

CHAPTER 3

AIM TO BECOME FAITHFUL IN EVERY AREA OF YOUR LIFE

*Many a man proclaims his own loyalty;
but a faithful man who can find?
Proverbs 20:6 (RSV)*

*I will look with favor on the faithful in the land, that they may dwell with me;
he who walks in the way that is blameless shall minister to me
Psalm 101:6 (RSV)*

*If you will fear the Lord and serve him and hearken to his voice and not rebel against the
commandment of the Lord, and if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord
your God, it will be well;*

1 Samuel 12:14

*Do not be like your fathers and your brethren, who were faithless to the LORD God of their
fathers, so that he made them a desolation, as you see.*

2 Chronicles 30:7 (RSV)

*¹⁰"One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very
little is also dishonest in much. ¹¹If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who
will entrust to you the true riches? ¹²And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's,
who will give you that which is your own? ¹³No servant can serve two masters, for either he will
hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot
serve God and money."*

Luke 16:10-13 (ESV)

*Faithful are the wounds of a friend,
but deceitful are the kisses of an enemy.
Proverbs 27:6 (NASB)*

*¹¹'None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land
which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob; for they did not follow Me fully, ¹²except Caleb
the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have followed the LORD
fully.'*

Numbers 32:11-12 (NASB)

*Watch over your heart with all diligence,
For from it flow the springs of life.
Proverbs 4:23 (NASB)*

*And he did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the LORD.
2 Chronicles 12:14 (RSV)*

*"Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have
seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your
children and your children's children—*

Deuteronomy 4:9 (RSV)

because David did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and did not turn aside from anything that he commanded him all the days of his life, except in the matter of Uri'ah the Hittite.

1 Kings 15:5 (RSV)

⁴ For when Solomon was old his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not wholly true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. ⁵ For Solomon went after Ash'toreth the goddess of the Sido'nians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. ⁶ So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not wholly follow the Lord, as David his father had done.

1 Kings 11:4-6 (RSV)

¹¹ And Asa did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, as David his father had done. ¹² He put away the male cult prostitutes out of the land, and removed all the idols that his fathers had made. ¹³ He also removed Ma'acah his mother from being queen mother because she had an abominable image made for Ashe'rah; and Asa cut down her image and burned it at the brook Kidron. ¹⁴ But the high places were not taken away. Nevertheless the heart of Asa was wholly true to the LORD all his days.

1 Kings 15:11-14 (RSV)

⁷ "You are the LORD God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans and named him Abraham. ⁸ You found his heart faithful to you, and you made a covenant with him to give to his descendants the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Jebusites and Girgashites. You have kept your promise because you are righteous.

Nehemiah 9:7-8 (NIV)

²² In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the Lord—this same King Ahaz. ²³ For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel.

2 Chronicles 28:22-23 (RSV)

²⁰ Thus Hezeki'ah did throughout all Judah; and he did what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. ²¹ And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered

2 Chronicles 31:20-21 (RSV)

What is "faithfulness"?

We could define faithfulness as being trustworthy, reliable, dependable and taking one's responsibilities seriously. This applies to every task or duty and to every relationship we are in. If we had to give it a single word definition, we could say it is 'loyalty'. It means sticking to a *task* and doing the very best you can with it. Likewise, it means sticking to a *person* and remaining true to them, no matter how inconvenient that may become.

The main person with whom you need to be faithful is God. He is always your first priority. But He also wants you to be faithful in every area of your life and with every other person. Psalm 15 describes the kind of person God is looking for and it is a demanding set of specifications:

¹ LORD, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

Who may live on your holy mountain?

*² The one whose walk is blameless,
who does what is righteous,*

who speaks the truth from their heart;
³ *whose tongue utters no slander,*
who does no wrong to a neighbor,
and casts no slur on others;
⁴ *who despises a vile person*
but honors those who fear the LORD;
who keeps an oath even when it hurts,
and does not change their mind;
⁵ *who lends money to the poor without interest;*
who does not accept a bribe against the innocent.
Whoever does these things
will never be shaken.

Psalm 15:1-5 (NIV)

To become faithful is one of God's main aims for us

Faithfulness is so important to God that it is listed as one of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians chapter five. It is listed there because it is one of the key defining qualities of God's own character. He Himself is totally faithful. He never breaks a promise and He never lets anybody down. God the Father wants you to grow to resemble the character and nature of His Son, Jesus Christ. That's a very ambitious project:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren.

Romans 8:29 (RSV)

Consider the extraordinary faithfulness Jesus showed when He stuck to His plan of going to the cross and allowing Himself to be crucified. He could have called it off or saved Himself from it at any time, but He never did. He voluntarily went through with all of it for our sake. That was faithfulness in its most extreme form. In considering how to grow in faithfulness yourself, please also refer to the chapter in this book on truthfulness. The two qualities are distinct but closely related.

The first step in becoming a faithful person is to *want* to be one

Becoming a consistently faithful person, across every aspect of your life, is a major project. It will take a long time for your character to develop. However, it has to begin somewhere and the best place to begin is by *wanting it*. You need to set your heart to really *seek* for this character quality. It needs to be your own aim and your own desire, just as it is God's aim for you.

²*I will give heed to the way that is blameless.*
Oh when wilt thou come to me?
I will walk with integrity of heart within my house;
³*I will not set before my eyes anything that is base.*
I hate the work of those who fall away; it shall not cleave to me.
⁴*Perverseness of heart shall be far from me;*
I will know nothing of evil.

