

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A DISCIPLE AND HOW CHRISTIAN CHARACTER IS FORMED

²⁵ Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, ²⁶ “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. ²⁷ And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—

Luke 14:25-28 (NKJV)

So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14:33 (ESV)

Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.

Luke 17:33 (NKJV)

Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you.

Deuteronomy 8:5 (RSV)

“.....for those who honour me I will honour, and those who despise me shall be lightly esteemed.”

1 Samuel 2:30(b) (RSV)

Let us know; let us press on to know the Lord;.....

Hosea 6:3(a) (ESV)

⁶ Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, ⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. ⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.

Colossians 2:6-8 (ESV)

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine;

John 8:31 (NASB)

Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them,

Deuteronomy 11:16 (RSV)

And he did evil, because he did not prepare his heart to seek the Lord.

2 Chronicles 12:14 (NKJV)

then take heed lest you forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

Deuteronomy 6:12(a) (RSV)

¹² and may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, ¹³ so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

1 Thessalonians 3:12-13 (ESV)

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”
John 13:35 (RSV)

²³ And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. ²⁴ For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. ²⁵ For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? ²⁶ For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.
Luke 9:23-26 (ESV)

Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”
Luke 9:62 (ESV)

⁴⁰ So they took his advice, and when they had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. ⁴¹ Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name.
Acts 5:40-41 (RSV)

²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.
Acts 14:21-22 (ESV)

¹I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love,
Ephesians 4:1-2 (RSV)

He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”
John 14:21 (RSV)

⁸ For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. ⁹ Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead;
2 Corinthians 1:8-9 (RSV)

And I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.
Philippians 1:6 (RSV)

There are many false teachings, wrong ideas and unrealistic expectations about what is involved in being a Christian

The main reason I wrote this chapter was to try to correct some of the misconceptions in the Western churches about what it means to be a Christian. In my own experience, over more than 30 years, I have heard very little preaching about the *cost and difficulty* of being a disciple. On the rare occasions when discipleship is mentioned at all, the impression is given that the Christian life is meant to be easy and comfortable, with little or no opposition.

Accordingly, most of us have no expectation of there being any price to pay for being a disciple. Most 'churchgoers' today are not taught to expect any affliction, pressure or testing. Instead, the general impression given is that the Christian life is meant to be non-challenging, uncontroversial, moderate and that we should fit in nicely with the unbelieving world around us.

Some leaders go even further and preach what has come to be known as a "*prosperity gospel*". That is the idea that Christians should expect to prosper financially and that they should pray for and expect to receive wealth, property and prestige *in this life*. Indeed, the absence of such privileges is then portrayed as if it was evidence that one lacks faith, or that one is not living right, or not pleasing God.

There is actually an element of truth in such teaching about prosperity, but only an element. It is frequently taken much too far, until it becomes a dangerously false teaching. So, as a general rule, if we live in accordance with God's will, develop the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and put biblical principles into practice, then we will prosper. Moreover, that will often include financial success and promotion in one's career.

The problem is that that is very far from being the *whole truth* about what it means to '*prosper*'. That is because, *in addition* to receiving such blessings, every real Christian must *also* expect to receive affliction, opposition, struggles, testing and also God's discipline. On top of all that, we also have to wage a lifelong war on three different fronts against the world, the flesh and the Devil. (See below for more information about these three battles and see also Books Seven and Nine which address them in detail.)

Experiencing all of these things is not inconsistent with prospering. At least there is no contradiction if we correctly define prosperity. It really means *being where God wants you to be, and successfully doing what He wants you to do*. By that definition, even as Jesus hung on the cross, He was prospering, because He was achieving God's purposes, and on a massive scale.

In this chapter I hope to set out a more realistic picture of what we can expect to experience in our lives if we become a real Christian, as opposed to a nominal one. Then we can count the cost properly, ideally even before we are converted. If so, we will be much better placed to handle the struggles and persecution that later come our way, rather than be surprised or resentful when they arise.

That said, the average 'churchgoer' in the West does not receive much, if any, affliction, or at least not as a result of his beliefs. Many of us are not sufficiently recognizable as Christians to be seen as a threat by any of God's enemies, whether human or demonic. In fact, the average Christian does not even give the subject of affliction any thought, mainly because he has never been told that he ought to.

That, in turn, is because a lot of church leaders take the view (correctly) that if they told the truth about what the Bible actually tells us to expect, then many of us would leave their churches. They know that many of us would go elsewhere, so as to hear a more comfortable message. A large percentage of church leaders are hirelings, doing a paid job, rather than genuine shepherds. They choose to limit themselves to saying what people *want* to hear rather than what they *need* to hear. (See Book Eight for more details of the differences between hirelings and shepherds)

I will now attempt to summarise what the Bible actually tells a disciple to expect. However, for the reasons stated above, you may find that it is a message that you have not heard before.

Being a disciple involves a deep commitment to Jesus Christ and a determination to follow and obey Him for the rest of your life.

The word '*disciple*' is rarely even used in most Western churches today, let alone taught on. Therefore, many of us have no idea how radical the Bible is about the expectations Jesus has of His disciples. He actually *commands* that we follow Him, obey Him and devote our entire lives to Him. We are meant to hand over to Him all that we have and all that we are. That includes our possessions, career plans, ambitions, relationships and even our own bodies.

Too many of us think that a Christian is simply someone who believes in God, or perhaps someone who goes to church. We tend to recoil from the suggestion that we should be any more committed than that. It sounds '*over the top*' to our modern ears to go any further than merely believing in Jesus.

Therefore, most Christians in the West settle for a life which is far less challenging, productive and adventurous than God intends us to have. He wants us all to aim very high and to seek to become the best disciple that we can possibly be. That should involve achieving great things for Him, i.e. relative to the level of talents we have been given.

Instead, most of us just want an easy life and to avoid inconvenience, hard work and discomfort. But, in taking the easy options, we are not experiencing the things that God wants us to face and overcome. Therefore we miss out on a great many blessings. In particular we would miss out on some or all of the rewards that Jesus will one day give out at the Judgment Seat of Christ to those who have served Him faithfully. (See Book Four.)

Those who choose the easy option, whether due to laziness, fear or lack of motivation, are going to miss out. They will not receive a host of blessings and rewards which Jesus wants to give to those disciples who serve Him with all their hearts. We therefore need to get really clear that becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ is a radical and costly step to take. It does bring blessings and advantages, and we must not overlook those either. However, it also involves handing over your whole life to Him and agreeing to follow and obey Him, whatever the cost may be.

It means a complete surrender of your own will to His, and to do what He wants, even if that clashes with what you want, as it often will. It may mean facing suffering, or even death, for His sake. A real Christian must be willing to receive the whole package of what it means to be a disciple, both the good and the bad.

Those are strange and extreme sounding statements to make. They will jar with most modern ears and sound excessive. We live in an age which has largely forgotten what discipleship is and we don't like to talk about duty, self-sacrifice or hardship. We know what it is to be a fan, but Jesus is not looking for fans. He is not a celebrity or a pop star. He is the King. In fact, He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He is also the Creator, Saviour, High Priest and Judge. Given all of that, He is fully entitled to expect complete loyalty and devoted service.

Moreover, Jesus is fully entitled to give us orders and commands. Again, those are words which sound odd to our Western ears. Today very few of us have had any military service. Therefore the very concept of giving absolute obedience to anybody's orders is unfamiliar to us, and even alien. But we need to grasp this. If not, we will have an inaccurate and unbalanced idea of what is involved in being Jesus' disciple.

Life as a Christian is not meant to be a holiday camp. A closer analogy would be to liken it to joining the army. When you become a soldier you give up all of your freedom and independence. You agree to go wherever you are sent and do whatever is required of you, however hard it may be, even if it means going to your death.

In much of the underdeveloped world, and especially in Islamic countries, becoming a Christian today may well involve losing one's life. More Christians were martyred in the twentieth century than in all the previous nineteen centuries combined. And it is getting even worse in this century, though our dishonest and politically correct media chooses not to report any of that.

Their silence is primarily due to fear of being seen to criticise Islam. It is persistently portrayed as if it was a '*religion of peace*'. In fact, it has always been spread and sustained by violence and intimidation, and it still is. For that reason, it is now by far the main persecutor of the Church.

Moreover, the power and viciousness of Islam is growing and it is spreading into Europe and America, in which it previously had no foothold. Soon, even in the West, becoming a Christian will involve increasingly severe persecution at the hands of Muslims and also aggressive secularists.

Being a real Christian is not easy. It is going to involve difficulty, opposition and even suffering.

We need to abandon any illusions we may be under. Alongside all the joys and benefits of becoming a real Christian, seeking to live as a *genuine, Bible-believing disciple* will involve many forms of struggle. Every *real* Christian has enlisted as a soldier in a spiritual war and is going to be treated as such by all God's enemies, both human and demonic.

They will certainly see you as their enemy, regardless of whether you see them as yours. If we do not realise those facts from the outset, then we are likely to give up and fall away at the first sign of hardship. We will do so, not because it is particularly *severe* as such, but because it is *unexpected*. The remedy for that is that we must be realistic enough to expect turbulence. Then we will not be surprised by it when it comes:

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; ¹⁶ yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God.

1Peter 4:12-16 (RSV)

When apostle Paul was converted God revealed to Ananias how much Paul would have to suffer for the sake of Jesus. Ananias must have told Paul about this, because Luke knew of it, which is why it is in the book of Acts. The point is that God made it clear to Paul, from the outset, that life as a Christian was not going to be easy:

¹⁵ But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; ¹⁶ for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name."

Acts 9:15-16 (RSV)

What Ananias was told proved to be entirely accurate. Years later, in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul gives a list of just *some* of the things he had to endure:

²⁴ Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night,

in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ *And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches.*

2 Corinthians 11:24-28 (RSV)

Apostle Paul also spoke very plainly to the church in Philippi about what being a disciple really involves. He describes it as being involved in a conflict which involves opposition and suffering:

²⁷ *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,* ²⁸ *and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.* ²⁹ *For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,* ³⁰ *engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

Philippians 1:27-30 (ESV)

Paul also told Timothy how his own life had involved a lot of persecution and that the same will happen to everyone who wants to live a godly life:

¹⁰ *Now you have observed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness,* ¹¹ *my persecutions, my sufferings, what befell me at Antioch, at Ico'nium, and at Lystra, what persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me.* ¹² *Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,* ¹³ *while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.*

2 Timothy 3:10-13 (RSV)

The problem is that we have to live as Christians in a non-Christian world. It is crooked, wicked and often hostile to what we believe. But we are not only meant to live amongst such people; we are supposed to shine like lights for their benefit. Moreover, instead of grumbling or complaining about this, Paul instructs us to be glad and to rejoice at the opportunities given to us to be such a light:

¹² *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,* ¹³ *for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* ¹⁴ *Do all things without grumbling or disputing,* ¹⁵ *that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world,* ¹⁶ *holding fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.* ¹⁷ *Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.* ¹⁸ *Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.*

Philippians 2:12-18 (ESV)

Every disciple is regarded as being part of the spiritual war between God and His enemies. Therefore we all have a duty to learn how to fight effectively in that war

We are expected to see ourselves as being part of a huge worldwide battle:

“fight the good fight of the faith;..... ”

Timothy 6:12 (a) (RSV)

¹⁰ *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might.* ¹¹ *Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.* ¹² *For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.*

Ephesians 6:10-12 (RSV)

³ For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, ⁴ for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵ We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,
2 Corinthians 10:3-5 (RSV)

God is training us for service in that war and the difficulties we face are meant to make us stronger and more ready for battle:

***Blessed be the Lord, my rock,
who trains my hands for war,
and my fingers for battle;***
Psalm 144:1 (RSV)

The war between God and His enemies has been going on ever since the Devil rebelled and led astray one third of the angels in Heaven. The scale of that battle grew even larger after Adam fell into sin. From then on human beings also became God's enemies, alongside the demons.

Every Christian is part of that war and is expected to fight in it. Regrettably, that fact is not widely known. Some of us may have heard of it, but we don't really believe it, or we won't accept it. Even if we do know there is a war, many of us see ourselves as non-combatants, or even neutrals. Those who think that way have no intention of fighting in any war or of getting caught up in it.

However, whether you know it or not, you are already caught up in that war anyway. That is, provided you are a *real* Christian. If you are, then Satan and his demons will regard you as a target, irrespective of what you may think of them.

It is not a war against human beings, and it does not involve guns, bombs or any other such weapons. Neither can it involve the use of carnal methods and techniques which the world uses, such as deception, manipulation, domination or the control of other people. But it is, nonetheless, a very real conflict, which is fought on many different fronts and in every part of your life. We shall examine some of those aspects below.

At any rate, God expects you to view yourself as a soldier in that spiritual war and to fight actively and effectively on His side. He also expects you to be alert and armed, i.e. spiritually, not militarily. We are instructed to wear the '*armour*' that God provides. Apostle Paul refers to this in his letter to the Ephesians:

¹³ Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, ¹⁵ and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; ¹⁶ besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. ¹⁷ And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Ephesians 6:13-17 ((RSV)

In the book of Judges, we are told that God allowed some of the Canaanites to be left in the Land of Israel, even after the first generation of Israelites took possession of it after leaving the wilderness. He did so because He wanted the Israelites of the next generation to learn how to fight, just as the generation that won the land under Joshua had to learn:

Now these are the nations which the Lord left, to test Israel by them, that is, all in Israel who had no experience of any war in Canaan; ² it was only that the generations of the people of Israel might know war, that he might teach war to such at least as had not known it before. ³ These are the nations: the five lords of the Philistines, and all the Canaanites, and the Sido'nians, and the Hivites who dwelt on Mount Lebanon, from Mount Ba'al-her'mon as far as the entrance of

Hamath. ⁴ They were for the testing of Israel, to know whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord, which he commanded their fathers by Moses.

