

DENYING ✕ YOURSELF



More Satisfying Than A Microwave Dinner

NOT THREE YEARS INTO HER JOB, AND BARELY THREE MONTHS INTO HER MARRIAGE, NAOMI GILBERT IS WARY OF THAT CLASSIC ESCAPIST ITCH. WHEN IT STARTS TO GET TOUGH, CAN YOU JUST GIVE IT THE FLICK AND TRY SOMETHING NEW?

I think the microwave could ruin my marriage.

Don't get me wrong, it's not that hubby is serving up less-than-desirable microwave meals. His culinary skills (or lack thereof) are not the culprit of our demise.

But if there is one thing that the microwave has taught me, it is that great things can be produced with a simple touch of the button. Reheated leftovers anyone?

Yes, slow cooked lamb shanks with oven roasted potatoes, a classic dessert of French crème brûlée and a glass of well-aged red may leave the mouth watering.

But it's such damn hard work! Time is precious, as are dollars, energy and enthusiasm. And who can be bothered with all the marinating, whisking and proving, when a quick flick of the 10 Minute Meals and hey presto it's done?

While I don't think that serving up a simple meal is a major moral dilemma (Jamie Oliver may beg to differ), I'm beginning to wonder what happens when this quick-and-easy attitude pervades other aspects of my life? What happens when I start approaching my marriage or my job with a similar outlook? My church? My friendships, ministry, neighbourhood? Even my relationship with God?

Even beyond my kitchen I see people trying to escape the hard yards. The long-term reward, while in most cases infinitely better, is so far off and so much more hard work, that we're not willing to deny ourselves and pay the price. The quick-fix option is easier, and it makes me happy – now.

The indicators of people not slogging it out for the long-term good, are everywhere.

Marriage is down. Divorce is up. ¹ Close to one in five students drop out of university by the end of their first year. ²

People stick at a job for an average of just four years (in 1959 it was 15 years). ³

More than 32% of people admit to being unfaithful to their partner (and what about those who don't admit it). ⁴ People are leaving the church in droves. ⁵

It seems when the going gets tough... it's dump and run. We leave our beloved, go backpacking across South East Asia, embark on a new career, or take up yoga – Eat, Pray, Love style. And we're left wondering why these lifestyle tweaks don't meet that nagging need for fulfilment.

But real fulfilment requires sacrifice. Surely Jesus taught us that.

Early days in heaven, life couldn't be sweeter as the truly divine. Then he landed on earth as a mere human: a peasant girl wiping his baby backside; on the run as a refugee; the calloused hands of a tradie; and though he repeatedly explained it, that bumbling band of followers never seemed to fully get what he was on about. I wonder if Jesus ever stopped and thought: I gave it all up for this?

Luckily for us, Jesus kept his sights set on the long-term Kingdom purpose, not his own pleasure and comfort. But even in Gethsemane he had to call on his Father in order to be re-energised for the hard task ahead. And praise God, he went through with it – the ultimate sacrifice – he laid down his life so that we can live.

As followers of his way, we're called to imitate his lifestyle of sacrifice. Jesus put it plainly when he said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me." ⁶ Deny myself? Really?

I imagine that daily denying myself and taking up my cross looks a little different today than it did in first century Rome.

Perhaps it looks like my friend who left his budding IT job to take on a teaching role in a down-and-out suburban high school with the hope of making a difference for the next generation. Or the young couple down the road who live with their parents, not so they can save up for a place of their own, but rather to reduce their environmental and economic impact. Or the mother who gave up the well-paid and highly esteemed career ladder climb to care for growing children. Or the family that moved in with a refugee woman to look after her children while she undergoes intense dialysis treatment. ⁷

Maybe it looks like Jonno and his family, who are Global Interaction cross-cultural workers doing the hard slog in Mozambique. Daily denying yourself in a mission setting is a whole different kettle of fish: language and cultural blunders; family and friends are miles away; and building relationships and talking about Jesus is a tough process. But get excited, because just recently one of Jonno's friends there made a decision to follow Jesus. He's one of the first Yao believers in the area. ⁸ Five years of friendship, conversations and prayers is all it took. Not much!

Then there's Cam and Kath who pretty much live the Australian dream. They've got it all – university degrees, their own home, 2.5 kids (there's one on the way), financial security, and even a dog named Dozer. But they've decided to leave it all behind and join the Global Interaction team in Mozambique. Long-term.

Why long-term? Global Interaction doesn't want people to rush in with all the quick-fix solutions then rush out again. Chris Barnden, who looks after the Global Interaction cross-cultural teams says, "Sometimes I worry that real spiritual transformation won't happen in these communities unless people are there for the long haul. We want our teams to learn the language, understand the culture and get to know people. It is only by doing this that we can really empower communities to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus."

It's a big commitment, requiring daily faithfulness and sacrifice.

But, what a powerful message to those around us about how important and impacting the gospel is, when we show we're willing to give up everything else so that others can hear it too. In a world that screams "Me, Me, Me", we're called to stand apart, for our lives to cry, "There is something bigger than me!" Something more important, worthwhile and everlasting (and not as instant as two minute noodles).

A long-term relationship with Jesus is so much better than any of the other things we could acquire in the short-term – money, prestige, fun experiences, facebook friends. I want more people to know him. But it will only happen if I am willing to deny myself, to forgo my own pleasure, comfort and ease. It's worth it.

Sort of like the lamb shanks I'm going to cook my husband for dinner.

¹ ABS stats

² Australian Government figures, Dec 2009

³ McCrindle Research, 2010

⁴ The Age, Jan 2011

⁵ Transforming Melbourne, 2009

⁶ Luke 9:23

⁷ All characters appearing in this paragraph are not fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is not coincidental.

⁸ The Yao are a Muslim people group in Southern Africa who have limited access to the gospel.