

My Deal with the Lord

When I was about 25 years old, about forty years ago, I made a deal with the Lord Jesus. I told him that if he would do something for me, I'd do something for him for thirty years. Today, the thirty years are finished. Here's how it happened.

**First Year of Teaching.** I went to Bible School for three years right after high school. I was not planning any ministry at that time, just to strengthen my faith. At the end of those three years, someone invited me to teach first year Bible, just for one year, at a small Bible School for First Nations students. I was 21 at the time.

It scared me, I felt completely unprepared, but I had no other plans for that year, felt kind of lost, so I did it. I taught the Bible for 75 minutes every morning, five days a week. I had almost no other books to use, just the Bible, and whatever I remembered from my own Bible school.

I learned there to read a chapter of the Bible, and then read it again, and then read it again, and think about what I was reading, so I could talk about this the next morning, and make sense. I had some other responsibilities with the students, but my main job was several hours of study so I could teach the next day.

I did that from September to May, and I realized by spring that I liked this, this was actually the most meaningful thing I had ever done, I could do this the rest of my life. But there was far too much I did not know about the Bible. If I was going to teach Bible, I must go back to school. So in fall I went back to school, what's now Providence, so I could teach in a Bible college.

**Pulpit Supply in Oakville and Poplar Point.** Four year later, in my last year of seminary, I was living in St Pierre with a roommate. I still had teaching in mind, but through these years I was always pretty active in a church, and if someone asked me to preach I normally said yes.

In the fall of the last year of my master's degree, I saw an advertisement on the seminary bulletin board. Two little Alliance churches west of Winnipeg shared a pastor, and their pastor had moved on, and they wanted a seminary student to preach in those two churches every Sunday.

So, from October to April, I drove one and a half hours to Oakville, where their service began at 9:30. They finished around 10:30, and then I drove north for 15 minutes to get to Poplar Point, and their service began at 11:00. I would preach the same sermon twice. They were both small churches, about the size of our church, about 100 people between the two of them.

That ended in April, when I graduated and left Manitoba. It went pretty well, at least I thought so, and I remember thinking, "I like these people. I could keep doing this. Pastoring a small rural church is not nearly as bad as I thought it would be. Remarkable! But I still want teaching."

**You Should Consider Doctoral Studies.** Another important thing happened the last year of my seminary. During that school year, one of my papers impressed one of my teachers. This was rare. I am not an “A” student. I worked fairly hard, and got Bs. Didn’t kill myself, didn’t get As.

But one of my papers impressed a teacher, not a research paper really, a study that required us to read Hebrews carefully. This teacher met me in the hallway, and said, “That was a very fine paper, Ed. Have you ever considered *doctoral* studies? I think you are the kind of student that would do well in a PhD program. You should consider doctoral studies.”

Well! No, I had never considered doctoral studies. I knew that the better schools I wanted to teach at only hired teachers that had a PhD, but it never occurred to me to pursue that myself. But now it did. All kinds of bells and whistles went off in my head about that. I was stunned at his suggestion, and delighted. This was something people did. Others had done this. Could I?

So by the end of that school year, by the time I had finished seminary, I had decided to apply to some PhD program somewhere, and give it my best shot, and maybe it would work. I finished seminary in spring of 1980, and was already making plans to enter doctoral studies.

**Scared.** Once the first excitement was over, I got scared. I could not do this in Canada. There were only a couple of universities in Canada that offered what I wanted, and Providence was not accredited at that time, so these schools would not accept my master’s degree. I would have to go to the USA or to Great Britain. Yuck. How would that work?

How on earth would I pay for this, going to school in a country where I could not work? I had paid for most of my own schooling to that point, but had no way to finance this. And, was I smart enough? You had to be smart to do this. I was never the top student.

And I doubted my motives. The first Bible School I went to did not like academic study for ministry. They were clear that their three years of Bible School was all anyone needed for any ministry. After that, people only went to school to get the respect of people, not God. Or to make more money. And people lost their faith in these schools.

People traded in their heart knowledge for head knowledge. They went to school loving the Lord, and came out knowing more but not loving the Lord. I had heard all about this, and it is true. All of those things have happened, just like that, and still do.

But I wanted to learn! I wanted to love the Lord with all my heart and soul, love him with my mind! Why could I not love the Lord with all my heart and soul and also my mind?

The Lord said we should love him in all those ways. I loved the Lord, and I wanted to serve him, and I also wanted to learn as much as I could. Why should those who attack the gospel know more than those who announce it? When our bodies are in trouble, we want someone who studied for years and years. Why is it less for our souls? Mostly, I wanted to learn.