Judges 3:1-4 (RSV)

In other words, God allowed some of those Canaanites to remain, so as to test His people and also to give them a need to fight, so that they could have the opportunity to learn how to do it. Although we are not called upon to fight human beings with military weapons, or even with carnal, worldly methods, the warfare analogy is still a valid one. God still wants us to learn how to fight for Him today, albeit that our battles are mainly spiritual.

As well as requiring *us* to take part in this war, Jesus *Himself* is involved in it. Contrary to the image most people have of Jesus, He is also a military figure. Indeed, one of Jesus' titles is the 'Lord of Hosts'? The word 'hosts' means armies. So, in effect, the title means that Jesus is the "Lord of armies". We actually see a pre-appearance of Jesus in the book of Joshua, where He appears to Joshua with a drawn sword in His hand and gives orders to him in a military manner.

In this incident he is referred to as the "angel of the LORD". That is another title that is used to refer to Jesus in the Old Testament, when He appeared in bodily form prior to His incarnation. In this incident the angel of the LORD, i.e, Jesus, describes Himself as the "Commander of the army of the LORD". He has every appearance of being a military figure:

¹³ When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man stood before him with his drawn sword in his hand; and Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you for us, or for our adversaries?" ¹⁴ And he said, "No; but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and worshiped, and said to him, "What does my lord bid his servant?" ¹⁵ And the commander of the LORD's army said to Joshua, "Put off your shoes from your feet; for the place where you stand is holy." And Joshua did so.

Joshua 5:13-15 (RSV)

This Person who appeared to Joshua was obviously not just an angel, because Joshua bows down and worships Him, which he would never do to an angel. Indeed, no angel would allow anyone to worship them. Joshua is also told to take off his shoes because the ground on which he stands is now "holy" by virtue of God being present there. In the next chapter we see that this same Person, who is now referred to as "the LORD", tells Joshua what to do about attacking and taking the city of Jericho:

¹ Now Jericho was shut up from within and from without because of the people of Israel; none went out, and none came in. ² And the LORD said to Joshua, "See, I have given into your hand Jericho, with its king and mighty men of valor. ³ You shall march around the city, all the men of war going around the city once. Thus shall you do for six days. ⁴ And seven priests shall bear seven trumpets of rams' horns before the ark; and on the seventh day you shall march around the city seven times, the priests blowing the trumpets. ⁵ And when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, as soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall go up every man straight before him."

Joshua 6:1-5 (RSV)

Later we again see the LORD (Jesus) speaking to Joshua and giving him further military instructions, this time about attacking and taking the city of Ai:

¹ And the Lord said to Joshua, "Do not fear or be dismayed; take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land; ² and you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king; only its spoil and its cattle you shall take as booty for yourselves; lay an ambush against the city, behind it." ³ So Joshua arose, and all the fighting men, to go up to Ai; and Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valor, and sent them forth by night.

Joshua 8:1-3 (RSV)

¹⁸ *Then the Lord said to Joshua, “Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai; for I will give it into your hand.” And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city.*
¹⁹ *And the ambush rose quickly out of their place, and as soon as he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and took it; and they made haste to set the city on fire.*

Joshua 8:18-19 (RSV)

We also see the LORD of Hosts accompanying King David. That largely explains David’s tremendous military successes. He had the commander of God’s army working alongside him and guiding him:

⁹ *And David became greater and greater, for the Lord of hosts was with him.*
1 Chronicles 11:9 (RSV)

The point is that in all of this, the angel of the LORD, i.e. Jesus, is seen as a *military* figure. He is referred to as the Commander of the army of the LORD and He operates in a military fashion, giving military orders about the conquest of a city. This illustrates the fact that, like Him, we are engaged in a war, albeit a spiritual one. That is evidently how God sees it, or He would have no need of any ‘army’. Given that Jesus Himself is engaged in that war, leading all of God’s armies, we have no valid basis to think that we can be excused from having to take part in His battles.

Self-denial is a valid and essential part of a life of discipleship

Modern Western society is fixated upon self. We are continually urged to indulge ourselves, such that many of us have become habitually self-centered and even self-obsessed. Far from condemning such an approach, modern psychology encourages us to *focus* on ourselves, *excuse* ourselves and *love* ourselves more and more.

By contrast, the Bible takes it as a given that we love ourselves more than enough as it is. God never tells us to love ourselves, because He knows that we already do. Therefore none of us has any need to learn how to love ourselves. Instead, He tells us to love *others* in the same way that we already love ourselves:

“.....You shall love your neighbour as yourself”
Matthew 19:19(b) (RSV)

The Bible takes a directly opposite approach to that taken by the world. It urges us to *deny* ourselves. That goes against all our carnal instincts and cultural expectations. But it is a vital part of being a disciple. Look how Jesus put it:

And he said to all, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.

Luke 9:23 (RSV)

This life of self-denial and of taking up a cross and carrying it is not restricted to a selected few, such as apostle Paul. The verse quoted above was not a special message, which Jesus only said to a few hardy types. He said it to “*all*” and that it applied to “*any*” man who would come after Him. Therefore it applies to you, and to me, and to all other disciples, without exception. Apostle Paul spoke of how much he had to give up for the sake of the gospel. But the sacrifices were worthwhile:

⁷ *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith; ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power*

of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 3:7-14 (RSV)

If we are ever going to learn how to deny ourselves and make sacrifices for Jesus' sake we must also learn how to *control* ourselves. Self-control is an essential first step to becoming a disciple. It enables us to make choices, and impose things on ourselves which our flesh nature does not want. Therefore self-control is listed as one of the fruit of the Spirit in Paul's letter to the Galatians:

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law.

Galatians 5:22-23 (RSV)

If you don't have self-control then it will not be possible to achieve any of God's objectives for your life. That is because your flesh nature will never desire what God wants, or cooperate with anything that promotes your growth as a disciple. Therefore, doing God's will is never the natural choice that you will instinctively make. It has to be imposed on yourself by yourself.

But you won't ever do that unless you can first learn to *control yourself*, such that your *will* makes the decisions, rather than you acting in accordance with your fleshly desires, instincts and habits. Therefore the Bible has a lot to say in favour of self-control. In fact, it is the only acceptable form of control. We cannot, and must not, control anybody else. But we can, and must, control ourselves:

*A man without self-control
is like a city broken into and left without walls
Proverbs 25:28 (RSV)*

*A fool gives full vent to his anger,
but a wise man quietly holds it back.
Proverbs 29:11 (RSV)*

When you become a disciple it is as if you change your nationality and become a citizen of the Kingdom of God. That Kingdom and its ways and values must become your focus, in place of the values of this world.

Another way to express the radical nature of the change we have to make, from being an unbeliever to a mature disciple, is to speak in terms of us changing our nationality. We are no longer to view ourselves primarily as citizens of the country we live in, but as people whose real citizenship is in Heaven. Jesus expects our primary loyalty to be to Him and to His Kingdom:

*But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ
Philippians 3:20 (ESV)*

Therefore, while we are alive now, we are effectively aliens or exiles. We live *in* this world but we are *not of* this world. We are to live as such, abstaining from many of the activities of those around us:

Since you call on a Father who judges each person's work impartially, live out your time as foreigners here in reverent fear.

1 Peter 1:17 (NIV)

¹¹ Beloved, I beseech you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against your soul.

1 Peter 2:11 (RSV)

We are not to love the things of this world, i.e. the sinful, worldly things which are opposed to God and all that he stands for:

¹⁵ Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world. ¹⁷ And the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

1 John 2:15-17 (RSV)

The entire population of this planet is divided into two groups - those who believe in the real God of the Bible and accept Jesus Christ, and those who don't. All who don't are described as being "of the world":

¹ Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, ³ and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already. ⁴ Little children, you are of God, and have overcome them; for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are of the world, therefore what they say is of the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are of God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and he who is not of God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

1 John 4:1-6 (RSV)

Part of the war we have to fight is a lifelong battle between our *new self* and our *old self*. In other words, it is a battle between our *spirit* and our *flesh*

The battle or conflict that we have to face is not only external to us, involving other people and demons. It is also an internal battle between our 'old self', otherwise known as our 'old man', 'carnal nature' or 'flesh', and our 'new self', 'new man' or 'new nature'. That is our human spirit which is reborn within us when we become a Christian.

This aspect of our overall battle is like a civil war between the two very different natures that are both alive within us. They remain within us until we die. This part of our struggle means that we have to choose to do what our new nature wants and to refuse to do what our flesh or old self wants. See how apostle Paul puts it:

⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

Romans 8:5-13 (ESV)

⁵ Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. ⁶ On account of these the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. ⁸ But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. ⁹ Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹ Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. ¹² Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, ¹³ bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴ And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:5-14 (ESV)

This first part of our battle, which is against our own sinful, flesh nature, is usually our greatest and hardest struggle. We have an opponent who is actually living inside us. It's not a demon. It's part of you. It operates as a kind of traitor or fifth-columnist seeking to undermine you from within and lead you astray. See Book Seven for a fuller discussion of our battle against the flesh. Now let us look more closely at the second and third battles that we have to fight. These are against the world system and also against the Devil and his demons.

We also have to contend with the sinful world system which is all around us. We must also reject its values and separate ourselves from its influence.

Whereas our battle against our own flesh takes place within ourselves, our battle against the world and all it stands for is an external one. By 'the world' we mean all of the thinking, values, standards, ways, priorities, practices, obsessions and methods of the unsaved and sinful world around us. It is a shorthand phrase for *the whole way that this present evil age operates*. This second part of our battle then is to resist the many temptations that this sinful world has to offer and to refuse to be conformed to it, or squeezed into its mould:

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.

Colossians 3:1-2 (RSV)

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:2 (ESV)

Apostle Paul also tells us that when we become a Christian we must cease to live in the worldly, futile way in which unbelievers live. We have to turn away from all such values and live differently:

¹⁷ Now this I affirm and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds; ¹⁸ they are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart; ¹⁹ they have become callous and have given themselves up to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of uncleanness.

Ephesians 4:17-19 (RSV)

²² Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, ²³ and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, ²⁴ and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24 (RSV)

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. ² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

³ But fornication and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is fitting among saints. ⁴ Let there be no filthiness, nor silly talk, nor levity, which are not fitting; but instead let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. ⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for it is because of these things that the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not associate with them, ⁸ for once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to learn what is pleasing to the Lord. ¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is a shame even to speak of the things that they do in secret;

Ephesians 5:1-12 (RSV)

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil. ¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. ¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, ¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart, ²⁰ always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

Ephesians 5:15-20 (RSV)

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Philippians 4:8 (RSV)

A real Christian is very different from the worldly people around him. He won't conform to their standards. Therefore the world will hate him. It hated Jesus and it will automatically hate, and oppose, anyone who rejects its ways and truly wants to follow and imitate Him:

Do not wonder, brethren, that the world hates you.

1 John 3:13 (RSV)

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

John 15:18-19 (ESV)

³ Let the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry. ⁴ They are surprised that you do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse you; ⁵ but they will give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.

1 Peter 4:3-5 (RSV)

Conversely, being a friend of the world automatically makes you an enemy of God:

Unfaithful creatures! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.

James 4:4 (RSV)

Every disciple needs to lose his fear of people and learn not to be ashamed of Jesus

We all have a strong desire to be liked and approved of by others. Therefore we are prone to neglecting our duties as disciples, or even denying Jesus, in order to avoid being disapproved of or criticised by other people. That craving to be approved of, or at least not to be disapproved of, keeps many of us trapped and paralysed with fear. The Bible calls this “*the fear of man*” and says that it becomes a ‘*snare*’.

***Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.
Proverbs 29:25 (NIV)***

If you can't conquer this fear of other people you will never get very far as a disciple of Jesus. You will always be the prisoner of other people's opinions. You will stay silent when you ought to speak, and also moderate the little that you do say, so as to avoid antagonizing the world around you. But if you do that, you are effectively following those people and are *their* disciple, rather than Jesus'.

The answer is to meet your fear head on and to refuse to submit to it. When you do that you will find that your fear of other people will diminish, or even disappear. At any rate, whether we find it easy or hard, the fact is God commands us not to fear other people:

***⁷ “Hear me, you who know what is right,
you people who have taken my instruction to heart:
Do not fear the reproach of mere mortals
or be terrified by their insults.
⁸ For the moth will eat them up like a garment;
the worm will devour them like wool.
But my righteousness will last forever,
my salvation through all generations.”
Isaiah 51:7-8 (NIV)***

We must also take active steps to rid ourselves of any sense of shame or embarrassment at being openly identified as being a disciple of Jesus. Many Christians feel reasonably relaxed about speaking about ‘*church*’ or even ‘*God*’. However, there is something about the specific name of ‘*Jesus*’ and also about speaking of the *cross* or the *gospel*, that makes even real Christians feel awkward and embarrassed. So they avoid the use of the Name ‘*Jesus*’ and also avoid or tone down any reference to the *gospel*. We need to resolve to overcome that sense of shame, as apostle Paul did, and be open about the whole *gospel*:

***For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.
Romans 1:16 (NKJV)***

I once had a one to one meeting with the senior leader of a particular church. I asked him why he consistently avoids controversial or unpopular themes when he preaches. He admitted that he fears the reaction of the people in the congregation and that he is also afraid of people generally. I was impressed by his honesty in being willing to admit those things to me. Few other leaders would do so, even though many are just as fearful as him.