Psalm 101:2-4 (RSV)

You need to pray persistently and sincerely that God would build these qualities into your character. Ask Him to help you to put the Bible into practice in your own life, so that His statutes can be made part of you:

*⁴You have ordained Your precepts,
That we should keep them diligently.
⁵Oh that my ways may be established
To keep Your statutes!*

Psalm 119:4-5 (NASB)

And ask God to remove every kind of falseness from you:

*²⁹Remove the false way from me,
And graciously grant me Your law.*

Psalm 119:29 (NASB)

Go further and ask God to help you to become a 'blameless' person:

*⁸⁰May my heart be blameless in Your statutes,
So that I will not be ashamed.*

Psalm 119:80 (NASB)

Being 'blameless' doesn't mean that we are sinless. Nobody is sinless. It means being sincere, genuine, truthful, godly and committed to obey God's Word to the best of your ability. Some good examples in the Bible of extremely blameless men would be Job, Daniel, Noah and Nathanael. Seek to become like them. However, we do not have to rise to the heights that they reached in order to be classed as blameless. It is within the reach of ordinary people like us, if we really want it.

Faithfulness is what you do when nobody is watching

Another good definition of faithfulness is that it's the way you do a job when nobody is watching. It is the way you go about painting the back of a shed when you know that nobody is ever going to see it or check it. If you were given that job, would you do it properly and diligently, with all the required coats of paints? Or, would you cut corners and lower your standards? Actually, there never is a time when nobody is watching. God sees everything you ever do.

He not only watches, He takes a keen interest. He is continually looking for evidence of you growing in Christlikeness. And He always wants to either reward or correct what you do. He is committed to improving you and seeing you grow to maturity. So, don't ever imagine that God won't notice. He's interested in every part of your life and He wants you to become faithful in everything you do, including your job. There is no aspect of your life or character in which He is content to allow you to remain carnal, worldly or immature.

God is reliable but unpredictable; we are unreliable but predictable.

Being faithful, or reliable, is not the same as being predictable or dull. On the contrary, God is totally reliable and faithful but He can be very unpredictable. He frequently manages to surprise us by going about things in novel, creative, unusual, unexpected ways. By contrast, we tend to be unreliable and unfaithful, yet we are very predictable. We let people down or behave badly in the same old ways, time and time again. When a person lacks faithfulness and cannot be depended on, he becomes a hazard and a disappointment to those around him. Let that never be said of you:

*¹⁹Like a bad tooth and an unsteady foot
Is confidence in a faithless man in time of trouble.*

Proverbs 25:19 (NASB)

God is looking for disciples who are truly committed to Him and willing to take a stand

The main person with whom we need to be faithful is God Himself. That is a major part of what discipleship is all about. Jesus is looking for men and women who are willing to be truly committed to Him:

***⁶My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land,
that they may dwell with me;
He who walks in a blameless way
is the one who will minister to me.***

Psalm 101:6 (NASB)

The LORD is continually looking around to find people whose hearts are completely His, not just partly so. That means people who are genuinely devoted to Him and determined to obey His commands:

⁹"For the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His....."

2 Chronicles 16:9 (a) (NASB)

Moreover, God looks around in every generation for men and women upon whom He can rely. He wants people who are willing to take responsibility for their fellow men and to 'stand in the gap' to plead for them before God, so that His judgment on them can be averted. However, such faithful, courageous people are so rare that in most generations God struggles to find them. In the days of Ezekiel God couldn't find anybody:

²⁹The people of the land have practiced oppression and committed robbery, and they have wronged the poor and needy and have oppressed the sojourner without justice. ³⁰I searched for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me for the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. ³¹Thus I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath; their way I have brought upon their heads," declares the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel 22:29-31 (NASB)

It is essential to remain true and faithful to God and to represent Him accurately, no matter how isolated that may cause us to be. Even if we are surrounded by wicked people, we must remain true to what the Bible says and be loyal to God and to everything that He stands for. Likewise we must be opposed to, and appalled by, everything that God opposes or is appalled by.

Behaving in such ways will certainly cause us to be isolated at times and even persecuted, but it will please God. Moreover, it will actually bring us under His protection and cause Him to ensure, when judgment comes upon those around us, that we are kept out of it, just as faithful Lot was kept from the judgment which came on Sodom.

Consider this very disturbing passage from Ezekiel which serves as a great inducement to us to stay faithful, no matter how much it may cost us. The passage concerns Ezekiel, to whom God reveals that He is sending angels to act as 'executioners' of those who have engaged in idolatry and other abominations. However, God specified that a mark should be put on the forehead of all those faithful people who had *not* engaged in such abominations and who had been appalled and grieved about them, as God was. Such faithful people were to be spared and were not to come under the judgment that was about to happen:

Then he cried in my ears with a loud voice, saying, "Draw near, you executioners of the city, each with his destroying weapon in his hand." ² And lo, six men came from the direction of the upper gate, which faces north, every man with his weapon for slaughter in his hand, and with them was a

man clothed in linen, with a writing case at his side. And they went in and stood beside the bronze altar.³ Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherubim on which it rested to the threshold of the house; and he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing case at his side. ⁴And the LORD said to him, “Go through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark upon the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it.”

⁵And to the others he said in my hearing, “Pass through the city after him, and smite; your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity; ⁶slay old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one upon whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were before the house. ⁷Then he said to them, “Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain. Go forth.” So they went forth, and smote in the city. ⁸And while they were smiting, and I was left alone, I fell upon my face, and cried, “Ah Lord GOD! wilt thou destroy all that remains of Israel in the outpouring of thy wrath upon Jerusalem?” ⁹Then he said to me, “The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great; the land is full of blood, and the city full of injustice; for they say, ‘The LORD has forsaken the land, and the LORD does not see.’ ¹⁰As for me, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity, but I will requite their deeds upon their heads.”

Ezekiel 9:1-10 (RSV)

In the same way judgment is coming upon all people, including those amongst whom we live and work. It may not take the same form, and it may not come today, but God’s judgment will eventually come. Whenever it does come, we need to be counted among that minority who were loyal to God and who were appalled and grieved by the same things as God. However much that approach might cause the world around us to scorn or despise us, it will gain us God’s approval. Then an equivalent mark, whether literal or metaphorical, will be placed upon us. I want to receive such a mark and to keep it, no matter what difficulty that creates.