**The Deal.** So, I made a deal with the Lord. In those days I regularly walked by myself in the evening in the dark and prayed. It went like this. “Lord, your ministry lasted three years, and you spent a lot of time with just twelve men. I will probably be able to serve you for thirty years after I finish school. If you will help me get a PhD, I will serve a church with twelve households for thirty years.”

I’m not after fame, and I’m not after money. And I don’t need to get a job teaching at a Bible College or a seminary. I want to learn more, I want to get a PhD, and then I’ll serve you without fame or money or a teaching job. For your whole ministry, you focused on twelve disciples. If you help me get my PhD in biblical studies, I’ll serve a church with twelve households for my whole ministry, let’s say thirty years.

I did not pray that every day, but when I got scared that’s how I prayed. That would have been in 80-81. Doctoral studies began in 82, and did not pray that way anymore, because I was not scared in the same way. I had things to do.

And the short story is that the Lord helped me get a PhD. I studied at university for two years, and finished up later, which is common in that business. They were hard years, mostly not because of the studies but because my marriage was in distress.

At that university, for every three students that began doctoral studies, only one ever finished. I did not know that when I started. The Lord helped me finish, pure and simple.

**Teaching at Providence.** And the end of my studies, Providence Seminary hired me to teach NT there, fall 1984. That was all my dreams come true! I was so pleased, also terrified, so young and dumb, but still, I was so pleased. When I was interviewed, someone asked me, “what would you like to be doing in ten years?” I said, “this position is all I ever wanted. I hope in ten years to be teaching right here, only doing it better than I did at the start.”

After my first year of teaching, my first wife Patti moved out. Tough year. I lived alone and continued to teach. After my fourth year of teaching, Patti and I were divorced. And a year later, Marilyn and I got married, and I was so happy. And then Providence let me go, dismissed me, because I was divorced and remarried.

That was 1990. I’d been teaching there 6 years. And 1990 was the year this church started. Seven young families, the age of young families in this church, began the Kleefeld Christian Community. And people, that was 30 years ago today. First Sunday of September, 1990. As of today, I have kept my part of my deal with the Lord. I have served a small church for 30 years. On that day, though, I was not thinking about that promise at all, not at all.

**Disappointment with My Ministry.** In the early years, I served this church part time, and I was a part time health care aide at the Grunthal Menno Home. I had certain expectations of how this church would go, and they did not happen.

I had taught Bible at the seminary for six years, and by the end of that, I was a popular teacher. I had learned a lot, and did well in the classroom, at least that's what I thought. And this church was great, a totally refreshing church, is what I thought.

And we are going to GROW! Just watch and see. This church is doing just the right things, and with my wonderful Spirit-anointed Bible sermons, this church is going places. But it didn't happen. Two years, three years, still didn't happen. A few families joined, the seven increased to ten or twelve, but then some would leave.

I experienced a lot of self-doubt in those days. What were we doing wrong? What was I doing wrong? I assumed that if we were following the Lord and living in his ways, if his Spirit was leading us and me, of course people would be hungry for this, and would come. But they didn't.

I didn't know what was going on. Obviously we are failing the Lord, or I am, in some important way, and I had no idea what it was. I didn't talk about this much, but I was discouraged for some years. The first thing necessary was for me to learn that I was not nearly as great as I thought I was. Whatever else I was confused about, that was pretty clear. I needed pruning, and got it.

**Remembering the Deal, and Relief.** About the fifth or sixth year of this church, one day I had a mild recollection of the deal I'd made with the Lord. If he'd help me get my PhD, I'd serve a church with twelve households for thirty years. This was about 95. I prayed that way in 80-81. For most of 15 years, that had not crossed my mind at all. I had a mild recollection of that.

My mind went back there several times over the next few days, and the memory got clearer and clearer. I remembered what I'd said, and why I'd said it. You see, once I got the job at Providence, I assumed the deal was off, the Lord had not decided to come collect from me. But, what if he waited for six years of teaching at Providence, and THEN he came to collect?

The more I thought about it, that's what it was. Could I do this another 25 years? No idea. But, people, my relief was huge. It was such good news. A burden fell off me. The small size of the church was not my failure to serve him well, it was the Lord himself holding me to an old promise! That was pure good news. I was actually being faithful, and didn't know it.

Around that same time, someone, I don't remember who, told me that when the apostles write letters to the churches, they never say anything about the size of the church, they never say anything about if it is growing or shrinking, they never say anything about whether new people are coming to the church, or not. They don't *care* about that, they care about *other things*.

That helped too. So, I decided to be faithful to the Lord, and leave the rest to him. I told said this at a church care meeting back then. I said, if you want this church to grow, throw me out, just like Jonah, it won't grow while I'm here. They decided to keep me anyway. Someone said to me, "Why don't you ask the Lord to release you from this vow?"