He impressed me even more when he then asked: “*How can I get rid of that fear of people?*” My reply was that the best way would be to replace his fear of people with an even stronger fear of God. That is we need to develop such a strong fear of the LORD that it negates, or drives out, any fear of people that we might still suffer from.

He then asked “*But how can I develop the fear of the LORD?*” My reply was that he could develop it by making a series of small decisions, day by day, to do what God wants, rather than what people want. Therefore, in his preaching, I said he should resolve to say exactly what God’s Word says and not to avoid any part of it, even if it is controversial or contradicts current orthodoxy or political correctness.

I said that each time he does that, even if only in small ways, or in front of small groups, his fear of man will get slightly smaller and his fear of God will get slightly bigger. The increments might only be small, but they add up and make a profound difference over a period of time. By doing this, even the most timid person can eventually learn to behave in a remarkably bold way, which he might never have thought possible.

Imagine you were afraid of the school bully but were even more afraid of the Headmaster. What if they were both nearby and were telling you to do the opposite things? Your fear of the Headmaster would outweigh your fear of the school bully and therefore set you free from it. It is a little bit like that with the fear of the LORD. As it grows, it sets us free from all other competing fears.

I also said, to this particular leader that I was meeting with, that we can develop the fear of the LORD by seeking to develop a fear for *His written Word*. Far too many of us are casual about God’s Word and handle it as if it was the word of a mere man, i.e. as if we were reading a passage from Shakespeare or Charles Dickens. That is true of many preachers too. They have little or no fear of God’s Word, because they don’t fear God Himself. However, the same is true in reverse as well. That is they do not fear God, because they do not fear His Word.

We are meant to fear God’s Word. It is meant to be awesome to us, because of *whose* Word it is and also because of its power. However, there is another reason why we should fear God’s Word, which few of us ever realise. That is that when we are judged at the Judgment Seat of Christ, one of the criteria by which we will be judged is the extent to which we have taken note of, and obeyed, God’s written Word. (See Book Four for a fuller discussion of this theme).

The point is that whenever we read God’s Word, and even more so whenever we teach or preach from it, we will be held accountable, and one day judged, for *how* we handled it. Jesus will hold us accountable for whether we *believed* it and also whether we took it seriously or treated it lightly. If we are in any position of leadership, such that we teach or preach, then Jesus will judge whether we compromised and *edited* His Word, so as to avoid making ourselves unpopular or arousing antagonism, or whether we presented it fully and accurately.

Countless preachers do alter the meaning of God’s Word, or they leave out parts of it, so as to avoid controversy. The same is true also of those who are not preachers. All of us face the same temptation to compromise God’s message in order to preserve our own image and reputation. But we have no right to do so and we will have to face the rebuke of Jesus Christ Himself if we do.

We should much prefer to be rebuked now by the world rather than be rebuked later by Jesus. That’s because we should fear Him far more than we fear them. And we should fear *His* Word far more than we fear *their* words. The prophet Isaiah says that God is looking for people who actually *tremble* at His Word, i.e. because they take it so seriously and are so concerned to abide by it:

***All these things my hand has made,
and so all these things are mine,
says the LORD.
But this is the man to whom I will look,
he that is humble and contrite in spirit,
and trembles at my word.
Isaiah 66:2 (RSV)***

Our third battle is against the Devil and all his demons. They are doing all they can to undermine and destroy you.

If life as a Christian was not already complicated enough, with our own flesh and the ungodly world system to deal with, it is made much harder by the involvement of the Devil and his demons. They are all fallen angels who were thrown out of Heaven long ago, before this world was made. They have already been judged and have been sentenced to spend eternity in the Lake of Fire. Indeed, it was created for them.

However, their sentence has not yet been carried out. Until it is, most of the demons are free to go where they wish and to interfere with us and oppose us. God actually permits them to do so, albeit within certain limits. Their primary objectives are to tempt us to *sin*, to get us to be *afraid* and *discouraged*, and to render us *ineffective* as disciples. They especially want to prevent us from telling others about the gospel. Our battle against the Devil and his demons, is a purely spiritual one:

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Ephesians 6:12 (ESV)

The demons are well aware of the other two battles we already face, against our own flesh and against the sinful world system. They are watching us fight those battles and they make full use of both of those struggles in their attempt to further undermine us. So, these three battles are each distinct and separate. Yet, they are all being waged simultaneously and in many ways they are all interconnected.

God wants disciples to *bear fruit* and do good works. That involves *dying to oneself*, which we do to ourselves, and being *pruned*, which God does to us. Both processes are painful, but essential if we are to be fruitful.

Being a disciple is not only about fighting battles. God also wants every Christian to *do good works* for Him. That is one of the reasons why we were created. God wants each of us to fulfil the purposes He has set for us and to make a difference in the lives of other people:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:10 (ESV)

We are also meant to *bear fruit* in the sense that the people around us benefit from our lives, and especially from our good works. Paul makes clear that that is what God wants from us:

⁹ And so, from the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, ¹⁰ to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Colossians 1:9-10 (RSV)

⁹ And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart. ¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

Galatians 6:9-10 (RSV)

Before we can become capable of bearing fruit of the right kind we first of all have to change. We are not able to produce anything good in our own strength, or from our own carnal nature. The things that come from us naturally are just *works of the flesh*. The Bible uses some agricultural analogies to describe what therefore needs to happen to us if we are to become fruitful.

Firstly, we are told that we need to *die to ourselves* and to all that our flesh nature stands for. Jesus Himself spoke of this and likened each of us to a grain of wheat falling to the earth and dying. Apostle Paul also spoke of putting to death all that is earthly or carnal in our nature. In effect, we are called to be the ‘executioner’ of our own flesh nature. God does not do it for us. We have to do this to ourselves:

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

Colossians 3:5 (RSV)

As we deny ourselves, and put our flesh nature to death, then we are like a grain of wheat dying in the ground. As a result it is able to produce far more grains of wheat than the single grain that it was to begin with. So, each believer must deny their own flesh *by refusing to give it what it wants*. We must be so severe in our self-denial that it is as if our flesh was being “*put to death*”. If we are willing to do that to ourselves, like a seed which dies in the soil, then we will bear fruit:

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. ²⁵ Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ²⁶ If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

John 12:24-26 (ESV)

Another agricultural analogy which the Bible uses is to speak of *pruning*. A rose bush or a fruit-bearing shrub needs to be cut back every year in order to produce the maximum harvest the next year. Cutting back the branches enables that which remains to grow more vigorously and to be far more productive. The same applies to us. If we want to bear fruit in our lives we have to be willing to be ‘pruned’. That involves having certain things within our lives cut off, or at least cut back. Jesus compares Himself to a vine and says that we are the branches and that God the Father is the vinedresser or farmer who does the pruning:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

John 15:1-2 (RSV)

Those branches that bear no fruit at all are cut off completely. So they have no future role. But even the branches that do bear some fruit are still pruned. That is done to cause that branch to grow back again and to be even more fruitful next time. So those branches that are pruned do have a future. God wants to take away all those parts of our life, character or possessions which would make us less fruitful if they were allowed to remain.

Preparing for persecution and suffering

We therefore need to start to see struggle, persecution and suffering as normal, rather than objecting to them, as though they were things which ought not to be happening to us. Far too many of us have been presented with a watered-down gospel. It is portrayed as being all about God’s love and about enjoying a life of peace and prosperity. Then, when we actually encounter severe difficulties, we are surprised and even resentful, as if God has let us down. We feel He has not lived up to the image we had of Him, based on the way He was described to us.

But, far from promising us peace and prosperity, Jesus told us straightforwardly that Christians need to expect division and not to be surprised when they encounter hostility from the unbelieving world, from apostate Christians within the churches, and even from their own families. In fact, far from being the exception, such opposition is often at its worst within our own families:

⁵¹"Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; ⁵²for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. ⁵³"They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Luke 12:51-53 (NASB)

He also told us plainly that we would be like sheep in the midst of wolves and that people will persecute us simply for believing in Him, and for being His representatives:

¹⁶ "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. ¹⁷ Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, ¹⁸ and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles."

Matthew 10: 16-18 (ESV)

²¹ Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, ²² and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ²³ When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. ²⁴ A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master."

Matthew 10: 21-24 (ESV)

The point is that the world hates Jesus. Therefore they will automatically hate His followers. We have all got to come to terms with that. Indeed, if we don't ever experience any hostility, rejection and opposition from the world, and from apostate Christians, then it is probably a sign that we are lukewarm and are not doing, or saying, what the Bible tells us to.

In other words, it may be that there is nothing in our lives for the unbelieving world to object to, because we are watering down our beliefs so as to make ourselves more acceptable to the world. Instead, we need to do the opposite and aim to be less like the world and more like Jesus. But, remember that if we are, then we will inevitably be persecuted:

¹⁸ "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, "Servants are not greater than their master." If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me."

John 15:18-21 (NASB)

"I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. ² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. ³ And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. ⁴ But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you. I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you."

John 16:1-4 (ESV)

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

2 Timothy 3:12 (NASB)

³¹ Jesus answered them, "Do you now believe? ³² Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. ³³ I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

John 16:31-33 (ESV)

²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

Acts 14:21-22 (ESV)

²² And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, ²³ except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. ²⁴ But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

Acts 20:22-24 (ESV)

Therefore we really must not be surprised or discouraged when we meet opposition. Nor should we be intimidated by it, or allow ourselves to change our course because of it. Instead, we should endure it all and carry on regardless, blessing and praying for those who persecute us:

and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;

1 Corinthians 4:12 (NASB)

A genuine Christian will inevitably be *persecuted*, but he need not necessarily be *defeated*. And he certainly is not forsaken, no matter how severe his difficulties may become. God will be with us through it all, and will not allow us to be destroyed by the experiences we face.

⁸ *we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;*

2 Corinthians 4:8-9 (NASB)

We can also take encouragement from the fact that Jesus Himself endured a huge amount of hostility from those who hated Him and His message. He is therefore our main example to follow:

Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

Hebrews 12:3 (RSV)

Although any real Christian will certainly be opposed in this world, we can still be at peace, in the sense of being reconciled to the fact that such mistreatment is inevitable. We can take courage from the fact that, no matter how severe it gets, Jesus has already won the main battle. His overall victory is certain. Therefore we already know that we are on the winning side and are contending against an enemy whose eventual defeat is assured. Consider the following sample passages which illustrate Jesus' triumph over Satan and over all that is evil:

³³ *"These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world."*

John 16:33 (NASB)

He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him

Colossians 2:15 (RSV)

¹² *But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³ then to wait until his enemies should be made a stool for his feet.*

Hebrews 10:12-13 (RSV)

¹² *Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast; ¹⁴ his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; ¹⁶ in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.*

Revelation 1:12-16 (RSV)

Then the seventh angel blew his trumpet, and there were loud voices in heaven, saying, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever."

Revelation 11:15 (RSV)

⁷ *Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, ⁸ but they were defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. ⁹ And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. ¹⁰ And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.*

Revelation 12:7-10 (RSV)

¹¹ *Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.*

Revelation 19:11-16 (RSV)

And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

Revelation 20:10 (NASB)

While we wait for Jesus to commence His reign as King over all the Earth, we can be completely sure that, no matter what we are called upon to face or endure in the meantime, nothing can ever separate us from Him. Whatever happens to us in this life, including death as a martyr, He is still with us, even as we go through that experience. Jesus does not promise to *keep us from* suffering or death, but He does promise *to be with us* during those bad experiences. We will not be separated from Him or have to endure the ordeals on our own:

³*Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; ³⁴who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. ³⁵Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation,*

or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶Just as it is written, "for your sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 8:33-39 (NASB)

Endurance and perseverance

The character qualities of endurance and perseverance are not widely sought after. Perhaps that is because the only way to develop them is for us to endure and persevere regularly until we eventually get good at it. Doing that is not pleasant, but there is no other way to develop the ability to endure and persevere. Therefore, if we are wise, we will pray for these qualities to be developed in our lives, even though the learning process will be painful, because it is undoubtedly worth it. We should therefore pray, as Paul did, to be strengthened in endurance and patience:

¹¹ May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, ¹² giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,

Colossians 1:11-13 (ESV)

The ability to endure things patiently, and to persevere come what may, are qualities which God wants us to have. They are two of the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit. That means they are not *gifts*. God does not *give* us patience, endurance or perseverance in the way that He gives us natural abilities or spiritual gifts. They have to be *grown* in us as *fruits* over long periods of time. We can, of course, ask for God's *help* in developing these qualities, but it is still our responsibility to grow them.

In other words, God will not give us Christian character as a *gift*. It cannot be imputed to us instantly, as Jesus' righteousness is transferred to us at the moment when we are justified. We must choose to *pursue* these character qualities and to develop them over time. First of all, we must set our minds to want these things and to be determined to get them, because the Bible repeatedly tells us that we need these qualities:

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.