Sometimes God cannot find even one faithful person in a place or situation. Let that never be so wherever you are

When sin and rebellion are on the increase in a town, workplace, or organization God looks for people who are remaining faithful. Through such people God can, and does, make a difference. They can be used by God to turn the situation around, to ‘rebuild the wall’ and to ‘stand in the gap’ while the ‘wall’ is being rebuilt. Through them God can do great things.

Moreover, where He finds such a person, even if they are the only one, God will sometimes turn His anger away from everybody. Then His judgment on that whole place is delayed, or even avoided, all for the sake of that one person. But there are times when God cannot find even one such faithful believer, whose heart is true and brave and genuinely loyal to Him. In such a case, where there is not even one faithful person, God’s judgment is likely to follow quickly:

²⁸And her prophets have daubed for them with whitewash, seeing false visions and divining lies for them, saying, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD,’ when the LORD has not spoken. ²⁹The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the sojourner without redress. ³⁰And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land, that I should not destroy it; but I found none. ³¹Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; their way have I requited upon their heads, says the Lord GOD.”

Ezekiel 22:28-31 (RSV)

In whatever situation or place you may be, you could be that faithful person, perhaps the only one there. If so, your individual faithfulness could cause God’s judgment on all of those around you to be delayed or avoided. That will, at the very least, provide more time for the people you know or work with to repent and turn to God

Growing as a disciple involves moving continually from one test to the next

I have slowly learned over the years how to be a manager of staff. In doing so, I have gained many insights into how God operates as a 'manager'. He has objectives for each of us for growth and development, mainly in character, but also in knowledge, skill and experience. He wants to bring us forward and upward, but also to find out how far we've already come.

Therefore He sets lots of little tests for us. You may not even realise that you are going through such tests, but you are. He is watching very closely to see how you handle each of them. He also knows all your thoughts and motives and He is always searching your heart to see what you are really thinking in any situation that you face:

⁹ “As for you, my son Solomon, know the God of your father, and serve Him with a whole heart and a willing mind; for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will let you find Him; but if you forsake Him, He will reject you forever.

1 Chronicles 28:9(NASB)

I know, my God that you test the heart and have pleasure in uprightness.....

1 Chronicles 29:17(a) (ESV)

It may be a test of your honesty. Or it may be a test to see whether you will keep a promise, even when it has become inconvenient or more costly than you expected. Will you still keep your word? Will you paint the back of the shed fully and carefully? Will you apply two coats of paint as you were asked to do, or will you skip the second coat and hope that nobody notices? Will you make the effort and turn up to give the help you promised to give someone? Those are the kind of things God wants to discover about you

We see an example of this in the life of King Hezekiah. We are told directly that God tested him. God allowed the representatives of the King of Babylon to come to Judah and to threaten King Hezekiah. God wanted to find out how he would handle that exceptionally stressful situation:

And so in the matter of the envoys of the princes of Babylon, who had been sent to him to inquire about the sign that had been done in the land, God left him to himself, in order to test him and to know all that was in his heart.

2 Chronicles 32:31 (ESV)

Therefore be alert to the fact that life is full of these tests. Start to consider why God puts you through them and what He wants you to learn from them, or what He is trying to find out about you. You are much more likely to pass such tests if you are aware that they exist and understand their purpose. Sadly, most of us don't realise either of those things. It's like being at school and sitting down to answer a series of questions without even realising that you are in an exam. That's hardly the best way to do well in it.

There will be no promotion unless you are faithful at your current level

Until you pass the various tests that God sets for you, He will not allow you to be promoted or to take on any greater responsibility. What boss would be willing to put you in charge of a chain of shops if you can't even be faithful in running one shop? Likewise, God will not allow you to move up in your service to Him until you prove yourself to be faithful at your current level. Surprisingly, most people never realise that there is any connection between faithfulness and promotion.

A few people are aware that employers operate this way, but not many grasp that this is also the way God operates. In particular, they don't recognise the tests as being tests, or at least not while they are happening. That's a shame, because if you don't pass these tests that God sets for you, He will simply keep on setting them for you, again and again, until you do. He won't let you skip any test and He won't let you go on until you pass each one. That is why some people never get beyond square one in their Christian life.

This principle, that there is no promotion until you are faithful at your current level, applies to all of us. We see it in operation in the life of King David. He was eventually promoted, by several stages, to be the King of Israel. However, that series of promotions began at the age of about 17, when God saw how carefully and diligently the teenage David cared for his father's sheep:

*⁷⁰He chose David his servant,
and took him from the sheepfolds;
⁷¹from tending the ewes that had young
he brought him to be the shepherd of Jacob his people,
of Israel his inheritance.
⁷²With upright heart he tended them,
and guided them with skilful hand.*

Psalm 78:70-72 (RSV)

Why require yourself to retake the same tests repeatedly? Pass them and move on.

Given that that is God's way of deciding whom He should promote, why not just knuckle down, be faithful, and pass the tests God has set for you? If so, you will become eligible to move on to the next set of tests, at the next level up. Just knowing that your current situation is a test will help you to approach it in a much better way.

You will begin to realise that your current crisis, and others like it, are not just random events. They will suddenly acquire meaning and significance. In fact, you may start to see them as opportunities, which is what they really are. You can then become more focused on this project of being faithful in every task or test that God ever sets for you.

But remember, when God sets tests for us He usually disguises them. For example, He tends to operate through other people, such as your boss, clients customers, colleagues, neighbours, friends etc. He especially likes to use those people who make life difficult. Difficult people, and even wicked ones, are some of God's favourite agents for testing you. That is partly because we don't associate such people with God.

Of course, they themselves have no idea of the testing 'project' which they are assisting God with. But you need to learn to recognise when it's the case. A great deal of the testing that God does in our lives is done through such undisclosed agents. It makes no difference at all whether they are Christians or not. God uses the most surprising people, and in the most unexpected situations, as He pursues His development program for you.

