balance” my love for both Jesus and my parents?
was hoping to get specific instructions on how to answer my mum and dad, and what to tell them. Instead, I received a simple directive from God: Be his witness.

The answer gave me great comfort. It was as if God was telling me I had done the right thing in choosing to follow him, and my mission now was to share my discovery with my family. I wasn’t being
asked to choose between Jesus and my parents; I was being tasked to share Jesus’s love with them.

Someone outlined my mission in a way that strengthened and inspired me:

Imagine that you and your family are living in a closed box. As far as you are concerned, the whole world is what you see inside the box. If someone were to tell you there was a bigger, better world outside, you’d think he was being ridiculous. One day, however, you find a key that opens a door in the box. You open the door and realize it’s true—there is indeed a world beyond the box that is bigger and better.

What would you do? Would you throw the key away and stay in the box with your family because you don’t want to disrupt the harmony at home? Or would you step out of the box, explore the world outside, and then come back to share what you’ve found with your family?

Luke 6:39 emphasizes the importance of us recognizing and understanding the truth ourselves before we seek to share it with others. Jesus said, “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit?” We cannot lead others in the right direction unless we’re sure the path we’re taking is the correct one.

This verse gave me great encouragement. Now that I had found the truth—only Jesus can save us—I could lead my family to this wonderful
discovery. And the best way to do this was by loving and honoring my parents. Through my words and actions, I could show them Christ, the Lord and Savior of the world. This new mission strengthened my resolve to be doubly sure of my new faith. Before I shared my discovery, I knew I had to have a clear understanding of what I believed.

In the process, I had to be able to answer fundamental questions such as: Was Jesus real, or was this just another religion? Was he really the Lord and Savior of the world? Why should I worship him? Could I trust what the Bible says about the person and work of Jesus?

I wasn’t being asked to choose between Jesus and my parents; I was being tasked to share Jesus’s love with them.
Revisiting the Faith

“SALVATION IS FOUND IN NO ONE ELSE, FOR THERE IS NO OTHER NAME UNDER HEAVEN GIVEN TO MANKIND BY WHICH WE MUST BE SAVED.” —Acts 4:12

To answer these questions, I revisited my original decision to follow Christ, and went back to the Bible.

IS JESUS REAL? As I love reading, it didn’t take me long to discover that many historical records show that Jesus did indeed live on earth about 2,000 years ago, and that he was crucified and died. But many of them didn’t say much about Jesus’s various claims: that he is the Son of God, that we can be reconciled with God by believing in him, and that he rose from the
dead three days after dying. I had to consider all these claims and decide whether Jesus was telling the truth or not. Something the Christian author C. S. Lewis said, however, struck me. He observed that for Jesus to make those claims, he either had to be a liar, a madman, or exactly what he said he was—the Son of God. As I read the Bible and other works, I came to the conclusion that Jesus was telling the truth: he was the Son of God, he came down to earth to die for us, he was resurrected, and by believing in him we can receive eternal life.

I was also moved by the depth of God’s love. In the Bible, I read that God created the world because he is love, and he wanted to share it. He created humanity to have a relationship with us, but we rebelled. Our disobedience resulted in sin and separation from God. Although we deserved to die, God sent his Son to die in our place, so that we could be forgiven and return to his side. Acts 4:12 says, “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.”

IS THE BIBLE RELIABLE? As I continued scrutinizing the Bible for answers about the nature of Jesus, why he came down to earth, what he did for us, and why we need to believe in him, I realized my newfound faith rested entirely on what the Bible said, but could I trust the Bible?

So I began to read up on the Bible itself. That’s when I discovered that it is not a single work by a
single author. Rather, it is made up of 66 books written by some 40 people over a span of more than 1,500 years. This should have resulted in a wide range of clashing opinions and contradicting descriptions. Yet I was amazed to find that all 66 books of the Bible are consistent and united in their message. They tell of the same God, his love for all mankind, and his absolute holiness. And they all point to Jesus, the only one who can save us and enable us to have a relationship with God.

I also found that the Bible has historical foundations; many of its accounts about major events in history have been corroborated by records and artifacts.