Hebrews 10:36 (ESV)

Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.

1 Corinthians 16:13 (NASB)

for now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 3:8 (NASB)

⁹ If anyone has an ear, let him hear:

¹⁰ If anyone is to be taken captive,

to captivity he goes;

if anyone is to be slain with the sword,

with the sword must he be slain.

Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints.

Revelation 13:9-10 (ESV)

Note that in each of the passages quoted above the responsibility is on us, not on God, to endure, stand firm, be strong etc. He will *help us*, but He will not *do it for us*. But we can still be encouraged because these qualities really can be developed. It is not a hopeless task. We have Jesus' example to follow first of all. But we also have the example of all the people of faith who have gone before us and who have endured severe trials and achieved great things by doing so. The writer to the Hebrews describes these people who have gone ahead of us as being a '*cloud of witnesses*'. He implies that they are able to see us and are cheering us on:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Hebrews 12:1-4 (ESV)

Nobody has had to endure more than Jesus, or been more hated than He was. He literally withstood everything that Satan himself had to throw at Him. Most of us are only ever going to encounter much weaker and lower-ranking demons. Yet Jesus endured suffering, while He was on this Earth in human form, just as we must. We can do likewise with our own suffering, especially if we realise that we need His help to persevere and ask Him for that help.

I don't often include quotations, other than from the Bible. However, this next one is worth reflecting on. It was said by Calvin Coolidge, the 30th President of the United States. He puts very well the vital importance of persistence if we are to succeed in anything:

*"Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence.
Talent will not;
nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with great talent.
Genius will not;
unrewarded genius is almost a proverb.
Education will not;
The world is full of educated derelicts.
Persistence, determination alone are omnipotent....."*

President Calvin Coolidge

Some of the beneficial effects of hardship

Though it is hard to believe this while you are going through a period of hardship, there really are many benefits that come from it. Some of these come to you personally. Others are about making you more effective for the sake of others. Therefore the benefit is also received by the cause we serve. We become better soldiers and ambassadors for Jesus and achieve more for Him.

Jesus' half-brother, James, tells us that trials produce steadfastness in us. That, in turn, leads to all sorts of further benefits. The end result is that we become complete and lacking in nothing:

² Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, ³ for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. ⁴ And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

James 1:2-4 (ESV)

Hardship is also one of the most effective ways God has to get us to come back to Him when we have been wandering away or growing lukewarm. When times are easy we tend to forget God and become preoccupied with ourselves or our own ambitions or possessions. But a dose of adversity soon brings us running back to God. It makes us rely on Him and become closer to Him:

⁴ *But I am the Lord your God*

from the land of Egypt;

you know no God but me,

and besides me there is no savior.

⁵ *It was I who knew you in the wilderness,*

in the land of drought;

⁶ *but when they had grazed, they became full,*

they were filled, and their heart was lifted up;

therefore they forgot me.

Hosea 13:4-6 (ESV)

Apostle Paul says that suffering produces endurance. That then produces character, which in turn produces hope. That hope then protects us from many things. Hope is therefore very important. That is why, in Paul's letters to the Ephesians and Thessalonians, we learn that hope is the '*helmet of salvation*', which Paul tells us to wear.

By that he firstly means the specific hope that we are going to be saved and have eternal life. But he also means hope in general, in its fuller, broader sense. In both of those ways hope is the best protection for our minds. It keeps us from depression and despair and therefore makes all sorts of other things achievable.

We will also receive rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ (see Book Four) for the level of endurance that we display in this life. Therefore another benefit of hardship is that it qualifies us to receive those rewards, such as the '*crown of life*' to which James refers:

Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him.

James 1:12 (ESV)

Whatever circumstances we have to face, and however hard they may be, God wants us to learn to be *content*, even while in those circumstances

Another character quality which every disciple needs to seek to develop in himself is *contentment*. That is the ability to be calm, at peace and reconciled to facing any circumstances that we are called upon to deal with. Few people have endured more than Apostle Paul. Yet, he tells us that he learned to be content in whatever situation he faced. But it is important to note the word '*learned*'.

Paul is not saying that he was always content, from the outset. On the contrary, he is saying that he had to gradually learn how to be content, over a period of time. That should encourage all of us, who are not presently content, to believe that such contentment is truly possible. We can achieve it if we really want it, and are willing to persist in seeking for it:

¹⁰ *I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

Philippians 4:10-13 (ESV)

When we become a Christian we also have a duty to learn the Bible thoroughly and to develop a broad and accurate knowledge of doctrine

When we become a Christian and set out on our life as a disciple we suddenly acquire a wide package of duties and responsibilities. It is as if we had joined the Army and become subject to military law and regulations. By that I do *not* mean that we should operate in a disciplined way and study diligently *in order to be saved*. We are to do so *because we have been saved*. In other words, we are not justified as a *result* of our works. We are called upon to do good works as a consequence of our *having already been* justified.

So, from the moment of conversion onwards, our greatest duty, and need, is to learn to understand and obey God's written Word, the Bible. The true extent of your love for Him and your devotion to Him is shown by your devotion to reading, learning and abiding by the Bible. You do not *love* Jesus one gram more than you love and obey His Word. And you do not *know* Him any more than you know His Word. There is no use pretending otherwise. The Bible makes this very clear:

²¹ Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him. ²² *Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?"* ²³ *Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.* ²⁴ *Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me.*

John 14: 21-24 (ESV)

¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.

John 15:14 (ESV)

³ And by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep his commandments. ⁴ He who says "I know him" but disobeys his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him; ⁵ but whoever keeps his word, in him truly love for God is perfected. By this we may be sure that we are in him: ⁶ he who says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

1 John 2:3-6 (RSV)

⁸ This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

Joshua 1:8 (ESV)

We are commanded to be obedient to Jesus and that means knowing and obeying His written Word. But how can we possibly do that unless we study it carefully? There is no other way. Therefore we are meant to become firmly rooted in the faith by knowing and obeying *the whole Bible*. That is also how we will avoid being led astray by false teaching and false prophets, of whom there are very many, especially in our own day:

Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, ⁷ having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude.⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.

Colossians 2:6-8 (NASB)

It is your duty therefore to obey all of Jesus' commands, including those given to us via the prophets and apostles, because every one of those was writing under God's instruction and guidance. Therefore, what they said is what God was saying. You are also responsible for making sure that you

are not deceived by false doctrines. As Paul says above, we are to “*see to it*”. You might perhaps imagine that Jesus would hold us blameless if we are deceived by false teachers. But that is not necessarily so, because proper diligence on our part is able to prevent us from being deceived in the first place. Any person who sincerely and diligently studies God’s Word will not be led astray.

At any rate, even if they are deceived for a while, it will not be permanent, because diligent study of God’s Word will eventually identify and correct the error. But that will only be the case if you are devoted to the Word of God itself, rather than to your own favourite teacher or denomination. However good they may be, they are not *authoritative* and they can never be *relied on*. Only God’s written Word is totally reliable. Everyone and everything else is flawed, or potentially flawed. They can all lead you astray if you follow them and rely on them, rather than on what the Bible says.

Therefore, as Paul says, you must “*see to it*” that you know the whole Bible really well, so that nobody is capable of deceiving you, or at least not for long. Be like the people of Berea who checked everything that any teacher told them by looking to see *whether it was in the Scriptures*. They did so even if that teacher was Apostle Paul.

By contrast, there have always been, and still are, many people who don’t want to hear the real truth of what the Bible says. Such people prefer a pleasant, easy, reassuring message. They automatically reject anything which sounds critical of their lifestyles, or which calls upon them to repent. They prefer to believe comforting lies rather than an uncomfortable truth. Isaiah spoke of such people:

⁹ *For they are a rebellious people,
lying sons,
sons who will not hear
the instruction of the Lord;
10 who say to the seers, “See not”;
and to the prophets, “Prophecy not to us what is right;
speak to us smooth things,
prophecy illusions,
11 leave the way, turn aside from the path,
let us hear no more of the Holy One of Israel.”
12 Therefore thus says the Holy One of Israel,
“Because you despise this word,
and trust in oppression and perverseness,
and rely on them;
13 therefore this iniquity shall be to you
like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse,
whose crash comes suddenly, in an instant;
14 and its breaking is like that of a potter’s vessel
which is smashed so ruthlessly
that among its fragments not a sherd is found
with which to take fire from the hearth,
or to dip up water out of the cistern.”
Isaiah 30:9-14 (RSV)*

What it means to “*enter by the narrow gate*” and to stay on the hard road, rather than take the broad, easy way

Another analogy which the Bible uses to describe the life of a real disciple is to speak of it as going through a narrow gate. That represents being saved. It then refers to continuing along a hard, narrow way. This represents the hardships faced by a disciple, rather than diverting onto any easy, broad path. The life of a real disciple is often difficult. Tough choices have to be made to deny oneself and to do one’s duty, even when one really doesn’t want to.

By contrast, the broad path, on which all unbelievers and false, compromised churchgoers travel, is very easy. On the broad path people can do whatever they want and always take the easy option. But a disciple has to choose to do what Jesus wants, which is much harder:

¹³ *“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few.*

Matthew 7:13-14 (RSV)

The narrow gate represents entering into the Christian life to begin with. It means believing the true gospel, as set out in the Bible, rather than the lukewarm, compromised, counterfeit gospel which so many churches present to us. Their man-made gospel is deliberately designed to be easy. It basically amounts to: *“Jesus loves you and wants you to love Him”*. There is little or no emphasis on sin, or God’s judgment, or our need to repent and get right with God.

Neither do they focus on the cost and hardship involved in a life of real discipleship. Such a realistic and accurate biblical message is not popular. Therefore a worldly church leader will not preach it. He fears being criticised for the things he says. He also fears offending people and therefore losing members. In particular, he fears losing their financial support.

So, vast numbers of people enter churches (at least in the West) with a very inadequate and inaccurate idea of what the gospel is. Many of them are not saved at all. They have not been shown the narrow gate and they have not entered by it. That therefore puts them on the wrong path from the start. But, even if they do begin well, merely to *enter* by the narrow gate is not enough.

If we want to develop into a strong disciple we must then *stay on the hard way* and not give in to the temptation to leave it in favour of the easier and broader path which leads to destruction. It is your responsibility to find out whether you are on the hard path and, if you are, then to stay on it and not veer off onto the easy way. The responsibility for all of that cannot be delegated to anybody else. However, God will, of course, help you to stay faithful, if you are willing to be helped.

Of all those who claim to be Christians, not everyone is genuine. We are not all real disciples

Another point about which we need to become realistic is the fact that not everybody who claims to be a Christian really is one. Many people are false. Many are deceivers and even more are deceived. So, we cannot safely assume that everybody who goes to church, or even all those who lead churches, are real Christians. Many are not and it is your personal responsibility to identify those who are false and to avoid coming under their influence. One day Jesus will put the question beyond doubt by identifying all such false people. Then they will be publicly rejected by Him:

²¹ *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’ ²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; ²⁵ and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; ²⁷ and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.”*

Matthew 7:21-28 (RSV)

There are many people who appear to be real, and who even say a lot of right things. But they are not genuine. They may say the right things, but they do not truly believe it themselves:

*Hear this, O house of Jacob,
who are called by the name of Israel,
and who came from the waters of Judah,
who swear by the name of the LORD
and confess the God of Israel,
but not in truth or right.*

Isaiah 48:1 (ESV)

Of the people who claim to be Christians, they are not all real disciples. Many people in churches are false and you are expected to try to learn how to identify them. You are to do so primarily by examining their *fruit*. You are also meant to learn how to identify their *false teaching*, by constantly comparing what they say with what the Bible says.

There is literally no church member or leader, however eminent, upon whom you can safely and uncritically rely. Whoever they may be, you are meant to check their teaching against the Bible. Moreover, if they don't like the fact that you are doing that, then that in itself tells you something very important about them. It would probably be your cue to leave that church and go elsewhere.

Consider also this very sobering passage from Luke, in which Jesus speaks of the need to enter by the narrow door and warns us against being complacent:

²² He went on his way through towns and villages, teaching and journeying toward Jerusalem. ²³ And someone said to him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" And he said to them, ²⁴ "Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. ²⁵ When once the master of the house has risen and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then he will answer you, 'I do not know where you come from.' ²⁶ Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets.' ²⁷ But he will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you come from. Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' ²⁸ In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. ²⁹ And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God. ³⁰ And behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last."

Luke 13:22-30 (ESV)

We see from the above passage that many who assume themselves to be Christians, and thus to be saved, will one day discover that they *are not*, or even that they *never were*. They will hear Jesus tell them to depart, because He does not know where they come from. In other words, they do not belong to Him

There is a high cost involved in being a genuine disciple. We must be realistic about that and be willing to pay that price.

Being a genuine disciple involves paying a high price. At any rate, the cost of real discipleship is far higher than most of us have been told to expect. Therefore we need to be much more realistic about that cost and be willing to pay whatever it takes. The truth is that Jesus makes very high demands of us at times. Here is a passage where Jesus makes these points in His own graphic way:

¹⁸ Now when Jesus saw a crowd around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. ¹⁹ And a scribe came up and said to him, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." ²⁰ And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his

head.”²¹ Another of the disciples said to him, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”²² And Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead.”