I said, “not a chance. I said if he helped me, I’d do this, he did help me, so I’m doing this. Besides, he can make this church grow any time he wants. He does not need my permission.”

That was at year five or six of this church. For five years I did not know why this church wasn’t growing, and for the next twenty-five years I’ve been thanking the Lord for this church just as it is. I have talked to so many pastors of large churches over the years, and quietly thanked God that I was serving this little church not their big church. Many, many times, brothers and sisters.

**Providence and No Permission.** In spite of all this, I still assumed that if I ever took a teaching job again at Providence or somewhere else, I would leave this church and teach, because I still viewed teaching as my first calling. I know this is inconsistent with the deal, but I’m like that.

In 2001, year eleven of this church, Providence offered me a full time job in the seminary Bible department. Wow. They changed their minds. So I had assumed if this happened, I would resign from Kleefeld Christian Community. But I couldn’t do it.

It is like the Lord said to me, “You can take the Providence teaching offer or not, that’s your business, but you are not leaving those people and that church, and that’s final.” This surprised me. I did not expect that. I was going to leave the church, but I couldn’t. Not even close. I tossed and turned about what to do, but leaving this church was not an option.

So I decided to do both. Those were hard years for us, for Marilyn especially. Two jobs like that, four young children. Perhaps I should have done something differently, although I don’t know what. But this was my surprise, that I was unable to resign from this church.

**Progressive Retirement – Another Surprise.** I knew that once I got older, I could not keep teaching full time at Providence and serve this church as well. And in those hard years, I always assumed that when I could no longer do both, I would pull back from this church and stay with Providence, since I still believed my first love was that teaching. Which I did love.

But eight or ten years ago, when I really did need to pull back, it was Providence that was wringing me out, not my work with the church. So at Providence I cut back to .8 of full time, then in a few years to .6, and then to .5.

And this surprised me. I had always thought I would do that with this church. But when it was time, that didn’t feel right. And I was glad that it was happening that way. This church was a good place to be, you all treated us well. I did not want to walk away from this.

So now I am quite part time at the seminary, and when I need to reduce more, that is what I will drop. And in these last eight years or so it has finally dawned on me that I might really keep my part of that deal. If the Lord kept me going, I would do my best to finish this. And here we are. Today is the day. For quite a few years we had less than twelve household, now a few more, but still about twelve active households. This very Sunday marks thirty years.

**The Kindness and Faithfulness of the Lord.** You can tell by now that this is not a story of my determination to keep that promise. I was always determined to serve the Lord, but not to keep that promise, not till quite recently. The Lord himself kept both parts of that deal. First he helped me get my PhD, and then he steered me into serving a small church for thirty years.

When I wanted out, he would not let me. But here's the thing. He could not have put me in a better place. There have been a few hard times, but overall it has very good, you people have been faithful family and loyal friends, you have taken care of us in many ways.

So many times, I've been glad we were in this church and not some other church. And now after 30 years, I am totally content to be doing less teaching and to focus on this body of believers.

I need to speak about Dave and Sharon. Their family started attending our church in year two or year three, and they dug in right away, and have shaped this church just by being here. Dave has been a wonderful friend to me. And Sharon and their children have been so good for us all, and for so long. And many others here have been good friends for years and years as well. We're so rich, so rich.

**Marilyn.** And that Marilyn. She never asked for this. She found out about my deal with the Lord about the same time I remembered it, well into the life of this church. Marilyn had a new job and lived in a new province every two years, before we were married. Stay in one little Mennonite town for thirty years? Heaven forbid it, anything but that.

But she dug in, and loved me and her children, and she loved all of you in ways I cannot. You know this is true. And she knows things about people and about God that I don't know. She's wise. She did not make any deal with the Lord, but she is a fearless warrior in the kingdom.

She and I have done this as a tag team right from the start. And she also has come to see my deal with the Lord as his kindness to both of us, to her as well. And that's because of what the Lord does in all of you. I thank God for that Marilyn. She is the delight of my eyes.

**Today.** This is a big day for me. It finishes something that I started 40 years ago. The Lord gives me the dignity of telling you, that I told the Lord: "if you do this for me, I will do that for you for thirty years." That is now complete. The Lord gives me the right to say that, and I am saying it.

But that's not what happened. What happened was that when I made that deal with Jesus, who has scars on his hands and his feet, he said to himself, "I can work with this. I will see Ed through both parts, all of this, right to the end." And as of today, he has done this for me. Amen.

PRAYER: Lord, when David gave you thanks for your work in him, he said, "What can I say, Lord? For you know your servant." And for me the same. You know your servant, Lord. You said we *all* could be confident that the one who began a good work in us would complete it. The one who calls us is faithful, and he will do it. Lord, you are doing all of this, in all of us. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:** To him who is able to keep us from stumbling and to present us before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.