Above all, we must be faithful to God

The most important thing of all is our personal commitment to God Himself. If we can get that right then other duties and relationships will also grow stronger. It is entirely possible to be unfaithful to God, to lie to Him and to let Him down, even if we believe in Him. The Jewish people did it, and so do we, quite regularly:

³⁵They remembered that God was their rock,

the Most High God their redeemer.

³⁶*But they flattered him with their mouths;
they lied to him with their tongues.*

³⁷*Their heart was not steadfast toward him;
they were not true to his covenant.*

Psalm 78:35-37 (RSV)

⁵³*He led them in safety,
so that they were not afraid;
but the sea overwhelmed their enemies.*

⁵⁴*And he brought them to his holy land,
to the mountain which his right hand had won.*

⁵⁵*He drove out nations before them;
he apportioned them for a possession
and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.*

⁵⁶*Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God,
and did not observe his testimonies,*

⁵⁷*but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers;
they twisted like a deceitful bow.*

⁵⁸*For they provoked him to anger with their high places;
they moved him to jealousy with their graven images.*

Psalm 78:53-58 (RSV)

God is therefore on the lookout for blameless people who are genuinely and wholeheartedly faithful to Him. He wants people He can trust, who will not let Him down. To such people He will show favour. However, He will not allow deceitful people to be in His presence:

⁶*I will look with favour on the faithful in the land,
that they may dwell with me;
he who walks in the way that is blameless shall minister to me.*

⁷*No man who practices deceit shall dwell in my house;
no man who utters lies shall continue in my presence.*

Psalm 101:6-7 (RSV)

Moreover, God will respond to unfaithfulness when He sees it. Those who are unfaithful to God, or unfaithful in the tasks or roles that they are given, will be brought down. In one way or another He will remove them, demote them or replace them:

*For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.*

Psalm 73:27 (ESV)

King Saul of Israel was unfaithful and disobedient. Therefore he was replaced. God is no respecter of persons. Nobody is above being disciplined and nobody is too senior or too important to have to be faithful:

For God does not show favoritism.

Romans 2:11 (NIV)

Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons:

Acts 10:34 (KJV)

²³ *And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ But he who does wrong will be repaid for what he has done, and there is no partiality.*

Colossians 3:23-25 (NKJV)

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)

We must also be faithful to God's Word, the Bible

We must obviously be faithful to God personally. However, one of the main ways we are expected to do that is by being faithful to God's *Word*. He has given us the Bible and it is intended to say what He wants to tell us. It would not be over-stating the position to say that we demonstrate our faithfulness to God most clearly by the attitude we adopt in relation to His written Word.

We cannot genuinely say that we love, respect or honour God any more than we love, respect and honour His Word. It is, in a certain sense, a proxy for Him. Our view of it indicates our view of Him. So, we must show our faithfulness to Him by being faithful to the Bible and, in particular, by obeying it:

¹*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
who walk in the law of the LORD!*

²*Blessed are those who keep his testimonies,
who seek him with their whole heart,*

³*who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!*

⁴*Thou hast commanded thy precepts to be kept diligently.*

⁵*O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping thy statutes!*

Psalms 119:1-5 (RSV)

Therefore, if you want to become a faithful person, there is no better place to start than by seriously increasing your respect for the Bible and learning it thoroughly. There is no better way of demonstrating your loyalty to God.

The faithfulness of the prophet Daniel

If you are looking for a role model from whom to learn about faithfulness, then the prophet Daniel is one of the very best you will find, anywhere in the Bible. He faced far more pressures and problems than we are ever likely to face. There were also many temptations, and opportunities for him to become proud or corrupt or to compromise, but he never did. He was remarkably faithful to God, to the Kings he worked for, and to everybody he ever met. Therefore not even his enemies could find any fault in him, even though they wanted to:

¹*It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom a hundred and twenty satraps, to be throughout the whole kingdom; ²and over them three presidents, of whom Daniel was one, to whom these satraps should give account, so that the king might suffer no loss. ³Then this Daniel became distinguished above all the other presidents and satraps, because an excellent spirit was in him; and the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom. ⁴Then the presidents and the satraps sought to find a ground for complaint against Daniel with regard to the kingdom; but they could find no ground for complaint or any fault, because he was faithful, and no error or fault was found in him. ⁵Then these men said, "We shall not find any ground for complaint against this Daniel unless we find it in connection with the law of his God."*

Daniel 6:1-5 (RSV)

Daniel is best known for the episode where he ended up in the lions' den because of his refusal to stop praying to God, even when it became illegal to do so. He risked his life over that issue and never wavered in his faithfulness. That was a big test for anybody to face, even Daniel.

However, we would be wrong to think that this huge, life or death crisis was the first test Daniel ever faced. That is very rarely the way that God operates. He does not usually expose us to life or death situations as the very first test we ever face. God is practical and He knows that our faithfulness and courage have to be developed over time, like a muscle. Therefore He starts us off with small tests and builds up to larger ones, stage by stage.

The same was true of Daniel's three friends, who ended up being cast into the fiery furnace because they refused to worship the Nebuchadnezzar's image. That, likewise, was not the first test that they ever faced. The first test that we are told about arose shortly after they all arrived in Babylon, after being taken there as prisoners. All four of these young men, probably in their late teens, faced the test of what to do about the food that was being offered to them. It did not meet the requirements of the Law of Moses. Today we would say it was not kosher.

Instead of compromising by just quietly eating it, they asked to be given vegetables. This stance was less likely to get them into trouble with Nebuchadnezzar than was the case on later occasions. Indeed, there is no indication that he ever even knew of it. So, the risk was less intense. However, the point is that it was that smaller test which prepared those four teenagers to take and pass the huge tests which they faced many years later.

If we are not willing to take a stand on smaller issues and face things such as criticism, disapproval, ridicule or damage to our careers, then we will never develop the levels of faithfulness that are needed to face up to the threat of martyrdom, or even the loss of our livelihoods or homes for Jesus's sake. Many Christians have wondered whether they could be sufficiently faithful to pass the test of martyrdom if they ever had to face it. But the real answer to that question is that if you are faithful *now* in the *small* tests you face at school or work and are willing to be disapproved of, or laughed at, for the sake of Jesus, then God will give you the grace you need to pass the life or death tests that might arise in the future.