Matthew 8:18-22 (ESV)

Jesus means that when we choose to follow Him we need to give up any idea of having any rights, entitlements or expectations. We must hand over our entire lives to Him and follow Him, wherever He goes and whatever it costs. Consider this very frank statement by Jesus in Luke’s gospel about the high level of commitment involved in true discipleship.

He speaks of the need to ‘hate’ our father and mother etc. He does not mean that literally. It is a figure of speech. We know that, because the fifth commandment tells us all to honour our father and mother. What Jesus means is simply that other people must all be put into second place, behind Him.

He wants us to count the cost of following Him realistically, ahead of time, and to resolve to be willing to pay it, before we even begin. In fact, from the outset, we must renounce all that we have and see it as His property. We must then focus on following Him as our top priority, ahead of everything else and everyone else:

²⁵ Now great multitudes accompanied him; and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build, and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends an embassy and asks terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Luke 14:25-33 (RSV)

For many of us the hardest thing to give up and to hand over to Jesus is our money and possessions. They can exert a terrifically strong hold over us. Nevertheless, we must be willing to give it all to Him and consider it all as being at His disposal. Indeed, some of us will be called to literally give it all away:

¹⁸ And a ruler asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ¹⁹ And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.’” ²¹ And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” ²³ But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. ²⁴ Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁶ Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁷ But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” ²⁸ And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” ²⁹ And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, ³⁰ who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

Luke 18:18-30 (ESV)

Jesus did not come to bring peace to this present age. On the contrary, following Him and staying true to His Word will result in conflict and trouble.

Being a genuine disciple of Jesus Christ does bring you peace. However, that means in the Hebrew sense of being at peace *within*, or *despite*, difficult circumstances. The peace that Jesus gives us does *not mean the absence* of such difficulties.

The Hebrew word for peace is '*Shalom*'. It is very different in meaning from the Greek word for peace, from which we get the girls' name '*Irene*'. *Shalom* is a much broader and deeper word. It involves deep, overall wholesomeness, contentment, success and prosperity. One can experience *Shalom* even in the midst of severe difficulty or conflict.

It is a much deeper and more far reaching concept than what is meant by the Greek word from which we get the word *Irene*. The Greek concept of peace, which has been adopted by the entire Western world, simply means the absence of war, conflict, hostility etc. That is a very narrow definition of peace.

So, a person can have peace in the sense of *Shalom* even in the midst of war, famine, conflict, persecution etc. But there would still not be peace in the Greek sense, i.e. '*Irene*'. In short, Jesus does promise His disciples that it is possible to achieve *Shalom* type peace. But He does not promise *Irene* type peace.

Jesus spoke of us needing to take up our own cross, i.e. to carry a metaphorical cross and follow Him. He actually said this long before he Himself had to carry a cross. He was, evidently, referring to the many other people who were publicly crucified by the Romans. It was a regular sight. The image of someone carrying a cross would therefore have been familiar to His listeners before they ever saw Him having to do it.

The image is of each disciple preparing to die and being willing to put his own flesh to death in order to follow Jesus. That is a valid expression of what life as a Christian can sometimes be. It is not all easy and 'peaceful', i.e. in the Greek sense of peace:

³⁴ ***“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.***

Matthew 10:34-39 (ESV)

It is important to get our expectations right as we enter the Christian life as a new believer. Too many of us have been given a false impression of Christianity by churches which try to present an attractive, positive image of what being a Christian is like. Therefore they make no mention of sacrifice, hardship, obedience, self-denial and so on. Those aspects of the Christian life are not seen as being easily marketable. They fear that to tell the plain truth about what the Bible actually says about being a disciple may put people off.

But we have no right to alter or 'improve' the message so as to get more people to accept Christianity. If we do that we are just creating a false gospel and are not helping anybody. Any leader who preaches a lukewarm, easy gospel is not seeking to make *disciples*. He is just looking for more *members* for his church, without any regard as to whether or not they are becoming real and mature followers of Jesus.

It is the duty of a disciple to be “*salt and light*” in this world

Another of the many purposes and objectives of a real disciple is that they should learn how to be both “*salt and light*” in this lost world. Each disciple is like a lamp. We are supposed to bring light wherever we go, lighting up the darkness of sin and ignorance that is in the lives and minds of those around us. That involves being an influence for good and helping others to know the truth.

But our duty as disciples extends beyond imparting truth to those around us. We are also to be of practical help to the poor, the sick, the elderly, the weak, the dying and so on. Therefore, as well as preaching the gospel, a disciple is also meant to make a difference to the world around them by helping to meet the *material needs* of those with whom he comes into contact. Here is how Jesus Himself made this point:

¹³ ***“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.***

¹⁴ ***“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.***

Matthew 5:13-16 (ESV)

So, we are meant to share the gospel *and* make a practical difference in the lives of the poor and needy. It is not *one or the other*. That needs to be emphasised because too many of us opt for doing only one of those things, at most, and then ignore the other. For example, some will focus solely on teaching and preaching, but they place little or no emphasis on doing practical things to help others.

Conversely, many people focus on giving such practical help. But they downplay the gospel-proclaiming aspect of being a disciple. But it is not up to us to choose those parts of Jesus' commands which we prefer. We cannot focus exclusively on those, ignoring the other counterbalancing things which He also said. If we do so we become at least unbalanced, and potentially even false.

For example many people follow the so called “*social gospel*”. They under-emphasise, or even ignore, anything which has to do with *preaching* about the need to repent and believe in Jesus in order to be saved. Instead, they focus solely on helping people *practically*, or on working for charities. But that one-sided approach is not valid. It is a rejection of what Jesus also said about being a light. That has to involve spreading the truth about the *entirety* of God's Word in a balanced and accurate way. A disciple cannot pick and choose which of God's commands are to be obeyed and which can be put to one side.

One of Jesus' intentions for His disciples is to *refine* them, just as a jeweller smelts and purifies silver by exposing it to great heat. He is doing that now, in this life, but He will complete it at the Judgment Seat

Jesus intends to refine us, just as a jeweller smelts precious metals to purify them and to separate them from the worthless dross which is mixed in with them. He is doing this now during our lives. However, when Jesus returns in His glorified resurrection body and judges us at the Judgment Seat of Christ (see Book Four) He will complete the refining process.

At the Judgment Seat He will assess our lives He will take away all that remains of the dross. He will also burn up all the wood, hay and stubble. Then he will see how much, or how little, of value is left intact, after that process of smelting or burning is complete. Here are two passages which refer to this future event. The first is from Malachi:

² ***“But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. ³ He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness.***

Malachi 3:2-3 (NASB)

We are all going to be judged in the end and we see here that one of the main criteria Jesus will use for judging us is how much real precious metal is left behind when the dross in our lives is burned away. The gold and silver represent those things we did in obedience to His Word, i.e. the things God wanted us to do and which were done in the right manner and with the right motives. The dross is everything else, i.e. the wilful, selfish, impetuous, carnal things we did which were not God’s will and which He did not ask us to do. See how apostle Paul develops this theme:

¹⁰ ***According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. ¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.***

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 (ESV)

At the Judgment Seat of Christ each of us will be individually rewarded, or not rewarded, praised or rebuked, and promoted or demoted. Some of the key factors that Jesus will evaluate in His role as our Judge are the extent to which we have been salt and light, our obedience, our faithfulness, how much fruit we bore and so on. See Book Four for a much fuller discussion of the many and varied criteria He will use in judging us.

We already know in advance that we are going to be judged in this way by Jesus. Doesn’t it therefore make sense to try, as far as possible, to bring that judgment process forward into the present? We can do that by judging ourselves frankly, in comparison to God’s Word. Then we can simply alter our attitudes and behaviour now, wherever we see that they are wrong. It can also come by praying for Jesus to expose your errors and sins, here and now, so that you can tackle them and repent of them *before you get to the Judgment Seat.*

If you do that, and keep on doing it, then it may be difficult and uncomfortable for you now, but you will gain greatly on the Day when Jesus Christ judges you. You will already have dealt with and removed some of the dross or the wood, hay and stubble in your life, ahead of the Judgment Seat of Christ. Then there will be less for Jesus to have to burn up and less need for Him to have to rebuke you.

That self-examination must surely make sense. It is also enlightened self-interest for us to seek as much correction and constructive criticism as we can get *here and now*, so that we can change even more thoroughly. Then we will bear more fruit, amass more “*gold, silver and precious stones*” and receive a greater reward than we would otherwise have got.

Whatever rewards we receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ, whether small, or large, or nothing at all, they will be eternal. However, any embarrassment or discomfort we receive now by being corrected and changing our behaviour is only temporary. Therefore, one would be a fool to avoid such self-judgment and correction now, merely because we find it difficult or unpleasant. It is the eternal outcome that matters, not the temporary difficulties or embarrassments of this life.

When you become a disciple God will begin to treat you as His own child. That means He will discipline you and even punish you. He does it for your own good, to help you to grow up.

There is today a misguided over-emphasis on God's love in many Western churches. There is also a misunderstanding of what His love really means. That error causes many of us to assume that God would never rebuke or discipline a Christian. Actually, the opposite is the case. The very fact that God disciplines us is one of the things that proves that we really belong to Him and are His children. No adult would go around chastising other people's children. But no right-thinking parent would fail to discipline their own child.

Therefore, whenever you see an adult disciplining a wayward child, it indicates that they are related as parent and child. You would never think of it as evidence that they are not related. Likewise, if we are real Christians, we need to expect to be treated as God's children. That means being disciplined and punished by Him when our attitudes and behaviour require it. If He did not do these things it would actually indicate that we are not His children:

⁵ Know then in your heart that, as a man disciplines his son, the Lord your God disciplines you. ⁶ So you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God by walking in his ways and by fearing him.

Deuteronomy 8:5-6 (ESV)

*⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?
"My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reproved by him.*

*⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives."*

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

Hebrews 12:5-11 (ESV)

So, the very fact that God disciplines us is proof that He *does* love us, because He knows we need it and benefit from it:

*Blessed is the man whom thou dost chasten, O LORD,
and whom thou dost teach out of thy law
Psalm 94:12 (RSV)*

*"----that he might humble you and test you, to do you good in the end"
Deuteronomy 8:16(b) (RSV)*

Accordingly, we need to expect God's discipline and cooperate with it. We should repent voluntarily, even before we are disciplined by Him for the wrong things that we do:

*Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.
Revelation 3:19 (ESV)*

God is very careful in His disciplining of us. He will chastise us, and sometimes it will need to be severe, but He will not usually bring our lives to an end. His aim is to change us and mature us. So He

limits the chastisement to what we can stand and what will help us. He does not ordinarily go beyond that:

***The Lord has disciplined me severely,
but he has not given me over to death.
Psalm 118:18 (ESV)***

However it has to be said that there can be exceptional circumstances which arise if we become carnal and live in immorality, as some Christians do. If so, then God might reach a point where He chooses to take our lives in order to stop us continuing in such sins. Apostle Paul addresses this disturbing and controversial theme in 1 Corinthians:

¹ I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³ and all ate the same supernatural food ⁴ and all drank the same supernatural drink. For they drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless with most of them God was not pleased; for they were overthrown in the wilderness. ⁶ Now these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to dance." ⁸ We must not indulge in immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹ We must not put the Lord to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents; ¹⁰ nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. ¹² Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

1 Corinthians 10:1-12 (RSV)

Such a drastic response as this is rare. Even so, we do need to be aware that it is a valid part of what God sometimes does to discipline His own people. God caused the premature death of many of the Israelites when they were in the Wilderness. He also refused to allow the older generation to enter the Promised Land. Many of those people who died in the wilderness, or who were even directly put to death or destroyed by God Himself, were believers and were saved. They had eternal life. But their lives were ended or shortened and they lost their inheritance, i.e. their right to live in the Promised Land.

That is, many of them were real believers who were saved and had eternal life. They were simply carnal, unbelieving and disobedient in their lifestyles and attitudes, as many of us are. So, God took away their lives because they disobeyed and displeased Him.

In the book of Exodus, Moses sets out how God will deal with those Israelites who afflict widows or orphans. He makes clear that they will receive God's wrath and that God will actually kill the wrongdoer:

²² You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. ²³ If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; ²⁴ and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.

Exodus 22:22-24 (RSV)

Likewise, in 1 Samuel we are told about the priest, Eli, whose sons, Hophni and Phinehas were wicked. They worked in the Tabernacle like their father, but they abused their positions and exploited people. Therefore the Bible says that it was God's will to put them to death:

***Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord.
1 Samuel 2:12 (NIV)***

This sin of the young men was very great in the Lord's sight, for they were treating the Lord's offering with contempt.

Samuel 2:17 (NIV)

²² Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel and how they slept with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ²³ So he said to them, "Why do you do such things? I hear from all the people about these wicked deeds of yours. ²⁴ No, my sons; the report I hear spreading among the Lord's people is not good. ²⁵ If one person sins against another, God may mediate for the offender; but if anyone sins against the Lord, who will intercede for them?" His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the Lord's will to put them to death.

Samuel 2:22-25 (NIV)

Of course, the passage from Exodus, which we saw earlier, comes from the Law of Moses. But none of us are under that. It was fulfilled, and therefore rendered obsolete, by Jesus' death and resurrection. So, the above passage from Exodus is no longer operative. Nonetheless, I include it here because it illustrates this principle. It demonstrates the way God thinks and how drastically He is prepared to act in certain situations.