As I thought about all this, I could see that although the Bible was written by some 40 people, God was its real Author. The apostle Paul reminded his protégé Timothy that “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16 NASB).

WHY SHOULD I BELIEVE? So Jesus is real and the Bible is reliable. Even so, why should I believe in him?

Having studied science in school, I found that I could better understand the Christian faith by comparing the reality of Christ to the concept of gravity. Whether I choose to believe it or not, I am under the influence of gravity—no matter what I do, it will always pull me back to earth. I could accept it and live by its rules—or pretend it doesn’t exist and suffer the consequences.
In the same way, I saw the truth of Jesus affects me whether I believed it or not. Therefore I had to believe. It wasn’t a case of choosing which religion or leader to follow—if Jesus was truly the only way to salvation and eternal life, then I had to believe in him.

John 1:3 says, “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.” How could I not follow the source of my life? How could I turn my back on the Creator who sought a relationship with me and my family?

As I revisited my decision to follow God, I remembered that I was not doing it naively. I understood the message of the gospel and knew what and why I believed. What’s more, my conviction also led to commitment: knowing that only Jesus could save me, I decided to commit myself to him as my Lord and Savior, pledging my life and absolute loyalty to him. It was a decision made from the head as well as the heart.

The answers the Bible contained not only affirmed my conviction, but also helped me think about what it meant to be a Christian. I wanted to show my parents that believing in Jesus did not mean turning my back on our Chinese roots and heritage. Rather, it was about acknowledging Jesus as Lord of my life and looking at life through his perspective.

In following God, I remained a Chinese and a Hakka; I was still able to appreciate and honor my culture, traditions, and roots, except for those aspects that distracted me from following Jesus.
Honoring My Parents

“HONOR YOUR FATHER AND YOUR MOTHER, SO THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG IN THE LAND THE LORD YOUR GOD IS GIVING YOU.” —Exodus 20:12

The Bible stresses that we are to obey and honor our parents. It is the fifth of the Ten Commandments—“Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12) —and comes right after four commandments about loving God. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right” (Ephesians 6:1).

In the Hebrew, the word for honor—kaved—means
“heavy” or “weighty.” To honor one’s parents is therefore to give due weight or respect to their position.

Jesus himself is described as being obedient to his earthly parents as a child, after an incident in Jerusalem where he was separated from them and they became worried about Him (Luke 2:51). As he hung dying on the cross, he also ensured that his disciple John would continue to look after his mother (John 19:26).

The challenge for me was how to continue to honor my parents without compromising my faith in God. I realized I could do this by being respectful to them, by being obedient, and by caring for them.

I was encouraged by the example of American theologian Francis Schaeffer, whose parents were upset when he decided to attend a Bible school. Francis explained respectfully that he believed it was God’s will for him to go, but he continued to honor his parents as taught in the Bible. His testimony undoubtedly played an important role in bringing both of them to Jesus Christ later on.

I did my best to apply this principle to my life. While my mother repeatedly tried to convince me to give up my faith, I decided not to answer back or argue with her. I went out of my way to be as polite and respectful as a child should be. I helped with household chores and ran errands whenever I was asked. I used to protest whenever I was told to do something, but now I made sure to do it willingly.
“Don’t you see?” I would ask my mother occasionally, “Nothing has changed since I became a Christian. I’m still your daughter, and you’re still my mother.”

I also continued to follow Chinese traditions that did not distract me from following God. When relatives passed away, I helped out at funerals and paid my respects in a proper manner. On the death anniversary of my grandparents, I did the same thing, honoring their memory.

I also joined my father’s Hakka clan association and made sure to attend its social events.

At the same time, I continued to meet with other Christians and prayed and read the Bible regularly. Throughout all this, God gave me the spiritual strength to persevere in my faith, as well as the guidance and wisdom to deal with my challenges. I drew on God’s promise to help and guide me, and he did so faithfully and continuously.

I believe God’s grace, which strengthened my resolve and guided me in my conduct, helped the situation at home. While my parents didn’t say so, I could sense that they eventually accepted my decision,
because they did not object to me going to church or later getting baptized. I thank God for softening their hearts despite their initial objections.