So, not only do we learn that habit of faithfulness. It is also that our small acts of courage today qualify us to receive God's help in future when the stakes are much higher. It is God's nature to respond with loyalty to those who are loyal to Him. He also honours those who honour Him. Therefore, if you want to maximise the likelihood of your staying faithful to the end, no matter what, then take care to be faithful now in the small, day to day pressures that you currently face.

The one thing we absolutely must not do is to be presumptuous or over-confident. I say that because I once heard a man say that, if faced with a man pointing a gun at him, he had no doubt that he would *"definitely not deny Jesus."*

Even as he said it, I was reminded of the over-confident bravado of apostle Peter as he 'talked big' on the night Jesus was arrested. He would have done much better if he had simply said: *"Lord, if I am tested today, please give me the grace and courage I need to stay faithful to you"*. Those are the kind of words that real martyrs say.

Daniel was like the prophet Samuel, Job, Joseph, Moses, John the Baptist, Apostle Paul and other remarkable figures. They all refused to compromise with sin or to betray God by letting Him down or taking Him for granted. Now let's consider someone who was very different; a man who began well, but ended in failure because of his unfaithfulness.

King Saul was not faithful. Therefore he was removed from being King

Saul was the first King of Israel. He began well and showed great promise at the start. However, in the end, he was removed from power. God regretted making Saul King. That wasn't because he failed, made mistakes or lost battles. He could have failed and made mistakes repeatedly, and still have kept God's approval. The reason King Saul had his position as King taken away from him was because God was not satisfied with his level of personal faithfulness. That was the issue, not his level of *success*. When he was under pressure he let God down and became disobedient and unfaithful.

The prophet Samuel, who was a priest at the Temple, had told King Saul to wait for him and that he would meet him at Gilgal. At that time Samuel would have offered sacrifices and prayed for God's help in the battle against the Philistines. However, Saul became impatient in waiting for Samuel to come. Therefore, he usurped Samuel's priestly role and gave the offerings himself, even though he was not a priest and had no right or authority to offer the sacrifices.

King Saul acted impetuously and went beyond his proper authority. He did what he knew to be wrong because he was in a highly stressful situation and felt he could not wait any longer for Samuel. When Samuel arrived, immediately afterwards, and saw what Saul had done, he announced God's judgment on Saul for his disobedience and lack of faithfulness:

⁵ And the Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots, and six thousand horsemen, and troops like the sand on the seashore in multitude; they came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth-a'ven. ⁶ When the men of Israel saw that they were in straits (for the people were hard pressed), the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns, ⁷ or crossed the fords of the Jordan^u to the land of Gad and Gilead. Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. ⁸ He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him. ⁹ So Saul said, "Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings." And he offered the burnt offering. ¹⁰ As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came; and Saul went out to meet him and salute him. ¹¹ Samuel said, "What have you done?" And Saul said, "When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, ¹² I said, 'Now the Philistines will come down upon me at Gilgal, and I have not entreated the favor of the LORD'; so I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering." ¹³ And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which he commanded you; for now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. ¹⁴ But now your kingdom shall not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."

1 Samuel 13:5-14 (RSV)

¹⁰ The word of the LORD came to Samuel: ¹¹ "I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments." And Samuel was angry, and he cried to the LORD all night.

1 Samuel 15:10-11 (ESV)

God was displeased by Saul's ongoing unfaithfulness and disobedience. Things reached a head when Saul disobeyed God's commands in relation to how he was to deal with the Amalekites. God then decided to remove the kingship from Saul. God did so even though Saul attempted, belatedly, to repent.

The problem was that Saul's repentance came too late, even assuming that it was genuine. Note also that Saul's disobedience arose because he feared the opinions of his people and tried to please them rather than please God. That was a fatal error. Nobody can be faithful to God if they also aim to please people. You can please one, or the other, but not both:

²² *And Samuel said,
"Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices,
as in obeying the voice of the LORD?
Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice,
and to listen than the fat of rams.*

²³ *For rebellion is as the sin of divination,
and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry.
Because you have rejected the word of the LORD,
he has also rejected you from being king."*

²⁴ *Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandment of the LORD and your words, because I feared the people and obeyed their voice." ²⁵ Now therefore, please pardon my sin and return with me that I may bow before the LORD." ²⁶ And Samuel said to Saul, "I will not return with you. For you have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel." ²⁷ As Samuel turned to go away, Saul seized the skirt of his robe, and it tore. ²⁸ And Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you.*

1 Samuel 15:22-28 (ESV)

Even worse, Saul also consulted a medium, (the witch at Endor) rather than seek God's guidance. God was not willing to tolerate that unfaithfulness. Therefore God took away not only Saul's throne, but also his life:

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)

Saul could have continued as King if he had operated differently. He didn't need more skill or more cleverness. He just needed more faithfulness. In particular, he needed to repent quickly when he did wrong, instead of hiding or denying his sins. The next King, David, probably made just as many mistakes as Saul did. He also committed some major sins. But the difference was *that he knew how to repent* and how to restore his intimacy and fellowship with God. That is why God thought so highly of David.