The Law of Moses is no longer in operation, but God does still sometimes do what He describes above. He still ends the lives of certain people, as He did with Hophni and Phinehas, the wicked sons of Eli. He does not do so today in order to comply with the Law of Moses. He does it because that is how He is.

We see another example of how God sometimes reacts to sin in the account of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus chapter 10. These two brothers were sons of Aaron, i.e. Moses' brother. Therefore, they were priests, as was their father, Aaron. It was therefore part of their duty to offer sacrifices and to burn incense in the Tabernacle.

One day they did something which angered God. They disobeyed God's instructions in some way, the exact details of which are not given. At any rate, they offered fire to the LORD in the Tabernacle in a way which God saw as unholy. In other words, they disrespected God by their actions, or by their neglect to do as He had commanded them. Therefore, as Nadab and Abihu were doing this, fire came forth from God and consumed them. God ended their lives Himself, there and then, at the very scene of their wrongdoing:

Now Nadab and Abi'hu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the LORD, such as he had not commanded them. ² And fire came forth from the presence of the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD.

Leviticus 10:1-2 (RSV)

Finally, look at what the Bible says about King Saul. He was appointed by God but he was unfaithful. Therefore, in the end, God did not merely demote or remove him. We are told that He '*slew him*':

¹³ So Saul died for his unfaithfulness; he was unfaithful to the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance, ¹⁴ and did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord slew him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.

1 Chronicles 10:13-14 (RSV)

In case anybody says that this only happened in the Old Testament, let us look at the book of Acts where we see the same thing happening to Ananias and Sapphira. They sold some land and gave some of the proceeds away to the apostles. They claimed that what they gave was the *entire* proceeds. In fact, they had held some back for themselves. There was nothing wrong with that, in itself. The Bible makes clear that they were fully entitled to do as they wished with the money. They

were under no duty to give away any of it, let alone all of it. The sin was not in holding some of it back, but in *lying* about it:

¹ But a man named Anani'as with his wife Sapphi'ra sold a piece of property, ² and with his wife's knowledge he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. ³ But Peter said, "Anani'as, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? ⁴ While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." ⁵ When Anani'as heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear came upon all who heard of it. ⁶ The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.

Acts 5:1-6 (RSV)

So, God took away Ananias' life *because he had lied to the Holy Spirit*. Then the same thing happened to his wife:

⁷ After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. ⁸ And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much." ⁹ But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." ¹⁰ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. ¹¹ And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things.

Acts 5:7-11 (RSV)

Some have argued that Ananias and Sapphira were not real Christians and were actually unsaved unbelievers, who were only pretending to be part of the church. However, I see no basis for saying that. The Bible does not say it, or even suggest it. On the contrary, if they were not real Christians God would have had no reason to discipline them. If God disciplined every non-Christian who ever told a lie there would be none of them left. God fully expects unbelievers to lie, but His principal judgment of them will come later at the Great White Throne, where they will be condemned and punished eternally.

The main reason why people argue that Ananias and Sapphira must have been non-Christians is because they don't like the idea of God dealing with real Christians in this way. But whether we like a thing or not has nothing to do with whether it is true. We must therefore be guided by what the Bible *actually says*, not by what we would *like it to say*.

On that basis we have to conclude that discipline of this kind can, and does, apply to real Christians. It ranges from rebuke to chastisement, and all the way up to ending our lives. That would send us to our Judgment and take away our opportunity to do any further harm.

If you are still unpersuaded that God can, and does, discipline us severely, and that He sometimes even takes away the life of a real Christian, then consider some further passages. Here apostle Paul speaks of "*deliver(ing) a man over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh*".

¹ It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. ³ For though absent in body I am present in spirit, and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment ⁴ in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

1 Corinthians 5:1-5 (RSV)

“.....By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith, among them Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.”

1 Timothy 1:19(b)-20 (RSV)

These are controversial passages and there are differing opinions as to exactly what Paul is speaking about. Some say that he merely means that such a person is put outside of the umbrella of protection of the Church. They then receive a buffeting of demonic attacks and eventually realize their error and stop behaving in a carnal way. It may well include all of that. However, my own belief is that it can go far beyond that and even include the loss of that carnal believer's life.

In direct terms, such a death could be caused by the severity of the demonic onslaught against him. However, the indirect cause is that God has permitted it, by removing His shield of protection. Then the carnal man dies and his sin and rebellion cease, but he himself can still be saved. Conversely, if God had not intervened, then perhaps he may not have been saved in the end, i.e. if his life had continued and his sin had kept on increasing until it reached its full limits and he became apostate.

It is a little bit like where a football manager can see that the behaviour of one of his players on the pitch is seriously out of order. Perhaps he has already had a yellow card, but he is continuing to foul other players, make reckless tackles and show dissent to the referee. His own manager might look at that developing situation and be able to see that it is inevitably going to end with that player being sent off by the referee. If so, that would generate a further ban of one, or even three, whole games, in addition to the current match.

In that situation a sensible manager might choose to substitute that player right now, before he gets compulsorily sent off. That would be upsetting for that player, but it would save him from even worse consequences, which would have occurred if he had been allowed to stay on the pitch any longer. Plus, it could save other players from potentially serious injuries.

An example of this is the famous footballer, Paul Gascoigne (“Gazza”) and his bizarre behaviour during the 1991 FA Cup Final between Tottenham Hotspur and Nottingham Forest. Gazza was in a strange mood that day and from the very first minute of the game he was lunging into wild tackles. One of those fouls nearly broke a Nottingham Forest player's leg. That was in the first few minutes of the game. At that point his own manager could, and should, have substituted him. Sadly, he didn't.

It was a shame because, later in the match, Gazza made yet another lunging tackle which caused him to tear his own cruciate ligaments very badly. He required surgery and had to miss a whole season to recover. All of that could have been avoided, if only he had been taken off the pitch by his own manager.

The point is that there are some Christians, even real ones, who get themselves into a severe mess. Their lives are sliding downwards so badly that they could cause harm to others, or even lose their own salvation, if they aren't stopped. My own belief is that God may look at that situation and conclude that the only practical solution is to take that believer home early, by ending their lives. If so, that would actually be a mercy, because the alternative would be to allow that person to continue declining until they pass the point of no return and become fully apostate. In that case, they could lose their eternal life.

The letter to the Hebrews seems to make it clear that it is possible for a Christian, even a real one, to fall so far, and to become so apostate, that there is no way back for them. It would appear that such a person may then end up being judged as an *unbeliever* at the Great White Throne instead of being judged as a believer at the Judgment Seat of Christ. In other words, it seems that an apostate can lose their salvation and end up being condemned:

⁴ For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵ and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶ if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. ⁷ For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. ⁸ But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.

Hebrews 6:4-8 (RSV)

This next passage deals with the situation of a person who has believed the gospel, and begun to be a disciple and to become sanctified. It indicates that he is in a worse position than an outright unbeliever if he then falls away and ‘spurns the Son of God’. What else can that mean, other than that he must end up in the Lake of Fire? That is where every unsaved person will end up. But how can a person be saved and yet be in a worse position than someone who is in the Lake of Fire?

²⁶ For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. ²⁸ A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” ³¹ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Hebrews 10:26-31 (RSV)

Apostle John also addresses this theme in his first letter. He is discussing the different levels and types of sins that a *believer* might commit and how other believers ought to respond to that believer’s sins. Because this is such an important and difficult issue, let us look at John’s words in the New American Standard Bible. That translation is particularly accurate, and thus more suitable to use when one is dealing with highly controversial passages:

¹⁶ If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin not leading to death. There is a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this. ¹⁷ All unrighteousness is sin, and there is a sin not leading to death.

1 John 5:16-17 (NASB)

Apostle John is referring to fellow believers who commit the ordinary, day to day, sins that we all commit, even if we are seeking to do God’s will and are maturing as disciples. For such fellow believers he says we are to pray, so that they cease sinning. That is because those sins are “*not leading to death*”. However, there are other sins which do lead to death.

For such grave sins John instructs us that it is not always the right thing to pray for that person. That is because sin of that high level of seriousness may make it necessary for God to bring forward that believer’s death. In other words, God may choose to remove them from this life and take them home early, so as to prevent them causing further harm to themselves or others.

This is a very complex and difficult area. Therefore we would need to think long and hard, and be very sure of our ground, before we ever come to the conclusion that a particular believer has gone so far into sin, and of such a grave nature, that God might intend to end their lives early. Nevertheless, I have briefly flagged the issue, because the Bible indicates that such situations can arise, and perhaps more often than we realise. Knowing that that is a possibility, however remote, should cause us all to fear the LORD more deeply and to take care how we live.

Please refer to chapters 21 and 22 of Book One of this series for a much fuller discussion of whether, and how, a real Christian might be able to fall away and end up being eternally lost. However, for present purposes, let it suffice to say that we all need to have a genuine fear of God and to be in awe of Him. That includes having a very real fear of the consequences of drifting away from Him. In the context of all that, it makes sense as to why God ending the life of a believer prematurely can rightly be seen as a mercy, i.e. to prevent him from falling away completely and losing his salvation.

The furnace of affliction or ‘the school of hard knocks’ – how God uses severe adversity to melt away the dross from our lives.

Not all of the difficult or unpleasant circumstances that we experience are due to God’s chastening or punishment. Some of it has other causes and purposes. One of those is that God allows us to face adversity, struggle, opposition and difficulty as a way of *changing* us. He allows such things even when He is pleased with us. As we saw above, It is as if the pressure we face has the effect of smelting us, just as precious metal is smelted by a jeweler to melt away the dross within the metal and to refine the silver or gold that remains. He does that to make it purer and better. It is also to test its genuineness. God does the same with us:

⁶In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, ⁷so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

1 Peter 1:6-7 (ESV)

Moses also speaks of the time spent as slaves in Egypt as being a ‘furnace’. Evidently God used that time in Egypt to forge the Israelites into what He wanted them to be:

But the Lord has taken you, and brought you forth out of the iron furnace, out of Egypt, to be a people of his own possession, as at this day.

Deuteronomy 4:20 (RSV)

Job also spoke of this process. He faced more adversity than most of us ever will. Yet he was aware that it had a redemptive purpose. He knew that, in the end, after God had tested him by pressure, just as precious metal is tested by fire, he would emerge as pure gold rather than as a mixture of gold and dross:

“...when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold”

Job 23:10(b) (NASB)

Therefore, instead of complaining about pressure or difficulty, as we often do, we ought to try to remember its valuable purpose. We should even find it possible to rejoice in our sufferings, because of the benefits they produce in us:

³More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.

Romans 5:3-5 (RSV)

It is good for us if God’s discipline can begin as early as possible, preferably while we are still young:

It is good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth.

Lamentations 3:27 (ESV)

At times the Christian life can be like a furnace in which we are ‘*tried*’ by being put under severe pressure. That is done firstly to see what we are made of and, secondly, to change us, so that we become better and purer. So, we must not assume that all pressure and difficulty is a departure from God’s will, as if we were going the wrong way.

Neither does it always mean that God is punishing or chastening us. On the contrary, it is often evidence that we are on the right path, because some affliction is essential if we are to become a mature disciple. It is therefore God’s policy to ensure that some of it will come our way, even if we are living well and doing what is right:

***“Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.
Isaiah 48:10 (NASB)***

God does not adopt this approach of allowing us to face affliction because He is *against us* or because He wants to harm us. He is for us and He does it for our *benefit*, because He is wise enough to know that it is what we all need. Often it is these difficulties or restrictions that prevent us from doing things that would have destroyed us if we had been allowed to do all the things we wanted to do:

***Surely it was for my benefit
that I suffered such anguish.
In your love you kept me
from the pit of destruction;
Isaiah 38:17(a) (NIV)***

God takes no *pleasure* from our sufferings, or from putting us under pressure. He allows it because there are times when it is *necessary* and He does it all with compassion. Moreover, it is not permanent. God will only allow the affliction to continue for as long as it is needed in order to bring about the required changes:

**³¹ For the Lord will not
cast off for ever,
³² but, though he cause grief, he will have compassion
according to the abundance of his steadfast love;
³³ for he does not willingly afflict
or grieve the sons of men.
Lamentations 3:31-33 (RSV)**

Although God will allow us to face very severe crisis and difficulties at times, and even to be knocked down by people and by circumstances, He will not let us be *permanently* knocked down. He will raise us up again at some point, when He has achieved the changes in our lives that He is trying to bring about:

***Thou who hast made me see many sore troubles
wilt revive me again;
from the depths of the earth
thou wilt bring me up again.
²¹ Thou wilt increase my honor,
and comfort me again.
Psalm 71:20-21 (RSV)***

***for a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again;
but the wicked are overthrown by calamity.
Proverbs 24:16 (RSV)***

One of the greatest benefits that comes from affliction and opposition is that it tends to drive us towards God's Word. When a real disciple is put under severe pressure, he will turn more and more to the Scriptures. The Bible will become increasingly important and precious to him. That fact alone makes the affliction worthwhile:

*Before I was afflicted I went astray,
but now I keep your word.*

Psalm 119:67 (ESV)

*It is good for me that I was afflicted,
that I might learn your statutes.*

Psalm 119:71 (ESV)

Be willing to ask God to put you into the furnace of affliction and to keep you there as long as is necessary

Obviously, most of us have no desire to suffer or to be put under pressure. Indeed, it would be perverse for us to actually *want* to suffer, or to gain any pleasure from it. We should not want it in that sense. Nevertheless, it is valid to be willing to pray that God would place us into His "*furnace of affliction*" if *He* wishes to, i.e. whenever *He* feels we need it.