I saw more evidence of this change when, to my great joy, my twin sister also came to Christ. My parents were less upset about it than they had been with me. Another time, my father was harshly criticized by his peers for allowing us to become Christians and for “not controlling his family properly.” Dad saw how upset my twin sister and I were, and he comforted us. “Ignore them,” he told us, “they don’t know what they’re saying.”

We were more than a little surprised. Instead of taking us to task for causing him to lose “face,” he chose to defend us.
It has been many years since I accepted Jesus as my Lord and Savior. One of the most significant changes since then is the quality of the new life Christ has given me. While I still face life’s challenges, I am able to handle them with God’s help. He gives my life a richness that nothing else could ever provide. As I learn to live according to God’s Word and mature in my relationship with him, I grow ever closer to my
parents and siblings, and my relationships with friends have been greatly enriched.

Ever conscious of my mission to be a witness to my family, I have also seen the promise of Acts 16:31 come true. God has brought members of my family to him in ways I could never have imagined. When my twin sister and I started going to church, our parents sent our elder sister to keep an eye on us. They had doubts about the kind of company we were keeping and feared that we could be led astray. Instead, this sister too was touched by what she witnessed and later became a Christian as well!

With God’s help, I began to understand why my parents were unhappy with my decision to follow Christ. My father was upset because he was worried for us and was concerned that this decision would disrupt harmony in the family and place our happiness and security at risk. I had to learn to see beyond my parents’ hurt and disappointment and recognize that they were motivated by love . . .
what they felt was the best for us. That knowledge spurred me to respond by showing them how much I appreciated their concern.

Indeed, I find that I am now able to love and honor my parents in a way I never experienced before. Having received God’s grace and mercy, I realized I had to be gracious and loving to others. After understanding my parents’ concern for me, I asked God for love and patience to help me honor them. He has helped me in my daily interactions with them, giving me the wisdom to be His witness. Years later, when I joined a Christian organization full-time, my parents didn’t object, and today I continue to enjoy a close, loving relationship with them.

Meanwhile, I continue to hope, pray, and trust in the Lord that one day, they too will come to know and worship Christ, who alone is Lord and Savior of the world. 🙏
What to do when your family objects
Are you going through something similar? Do you face objections to your faith from your family, and do you struggle to hold on to Christ? Let me leave you with some encouraging advice from my own experience.

Hold on to the truth
Acts 4:12 states God’s truth simply and powerfully: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.” When we decide to follow Jesus, we are not simply choosing to pledge our loyalty to a god of our choice—we are turning to the one true God, who is Jesus. He reconciles us with the Father, making possible our eternal fellowship with him. In John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Be your family’s guide
Luke 6:39 says, “Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into a pit?” This reminds us that we need to find the right path in life. Having discovered
the only way to God, we can lead our loved ones
to him through Jesus. But this will take time and
patience. If you are the first in your family to turn
to Christ, then take heart: the gospel has taken a
foothold in your family through you. Let God work
in your loved ones’ hearts and show them his love
through your daily interaction with them.

**Honor your parents**

Ephesians 6:1 says, “Children, obey your parents
in the Lord, for this is right.” Scripture makes it
clear that we are to honor our parents, no matter
what they believe and say about our faith. This not
only means being obedient, but also being sensitive
towards their feelings, valuing what is important to
them, and respecting them as people of significance
in your life. While God takes first place in your life,
assure your parents that they are still important to
you, and show them you will perform your duties by
providing for and caring for them. This is one of the
most effective ways of showing God’s love.

**Seek spiritual support**

You are not called to walk this journey alone. Keep
meeting with fellow Christians who can support you
spiritually and emotionally. They can pray with you,
encourage and comfort you in difficult times, and
be available when you need advice or a listening
ear. The Bible gives many examples of great men—
from King David to the apostle Paul—who were not afraid to turn to fellow believers for comfort. And, of course, keep in close fellowship with God, talking to him constantly and drawing strength and wisdom from his Word.
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