The faithfulness of King David - a man after God's own heart

God rejected King Saul, as we have seen, and looked for a man He could rely on to be faithful and who would be '*a man after God's own heart*':

¹³ *And Samuel said to Saul, "You have done foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which he commanded you; for now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. ¹⁴ But now your kingdom shall not continue; the LORD has sought out a man after his own heart; and the LORD has appointed him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you."*

1 Samuel 13:13-14 (RSV)

God commanded the prophet Samuel, to appoint a new King to replace Saul and He told Samuel where to find him:

¹ *The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you grieve over Saul, seeing I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil, and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons."*

1 Samuel 16:1 (RSV)

Jesse had eight sons. All of them were impressive men, especially the older ones. But the one God had chosen was the youngest, David. He was still only a teenager, probably about 16 or 17. God made it clear to Samuel that He was looking for a man *with the right kind of heart*, as opposed to talent, ability or strength. That is because faithfulness is an attitude of the heart, not a skill or ability:

*⁶When they came, he looked on Eli'ab and thought, "Surely the LORD'S anointed is before him."
⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart."
⁸Then Jesse called Abin'adab, and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one."
⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "Neither has the LORD chosen this one."
¹⁰And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen these."
¹¹And Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and fetch him; for we will not sit down till he comes here."*

1 Samuel 16:6-11 (RSV)

So, David was chosen and then secretly anointed by Samuel to be the next King of Israel. Saul was not told about it because he would have killed David if he had known. David then ended up making a name for himself when he volunteered to fight a giant called Goliath in one to one combat. Goliath was a Philistine soldier who had been challenging Israel's army to select a man to fight him. He was also mocking the Israelite army, because nobody volunteered. Nobody but David was brave enough, or had enough faith, to fight him. He therefore told King Saul that he wanted to fight Goliath, despite being only about 17 years old:

³²And David said to Saul, "Let no man's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."

1 Samuel 17:32 (RSV)

The duel took place and, contrary to what some people imagine, David went into it fully expecting to win. He trusted God and believed He would help him. But he also felt outraged at the way that the heathen Goliath had been defying God and insulting His chosen people, Israel. David's heart was so intensely loyal to God that he could not bear to hear such things. He wanted to vindicate God and to uphold His honour. He was therefore willing to face Goliath and to stop him:

⁴¹And the Philistine came on and drew near to David, with his shield-bearer in front of him. ⁴²And when the Philistine looked, and saw David, he disdained him; for he was but a youth, ruddy and comely in appearance. ⁴³And the Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. ⁴⁴The Philistine said to David, "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field."

1 Samuel 17:41-44 (RSV)

Goliath had been insulting God's people, Israel. Now he was insulting David and making very intimidating threats. But David's loyalty to God made him willing to take this great risk for the sake of God's Name. David showed great courage that day. That is true of all people who are faithful to God. Faithfulness will inevitably lead us into situations of danger, where we have to put at risk our reputation, finances, status, or even our own lives. The courage we show at such times is a key indicator of our faithfulness. Look how much courage David showed and with such boldness:

⁴⁵Then David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. ⁴⁶This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand, and I will strike you down, and cut off your head; and I will give the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines this day to the birds of the air and to the wild beasts of the earth; that all the earth may know that there is a God

in Israel, ⁴⁷and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD'S and he will give you into our hand." ⁴⁸When the Philistine arose and came and drew near to meet David, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet the Philistine. ⁴⁹And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone, and slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground.

1 Samuel 17:45-49 (RSV)

Once David had become famous, following his spectacular victory over Goliath, King Saul began to envy him. He became suspicious and paranoid. He saw David as a threat and tried to kill him. He sent men to hunt David down and so he had to go on the run for several years, hiding in the wilderness to get away from Saul's men. Nevertheless, even during this period on the run, David never did anything to undermine King Saul. He recognised that Saul was still the legitimate King of Israel and that, although Samuel had anointed him, his own time as King had not yet begun.

Thus David refused to seize the throne, either by force or manipulation. He was sorely tested on one occasion when he was hiding in a cave from Saul's men and Saul came in to relieve himself. David had the perfect chance to kill Saul. His men urged him to do so, saying that it was obviously a God-given opportunity. But David refused. He stayed faithful to King Saul and chose, instead, to wait until God made him King, rather than grab power for himself:

¹When Saul returned from following the Philistines, he was told, "Behold, David is in the wilderness of En-ge'di." ²Then Saul took three thousand chosen men out of all Israel, and went to seek David and his men in front of the Wildgoats' Rocks. ³And he came to the sheepfolds by the way, where there was a cave; and Saul went in to relieve himself. Now David and his men were sitting in the innermost parts of the cave. ⁴And the men of David said to him, "Here is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold, I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it shall seem good to you.'" Then David arose and stealthily cut off the skirt of Saul's robe. ⁵And afterward David's heart smote him, because he had cut off Saul's skirt. ⁶He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD'S anointed, to put forth my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD'S anointed." ⁷So David persuaded his men with these words, and did not permit them to attack Saul. And Saul rose up and left the cave, and went upon his way.

1 Samuel 24:1-7 (RSV)

What a difficult test that was for David. We are unlikely ever to face one as severe as that. But note his extreme faithfulness to God, and also to King Saul himself, who was still the rightful King. David felt that as God had appointed Saul, he had a solemn duty to be loyal to the King, even though Saul was seeking to have him killed. David came out of the cave afterwards and shouted to Saul so that he could realise what had happened and that David had done him no harm:

⁸Afterward David also arose, and went out of the cave, and called after Saul, "My lord the king!" And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth, and did obeisance. ⁹And David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of men who say, 'Behold, David seeks your hurt'? ¹⁰Lo, this day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave; and some bade me kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not put forth my hand against my lord; for he is the LORD'S anointed.'" ¹¹See, my father, see the skirt of your robe in my hand; for by the fact that I cut off the skirt of your robe, and did not kill you, you may know and see that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you hunt my life to take it. ¹²May the LORD judge between me and you, may the LORD avenge me upon you; but my hand shall not be against you.

1 Samuel 24:8-12 (RSV)

When Saul heard this he was convicted, He knew that he was acting wrongly and that David was a much more faithful man than himself:

¹⁶When David had finished speaking these words to Saul, Saul said, "Is this your voice, my son David?" And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. ¹⁷He said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. ¹⁸And you have declared this day how you have dealt well with me, in that you did not kill me when the LORD put me into your hands. ¹⁹For if a man finds his enemy, will he let him go away safe? So may the LORD reward you with good for what you have done to me this day. ²⁰And now, behold, I know that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand. ²¹Swear to me therefore by the LORD that you will not cut off my descendants after me, and that you will not destroy my name out of my father's house." ²²And David swore this to Saul. Then Saul went home; but David and his men went up to the stronghold.