It would be like an overweight person who has no actual *desire* to diet but who, nonetheless, *chooses* to go into a health farm or diet clinic for a period of time, where food intake is strictly controlled. It isn't what they want as such. They may well find it very difficult. But it is still what they choose to do. Likewise, it makes sense that we should take that approach when facing affliction, because anything that God does is for the best, even when He is putting us through an ordeal.

However, we need to think very carefully before we actually pray to *ask* God to put us into His furnace of affliction. You can make that prayer, and it is a good thing to do. But you need to do it with your eyes wide open, realising the full implications of what you are praying for. God will take you at your word and you will then be sent on a roller-coaster ride involving some "white-knuckle" moments of difficulty and pressure.

You will face incident after incident, and person after person, that God will use to test and stretch you to your limits. He will not take you past the point at which He knows you would snap. But, in my experience, He does seem to go fairly close to that point. At least it feels like that while you are going through it.

I draw attention to this concept of a Christian positively asking to be put into the furnace of affliction because it is a prayer I made myself many years ago. God certainly took me at my word and my life was turned upside down and inside out for more than a decade. I believe it was the direct result of my making that prayer. I asked God to put me into His furnace and not to let me out until He was satisfied that I had been in there long enough to deal with the dross in my life and character.

I made that prayer with my eyes open, fully meaning what I was saying, and knowing that it would lead to some difficulty. I got the idea from listening to a teaching tape in which the speaker recommended it, but warned that we should not pray it unless we really mean it and are willing to pay the price. I did mean it, and was willing to face whatever God saw fit to do with me. However, I had no idea at the time *how long* that smelting process would take or *how arduous* it would be. It also never occurred to me that God would put pressure on me in my job and business. Somehow, I didn't expect Him to reach into those parts of my life.

At any rate, the fact is I prayed that prayer and within a month a series of stress-inducing incidents began which went on for about 13 years. It all began with me discovering that one of my business partners at that time had forged an invoice on the firm's letterhead. It was typed up by him rather than by the cashiers, and was not entered onto the system at all.

He did it in order to get a client to pay him personally, rather than the firm. So, that was an attempt by him to divert money away from the firm and to have it all for himself instead. I was a one third owner of that firm. I then went to the Senior Partner and reported this to him. He promised to support me when I confronted the partner who had done this.

However, when we met to discuss it at a Partners' meeting, the Senior Partner said nothing. He never backed me up and just stared at the floor when I turned to him and asked for his comments. He made no reply. I could see then that I was on my own and that the Senior Partner had decided to back the wrongdoer rather than me.

From that moment, I realised that I needed to get out of that firm. So I told the other two partners, shortly afterwards, that I wanted to de-merge the firm and leave, taking my own files and clients with me, plus my own staff. At that point the two of them turned on me aggressively and refused to cooperate or to permit me to leave. So, I appointed solicitors to act for me and then issued court proceedings to have the firm wound up.

I did so on the basis of the second partner's misconduct and the Senior Partner's refusal to do anything about it, or to allow me to leave. But they resisted those proceedings. Then, they went to the other extreme and held a further partner's meeting a few weeks later at which they expelled me from the firm.

The two of them simply voted to expel me as a partner. I voted against, but they had two votes. They expelled me on the supposed basis that I was causing disruption, and they drew up a list of bogus or exaggerated allegations. So, we ended up with the bizarre situation in which I was basically expelled for catching the second partner in an act of wrongdoing and for raising it at a partners' meeting. It was the sort of thing which you see in films, but which you never expect to happen in real life, least of all to yourself.

In addition to that blow, we also learned, in the very same month, that my wife was being made redundant from her job which she had had for many years. Therefore we suddenly had no income at all. That said, it was also God's way of providing for us, because the redundancy payment helped us to start up the new firm.

So, in quick succession, I was thrown out of my job and business and then my wife lost her job. Moreover, my former partners then refused to pay me my one third share of the equity or capital in the business. The partnership deed required that they pay me, but instead, they made more allegations against me and argued that these amounted to 'counterclaims'. They just happened to be equal to what I was owed by them.

I could have fought them in the courts, but it would have taken about two years, especially as they would have dragged it out by causing procedural delays. So, after fighting for a few months, I gave up and discontinued my claim. I could not afford the legal costs involved. In the space of the first three months I had already received bills from my own solicitors of about £20,000 and we had only just got started.

I had also realised by then that my former partners would make whatever further allegations were needed to spin out the case and to avoid, or at least delay, paying me. Moreover, there was a high chance that they would not be *able* to pay me in the end, even if I eventually won the case and got a court order requiring them to do so.

You can perhaps imagine how painful that whole experience was. It was unjust and hugely disruptive to me financially. I had no option but to start again from scratch by opening a new law firm. It had no staff, no files, no clients, no furniture, no equipment, no anything. On day one I was literally the only person in the so called 'firm'. The furniture consisted of a dining room chair from home and my mobile phone was the only phone 'system' that I had. Yet, only one day earlier, I had been the managing partner and Head of the Litigation department in a quite large firm.

Nevertheless, I then recruited staff, got furniture, and began to open files for new clients, but it was very tough. Moreover, we had very little cash and banks refused to help me. So, for the first three years of the new firm's life I had to survive in an extremely difficult financial situation. It was emotionally exhausting, always being on a knife edge. I came close to going bust several times, but God always rescued me at the last moment. I survived each crisis, in turn, though only for there to be yet another one within weeks or months afterwards

On top of all that I began to experience severe problems with some of the staff that I recruited for the new law firm. Person after person came in and caused me great stress and difficulty due to their dishonesty, laziness, incompetence or malice. Again and again I had to go through the process of investigating, disciplining and dismissing them. I found it all very wearing and debilitating, especially as so many of them were so nasty to deal with.

The problem was made worse by the fact that the new firm grew so quickly. At its peak, five years after I started the new firm, there were over 80 staff working in it. That rapid rate of expansion helps to explain why so many bad people got in. But it still doesn't fully explain the very high numbers of bad staff. It was disproportionate, or statistically unrepresentative, in that I got far more than my fair share of devious and malicious employees.

I now realise that God deliberately allowed this stream of bad people to get in. He wanted to test me to my limits. It was also to give me lots of experience of handling wicked people. The various situations I faced in dealing with them gave me the material I needed to write Book Six in this series, which is about identifying wicked people and how to handle them. So, the long series of confrontations had great value in the end, but the learning process was an exhausting ordeal, which went on for many years.

One of the worst employees I had to deal with was a woman in her early thirties whom I recruited and made a supervisor. I unwisely gave her that role too quickly and she turned out to be both incompetent and disloyal. So we had to dismiss her after only five months in the job. She then issued proceedings in an Employment Tribunal and made up a ridiculously false story as to why she had been sacked. She said that it was because she had worn a short skirt! That had nothing to do with it. Indeed, I hadn't even seen it. Or, if I had, I hadn't noticed it.

She also went to the national media making these bogus allegations about me. One day a journalist actually came to the door of our house, while I was out, and upset my wife by questioning her. I defended the case, in which she was claiming over £100,000, but in the end she abandoned her entire claim and received no damages or costs at all.

She had assumed that I would be intimidated by the size of her claim, and by having my name in national newspapers, and that I would accept her demands. But I refused to be intimidated, or to give in to her. Therefore, at the last moment, she dropped the entire claim because she didn't want it to go to a hearing. She knew that she had no case and was only bluffing.

Nevertheless, for several months I had to deal with the stress of false allegations being made by a malicious claimant and with it being heavily publicized in virtually every national newspaper. It wasn't easy, to put it mildly. In fact it really got me down. Yet I had no alternative but to fight it. I felt like the Psalmist in his dealings with false witnesses:

***Give me not up to the will of my adversaries;
for false witnesses have risen against me,
and they breathe out violence.***

Psalm 27:12 (RSV)

In addition to all these pressures, I was also kept very busy as a Borough Councillor and Chairman of the Conservative Association. I had these two roles at the same time as running a law firm and they added a lot to my workload. However, perhaps the greatest pressure of all though came from something so obscure that less than 0.5% of the population have ever even heard of it. It was a legal issue which threatened my entire livelihood for about ten years. It had to do with the client agreements used in litigation cases. They are called Conditional Fee Agreements (“CFAs”) or “*no win, no fee*” agreements so far as the public are concerned.

It is much too complex to explain in detail here, but the gist of it is that these CFAs were drafted to comply with very specific (and badly written) legislation. If they were correctly worded, and fully complied with all the minutiae of the CFA regulations, then a law firm would be paid in full. But if not, then the law firm would be paid nothing at all. There were many cases being reported of law firms whose CFA had been ruled to be non-compliant, and therefore invalid, for a variety of trivial reasons.

These reported cases came one after another, and caused major turmoil amongst law firms. Each time I wondered if my firm would be the next to be destroyed by having its CFA declared to have been imperfectly drafted in some obscure way. Therefore, for nearly a decade, there was a “costs war” in which insurance companies and other paying parties were searching for tiny defects in the drafting of these CFAs which they could use to get out of paying.

If a firm’s CFA was held to be non-compliant, then nothing would be payable to that firm for all the work done on that file, for perhaps the previous 12-36 months. And it would not only affect that one file, but all subsequent files as well, because that insurer would then raise the same challenge with that firm on every other file from then on. Moreover, other insurers would also hear of the Court’s judgment and then join in by refusing to pay. This costs war affected most law firms, but mine in particular, because nearly all our work was done through CFAs. Most other firms only did a small percentage of their work that way.

Thus, if my firm’s CFA had ever been held to be technically in breach of the rules, and thus invalid, then I would have been financially wiped out overnight. I would have been bankrupt. I had that huge threat hanging over me for nearly a decade. I managed to fend off various temporary challenges for five years but eventually the first serious legal challenge was made to me. It related to a microscopically small detail in our CFA.

An insurance company challenged it on four different grounds and refused to pay us. We therefore had to go to Court in London to have a judge decide whether they should have to pay us, i.e. whether the drafting of our CFA was valid or invalid.

That case then lasted for five more years. That long delay was mainly because I deliberately slowed their challenge down in every way I could. We also redrafted my firm’s CFA for all new clients from then on. I wanted to try to reduce the potential impact of losing the case by allowing as many as possible of the old ones to get completed and paid before this challenge reached the stage of a court hearing. My aim was to have as few old CFAs remaining as possible, in case I lost at that hearing.

Eventually, it all ended well. I won the case outright and our CFA was fully upheld and declared to be compliant on all counts. The insurer had challenged my CFA on four different points and they lost on all of them. However, during those ten years I had to live with the constant prospect of being wiped out financially and losing my whole business, all because a minor word or phrase in our CFA might be held to be technically non-compliant. It was like the sword of Damocles hanging over my head

throughout all those years, on top of all the other work pressures that I had to face, plus the problems of dealing with bad staff.

Moreover, I also had to deal with some major problems in the church I was then part of. The leader was behaving very badly, including being a liar and a manipulator. I was the Chairman of the Trustees of that church and was therefore responsible for all the paid staff of the church. Therefore it fell to me to try to do something about the leader's misconduct. (See Book One for further details). Tackling him was very disorientating and stressful in itself, but he also did great harm to me by telling lies about me in order to defend himself.

On top of all these things there were also many other miscellaneous, one-off pressures and crises too. It was basically coming from all directions simultaneously and it was unrelenting. At any given time there would always be one, and usually two, three or even more, crises for me to deal with. It never stopped throughout all those years. But God used that sustained ordeal to break me and refine my character. I changed a great deal and learned very much.

As far as I was concerned, it definitely met the definition of being a 'furnace'. I also believe that that long sequence of events was the direct result of my prayer that God would put me into His furnace. God took that prayer far more seriously than I had. Even so, as I look back, I don't regret praying as I did. Neither do I regret any of the time spent in the furnace, despite its severity. It all served the purpose of melting me down and changing me for the better.

Therefore if I had my time again I would make the same prayer. I would also advise you to do so too, *provided* you are serious, really mean what you are praying, and are willing to stay in the furnace for as long as it takes. However, bear in mind that, realistically, it will probably mean *years* rather than weeks or months.

I say that because when metal is melted it requires very severe heat and for a long time. Ordinary flames would just heat the metal, but not melt it. In the same way, God is not merely seeking to heat you up; He wants to melt you down completely. So, be reconciled to the fact that it will take ages, due to the scale of the task He is attempting to accomplish.

Some might say that it is foolish to pray for additional difficulties, and that, as they say in the army, one should "*never volunteer for anything*". There is some sense in that. Most soldiers only do what they *have* to do and don't volunteer for any more. That's not unreasonable. However, there is also a school of thought that says that if you have to be in the army, then you may as well try to be the very best you can be. It's that kind of reasoning that makes people apply to join the Marines or the Paratroops or some other equivalent.