1 Samuel 24:16-22 (RSV)

However, although Saul really was convicted, and knew he was sinning, he still did not repent. He continued, even after this, to pursue David, and to attempt to kill him. Thus, he was still seeking to do to David something which he had asked David to swear not to do to him. Saul was thus unfaithful to David, and to God and he was also a hypocrite.

By contrast, David was totally faithful, both to Saul and to God. Therefore his strength gradually rose. More and more men came to join David in the wilderness and became his followers. In the end, the whole kingdom became his and he reigned over it all with justice and equity:

¹⁵So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people.

2 Samuel 8:15 (RSV)

One of the main reasons why David's reign was so successful was that he had entered into it well. He refused to *grab* the throne, which is what probably 99.9% of other men would have done. Instead, he waited many years to be *given* Saul's place as King. He was also totally faithful to his predecessor, despite grievous ongoing provocation. Thus he reaped a good harvest from that faithfulness. The law of sowing and reaping was at work in David's life. (See later books in this series for a full discussion of that law and how it operates in all our lives).

However, the main reason for his success was that he was so faithful to God, to his people, and to the men who served under him. There were a few spectacular exceptions when David sinned badly, but he always repented for those. Overall, he was unusually faithful, and God viewed him as "*a man after my (own) heart, who will do all my will*":

²¹ Then they asked for a king; and God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years. ²²And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king; of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.'

Acts 13:21-22 (RSV)

Consequently, God viewed David as the best King Israel ever had. God also set out His assessment of the other Kings of both Israel and Judah. The Bible records each reign, whether good or bad. When it does, it focuses not on the abilities or successes of each King, but on the degree to which they were faithful. That was always the crucial thing in God's eyes, not their achievements.

That is where God's view of things is so very different to ours. We tend to assess other people on all the wrong criteria, such as their looks, fame, wealth, power and achievements. But God's view is so unlike ours. He considers to be successful very many men and women whom the world regards as failures. He also regards as failures many people whom most of us would admire as great successes.

How God graded the various kings of Israel and Judah

Let's look at some examples of both good and bad kings, according to how God assessed them. We cannot look at them all, as there are so many. But we will consider a number. In each case, note carefully the characteristics God focuses on, and also those that He *doesn't* focus on, when assessing people. We shall begin by looking at King Jehoshaphat of Judah:

³*The LORD was with Jehosh'aphat, because he walked in the earlier ways of his father; he did not seek the Ba'als, ⁴ but sought the God of his father and walked in his commandments, and not according to the ways of Israel. ⁵Therefore the LORD established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah brought tribute to Jehosh'aphat; and he had great riches and honour. ⁶His heart was courageous in the ways of the LORD; and furthermore he took the high places and the Ashe'rim out of Judah.*

⁷*In the third year of his reign he sent his princes, Ben-hail, Obadi'ah, Zechari'ah, Nathan'el, and Micai'ah, to teach in the cities of Judah; ⁸ and with them the Levites, Shemai'ah, Nethani'ah, Zebadi'ah, As'ahel, Shemi'ramoth, Jehon'athan, Adoni'jah, Tobi'jah, and Tobadoni'jah; and with these Levites, the priests Elish'ama and Jeho'ram. ⁹ And they taught in Judah, having the book of the law of the LORD with them; they went about through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people.*

2 Chronicles 17:3-9 (RSV)

Note also the positive consequences for the people of Judah that came from Jehoshaphat's faithfulness and also the rewards that came to Jehoshaphat personally:

¹⁰*And the fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah, and they made no war against Jehosh'aphat. ¹¹ Some of the Philistines brought Jehosh'aphat presents, and silver for tribute; and the Arabs also brought him seven thousand seven hundred rams and seven thousand seven hundred he-goats. ¹² And Jehosh'aphat grew steadily greater. He built in Judah fortresses and store-cities, ¹³ and he had great stores in the cities of Judah. He had soldiers, mighty men of valor, in Jerusalem.*

2 Chronicles 17:10-13 (RSV)

That was God's verdict on the reign of the godly King Jehoshaphat of Judah. But, note that God never even mentions his *abilities* or his *achievements*, as almost all of us would do. Instead, God's attention is focused on the fact that:

- a) he did not serve or worship the Baals. (These were the pagan gods that the Canaanites worshipped. Their occult practices had spread into both Israel and Judah)
- b) he sought instead for God, i.e. he worshiped only the true God.
- c) he walked in the commandments, i.e. he was obedient to God's written Word.
- d) His heart was "*courageous in the ways of the LORD*"
- e) He made it a priority to send out some of his best people to teach God's Word (the book of the law of the LORD) in all the cities of Judah.

Those are the things God focused on when evaluating the reign of Jehoshaphat. That speaks volumes about what our priorities should be. Now let's look at God's assessment of King Amaziah of Judah. He began well and showed some faithfulness. However, his problem was that his faithfulness was not sufficiently wholehearted:

Amaziah was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. And his mother's name was Jehoaddan of Jerusalem. ² He did right in the sight of the LORD, yet not with a whole heart.

2 Chronicles 25:1-2 (NASB)

There were three main things that caused Amaziah to go astray in the end and to abandon his faithfulness:

a) He did not fully trust in God to help him. So, he formed an alliance with the idolatrous Northern Kingdom of Israel. God did not tell him, or want him, to do that, due to the wickedness of its kings:

⁶ He hired also 100,000 valiant warriors out of Israel for one hundred talents of silver. ⁷ But a man of God came to him saying, "O king, do not let the army of Israel go with you, for the LORD is not with Israel nor with any of the sons of Ephraim.