I was interested to hear, when watching a series about the American 101st Airborne Division in World War Two, that many of the men who applied to join it expressed that view. They had volunteered to join an elite unit because they wanted to be the very best they could be. But choosing to train to become a paratrooper, rather than remaining as an ordinary, conscripted infantryman, meant a much harder physical regime. Many volunteers had to drop out, or else they were weeded out by the Army, because they just couldn't cope with the rigour of it.

But that minority who could endure it became some of the very best and most effective soldiers in the army. For that reason, when there was a really difficult job to be done, General Eisenhower often sent the 101st Airborne Division to deal with it. So, volunteering for a much harder training regime can be the right thing to do, provided you have thought it through beforehand, and are willing to pay the full price.

Do bear in mind though that being put into God's furnace is not an entirely voluntary affair. He will put all of us into it, from time to time, and to a certain extent, *even if we never ask for it*. So, we can't escape God's training regime simply by never volunteering for it. The only question is whether you

should deliberately seek to be given *more* of it, or just take whatever level of pressure God was going to give you anyway, without asking for any extra. It all depends on how committed you are and whether you want an easier life now, or a better life in the next world.

God will also test you from time to time to find out how you handle pressure and how you react in difficult situations

Another reason why God puts all of us through difficult experiences, whether we ask for them or not, is because He wants us to develop strength, stamina and hardiness. He wants us to be able to withstand a series of difficult experiences, over a sustained period of time, and to come through successfully, still persevering, and without fainting or giving in:

*¹⁰If you faint in the day of adversity,
your strength is small
Proverbs 24:10 (RSV)*

As part of that toughening up process, God needs to find out how well, or badly, we will react under the pressure of various tests and trials. An employer takes a similar approach with a member of staff. He will sometimes give an employee a difficult task, which he knows is harder than anything they have done to date, simply because he wants to find out how they will react to that challenge.

It is a way of finding out what that employee is really made of and how much potential they have to be promoted and to do even harder things in the future. It is effectively a quality control test to see what we are at present, just as a silversmith tests silver to find out how pure it is:

*For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
Psalm 66:10 (ESV)*

When you face such times of crisis and testing you will need to have resilience and the ability to bounce back. You will be greatly assisted in that if you can learn to encourage yourself, rather than having to rely on other people for encouragement, which may not be forthcoming. You have to learn how to build yourself up, restore your own morale, and reassure yourself.

You can do this best by digging into God's Word at such times, especially the Psalms. In particular you can do it by speaking God's promises out loud by way of proclamation. (See the later book in this series, on the subject of prayer, for details of what proclamation is and how to do it.) King David is a classic example of a man who really knew how to encourage himself, and how to pick himself up and stay strong when facing a crisis.

Here he is at a very grim moment. David's wives and children, and the wives and children of all his men, have been kidnapped by Amalekite raiders while he and his men were away. When they learn of this disaster, David's men blame him and want to stone him to death, which is hardly a supportive response. Yet David does not panic. He gets a grip on his own emotions, encourages himself, and then gets himself ready to take practical action:

¹ Now when David and his men came to Ziklag on the third day, the Amal'ekites had made a raid upon the Negeb and upon Ziklag. They had overcome Ziklag, and burned it with fire, ² and taken captive the women and all who were in it, both small and great; they killed no one, but carried them off, and went their way. ³ And when David and his men came to the city, they found it burned with fire, and their wives and sons and daughters taken captive. ⁴ Then David and the people who were with him raised their voices and wept, until they had no more strength to weep. ⁵ David's two wives also had been taken captive, Ahin'o-am of Jezreel, and Ab'igail the widow of Nabal of Carmel. ⁶ And David was greatly distressed; for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the

people were bitter in soul, each for his sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.

1 Samuel 30:1-6 (RSV)

David then launched a counterattack on the Amalekites and recovered all the hostages alive and well. This would never have been achieved if he had not had the self-control and resilience needed to regain control of his own feelings:

¹⁷ And David smote them from twilight until the evening of the next day; and not a man of them escaped, except four hundred young men, who mounted camels and fled. ¹⁸ David recovered all that the Amal'ekites had taken; and David rescued his two wives. ¹⁹ Nothing was missing, whether small or great, sons or daughters, spoil or anything that had been taken; David brought back all. ²⁰ David also captured all the flocks and herds; and the people drove those cattle before him, and said, "This is David's spoil."

1 Samuel 30:17-20 (RSV)

God is watching all of us all the time and testing us continually. This is true both of genuine disciples and also unbelievers. All of us are being examined and tested so that God can assess us and evaluate our attitude, work rate, calibre, character, endurance, faithfulness, obedience and so on. He even tests the wicked in these ways. Nobody is immune from this regime of examination and testing:

*⁴ The Lord is in his holy temple,
the Lord's throne is in heaven;
his eyes behold, his eyelids test, the children of men.*

*⁵ The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked,
and his soul hates him that loves violence.*

Psalms 11:4-5 (RSV)

God will even allow us to come into contact with false teachers, false prophets and insincere leaders. That is partly for the simple reason that such people exist in this world and in large numbers. Therefore they can't be avoided. However, it is also because God wants to find out how we will deal with them. He wants to know whether we will believe what His written Word says and remain faithful to that, or whether we will choose to believe what mere men tell us, even when it contradicts His Word:

"If a prophet arises among you, or a dreamer of dreams, and gives you a sign or a wonder, ² and the sign or wonder which he tells you comes to pass, and if he says, 'Let us go after other gods,' which you have not known, 'and let us serve them,' ³ you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or to that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you, to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. ⁴ You shall walk after the Lord your God and fear him, and keep his commandments and obey his voice, and you shall serve him and cleave to him.

Deuteronomy 13:1-4 (RSV)

If you want to be successful as a disciple and to grow as quickly and as far as possible, then you will need to come to terms with the fact that God carries out these ongoing quality control tests. Stop being surprised, perplexed or annoyed by them and just seek to pass them. Then seek to serve Him as faithfully as you can, while going through them. Seek to pass each of His tests and to graduate upwards to the next level.

But, be aware that the inevitable result of every such promotion is that you will then be required to take even harder tests. In short, do everything in the full knowledge that you are being continually tested and accept that that is a valid part of how God operates, because He wants to search you and find out what you are capable of. He also wants to find out what your real thoughts and motives are:

And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the Lord searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought.....

1 Chronicles 29:9(a) (ESV)

And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Romans 8:27 (RSV)

Therefore the fact that you are regularly tested and exposed to severe difficulties, even for long periods, is not a sign that God is against you or has abandoned you. Neither does it mean that He disapproves of you. Far from it. It is actually evidence that He regards you as being His. You are being treated as a disciple. That is the point, which far too many of us miss.

We tend to assume that difficulty and trials are obviously a departure from God's plan for us. In fact, much of the time, they *are* His plan. So we need to stop viewing these struggles as an aberration that ought not to be allowed to happen to a Christian. Instead, start to see them all as normal, and even advantageous.

You would never succeed in an army career if you never got the chance to experience living under canvas, or even sleeping under hedges, in arctic, desert and jungle conditions. Likewise, it would be a very inadequate training regime if they never let you go on assault courses or cross country runs or mountain climbs etc.

The fact that you are subjected to such things is a sign that the senior officers take you, and your training, very seriously. They would actually be letting you down, and letting your country down, if they did not regularly expose you to such arduous conditions and test you up to and beyond your current limits.

One of the reasons why the Royal Marines and Parachute Regiment did so well in the Falklands War, and defeated an Argentinian force which was many times larger in terms of numbers, was because they had been so well trained. They were far more hardy than the Argentinian conscripts. The British soldiers, all of whom are volunteers, were used to sleeping out all night on Dartmoor in the cold and wet. Therefore, the bleak terrain of South Georgia and the Falklands did not cause them any concern. It seemed quite familiar, after all they had been through in training exercises.

I also remember my Dad telling me about some of his Army training. In particular, he spoke of how they were required to crawl across the ground while live bullets were being fired horizontally, just two or three feet above them. The Army did that because they wanted them to get used to the experience of being fired at. Then they would not panic, or be fazed, by the whizz of bullets passing nearby in real battles later on.

Have I been painting an excessively negative picture of what it means to be a Christian, over-emphasising the struggles and under-emphasising the benefits?

I hope that what I have said in this chapter is balanced. I have attempted to emphasise the joys and benefits that come from being Jesus' disciple, both in this life, and also in eternity. However I have also gone to great lengths to try to remind you of the downsides as well. It could be that in my efforts to correct the imbalance in most present day Western churches I have made the mistake of over-emphasising the struggles.

To some readers I may have given the impression that those difficulties are continuous and unrelenting for all of us. They are not. In reality, for most of us, they come and go. That said, the truth is that for a real Christian, the opposition and the struggles come more often than we would like

and they stay for longer than we would like. That is why the Bible speaks of these things so regularly and frankly.

What I have tried to do, therefore, is to draw attention to the warnings made by the apostles, and by Jesus in particular. The warnings are *theirs*, not mine. So is the level of emphasis they give to this theme. I have only emphasised these issues because the Bible does so. The best way for you to gauge whether I am guilty of any imbalance is to read the whole New Testament right through. Ask yourself, as you go along, how much of it is pointing to the *benefits* of being a Christian and how much is speaking about the *difficulties* it brings. Then you *can* decide for yourself what the overall message of the Bible is on this issue, and which of these things the Bible emphasises the most.

Having come to a conclusion on that point, then ask yourself whether the picture the Bible paints of what life will be like for a real Christian is the same as, or different from, what you may have been taught to expect by any churches you have been part of to date. I suspect that you may conclude at the end of that process that it is in the majority of the churches in the West that the real imbalance is to be found. Their emphasis is usually on ease and comfort and they generally deny, or are silent about, anything which might alarm us.

Jesus is entirely realistic about what stage we are at. He is also patient with us as we gradually learn lessons and grow as disciples.

It is also possible that you have picked up the mistaken impression that because it can be difficult to be a disciple at times then it follows that Jesus must be a harsh taskmaster who is never satisfied with us. That is absolutely not the case. It is very true that Jesus always wants us to go further, get stronger, become wiser, bear more fruit etc. However, He is also entirely realistic about the current level of our maturity at any given time.

Remember that Jesus was, is, and always will be, a human being, as well as being God. He therefore grew up and learned things gradually, just as we do. He also faced the same struggles we face and He knows how hard life can be for us at times:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.

Hebrews 4:15 (RSV)

He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.

Hebrews 5:2 (RSV)

Therefore, if we are a two week old Christian who knows very little and has only just begun to take the first faltering steps as a disciple, then Jesus will expect very little from us. He will be pleased by the tiniest little steps forward. He will also fully expect us to make errors, misjudge situations, get into messes and fall flat on our faces. In fact, He will expect us to do all those things *regularly*. That is what all new believers do.

They are spiritual infants and have got to learn by trial and error and by making mistakes. There is no other way. That's how we learn anything in life, for example maths or playing the piano or riding a bike. We have no alternative but to start as absolute novices and gradually develop from there. Jesus is fully aware of that.

You do not become angry, or even feel dissatisfied, when your five year old falls off their bicycle when they first try to ride it without stabilisers. Likewise, Jesus is not angry when we try things and make mistakes. He fully understands and sympathises. He remembers that even He had to learn and develop gradually, as He grew up from a child to a youth to a young man. He was always God, even as a child, but He chose to limit Himself, such that even He had to learn things step by step. In terms

of His human nature, He did not begin with complete knowledge or understanding. His wisdom *increased* over the years. Luke makes this clear when speaking of Jesus's upbringing:

***And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.
Luke 2:52 (RSV)***

We should therefore make sure we get this very clear and be reassured and encouraged. A piano teacher expects less from a five year old beginner than from a ten year old who has reached grade 3 or 4. And he expects less of that ten year old than of a 16 year old who is preparing to take grade 8. Yet, despite the fact that they are at different levels, the piano teacher could be equally pleased with all three of those youngsters.

Relative to their age and length of experience, they might all be doing equally well in his eyes. Or they may not. It depends on each child's own diligence, commitment, work-rate and attentiveness etc. The teacher might, for example, be more pleased with the attitude and *relative* rate of progress of the 10 year old than with that of the 16 year old, even though the latter is further ahead in *absolute* terms.

We can all see that point very easily in the context of piano teachers and the like. But we need to grasp that it also applies to us as disciples. So, the fact that Jesus always wants us to go further, become better, and grow more like Him, does not mean that He is unreasonable or difficult to please. He may or may not be pleased with the current state of our attitude, or the level of our maturity relative to our age. But, whether He is or not, He will still want us to go further, try new things, learn more, and take more risks for Him.

Those will always be His ambitions for us, however much, or little, progress we may have made to date. But it absolutely doesn't follow that He is therefore against us, or impossible to please. You have only to read the seven letters to the seven churches in Revelation chapters two and three, to know that there are some people with whom Jesus is very pleased, even though they may not realise it

So, we need to recognise that whatever stage we are at, Jesus will always want us to become *more* mature, even if we have already been growing in maturity for 70 years and have come a long way. But it doesn't mean that He is against us, or that He is an endless critic who can never be satisfied. He is delighted with us at times and thrilled by *any* progress we make. But even so, He still urges us to keep going, and never to stop growing and maturing. That is the right way to see Jesus. He is infinitely understanding and realistic, but also intensely ambitious for us, as any good parent is.