2 Chronicles 25:6-7 (NASB)

b) He had a military victory over the people of Seir and, after the battle was over, he brought their false gods/idols back to Jerusalem. He then ended up getting into idolatry, bowing down to those gods and burning incense to them:

¹⁴ Now after Amaziah came from slaughtering the Edomites, he brought the gods of the sons of Seir, set them up as his gods, bowed down before them and burned incense to them. ¹⁵ Then the anger of the LORD burned against Amaziah, and He sent him a prophet who said to him, "Why have you sought the gods of the people who have not delivered their own people from your hand?" ¹⁶ As he was talking with him, the king said to him, "Have we appointed you a royal counselor? Stop! Why should you be struck down?" Then the prophet stopped and said, "I know that God has planned to destroy you, because you have done this and have not listened to my counsel."

2 Chronicles 25:14-16 (NASB)

c) His heart became proud and over-confident because of his victories. As a result, he started an unnecessary war and also refused to listen to God's prophets:

¹⁹ You said, 'Behold, you have defeated Edom.' And your heart has become proud in boasting. Now stay at home; for why should you provoke trouble so that you, even you, would fall and Judah with you?"²⁰ But Amaziah would not listen, for it was from God, that He might deliver them into the hand of Joash because they had sought the gods of Edom.

2 Chronicles 25:19-20 (NASB)

So, Amaziah began well, as so many of us do. His crucial failure was that but he did not keep it up. He allowed himself to slip into unfaithfulness and even idolatry and he turned away from following the Lord. That caused God to engineer his downfall, which is so sad, because if he had stayed faithful and been wholehearted he would have had God's help. Instead, God arranged for the Northern Kingdom to bring Amaziah down and also for his own people in Jerusalem to turn against him. None of this would have happened if only he had remained faithful:

From the time that Amaziah turned away from following the LORD they conspired against him in Jerusalem, and he fled to Lachish; but they sent after him to Lachish and killed him there.

2 Chronicles 25:27 (NASB)

Now look at Amaziah's son, King Uzziah of Judah. He too began well but then allowed himself to slip. He dropped his standards as a result of the same problems of pride, over-confidence and presumption:

¹And all the people of Judah took Uzzi'ah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king instead of his father Amazi'ah. ²He built Eloth and restored it to Judah, after the king slept with his fathers. ³Uzzi'ah was sixteen years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jecoli'ah of Jerusalem. ⁴And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Amazi'ah had done. ⁵He set himself to seek God in the days of Zechari'ah, who instructed him in the fear of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper.

2 Chronicles 26:1-5 (RSV)

Here we see God's assessment of how King Uzziah *began* his reign. It focuses entirely on the fact that he:

- a) did what was right in the eyes of the LORD
- b) feared God
- c) sought the LORD

Again, none of these things have anything to do with Uzziah's abilities, achievements or victories in battles. They are all about his loyalty and faithfulness to God. That makes sense. Why should God praise us or reward us for our talents or abilities, when it was He that gave them all to us in the first place? Those things interest us, but not God, because our talents do not entitle us to any credit or reward.

Thus, in a certain sense, it would be inappropriate to praise Mozart for what he composed, given that the music usually just arrived, complete, in Mozart's head. All he had to do was to write it down. It was all given to him by God. So the credit for Mozart's music really belongs to God, more than to Mozart. However, what we could praise Mozart for is his diligence in writing it down after he had received it in his head. That states the extent of Mozart's contribution more accurately. He was a diligent worker, for which he deserves credit, but the music itself was God's, not his.

The same principle applies to the Kings of Israel and also to us. When we appear before Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ, He will not reward us for being good looking or clever or successful or powerful. If we have any of those things it is no credit to us, because they came from Him, not us.

Jesus will limit Himself, therefore, to rewarding us for our faithfulness in terms of what we did with what He gave us. So, at the Judgment Seat of Christ those who were given great talent have no advantage over those who were given very little talent. Once you stop to consider this, it becomes obvious that that would be how God would see things.

In the later part of his long reign, King Uzziah became less faithful and less obedient. God's blessings upon him for his faithfulness, and all the success that that brought him, started to go to his head and he became proud. He then usurped the role of the priests and became angry when they tried to stop him doing so. God therefore punished Uzziah towards the end of his reign. What a shame for Him to spoil his good record in that way and to have his decline into unfaithfulness recorded in the Bible, for all of us to see for the next 3000 years.

That failure must be a lesson to us, especially as we approach the end of our lives or ministries. That is when there is the greatest temptation to become self-satisfied and to rest on our laurels. We must never allow ourselves to become proud or complacent, such that Jesus revises downwards the 'grade' that He is going to give us:

¹⁵ In Jerusalem he made engines, invented by skilful men, to be on the towers and the corners, to shoot arrows and great stones. And his fame spread far, for he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. ¹⁶But when he was strong he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the LORD

his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ¹⁷But Azari'ah the priest went in after him, with eighty priests of the LORD who were men of valor; ¹⁸and they withstood King Uzzi'ah, and said to him, "It is not for you, Uzzi'ah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Go out of the sanctuary; for you have done wrong, and it will bring you no honor from the LORD God."

¹⁹Then Uzzi'ah was angry. Now he had a censer in his hand to burn incense, and when he became angry with the priests leprosy broke out on his forehead, in the presence of the priests in the house of the LORD, by the altar of incense. ²⁰And Azari'ah the chief priest, and all the priests, looked at him, and behold, he was leprous in his forehead! And they thrust him out quickly, and he himself hastened to go out, because the LORD had smitten him. ²¹And King Uzzi'ah was a leper to the day of his death, and being a leper dwelt in a separate house, for he was excluded from the house of the LORD. And Jotham his son was over the king's household, governing the people of the land.

2 Chronicles 26:15-21 (RSV)

However, Uzziah's son Jotham did better. He avoided the sin that Uzziah had committed in the Temple. That was good but, despite speaking well of Jotham, God still notes in the end that he did not prevent the people from following corrupt practices. In short, Jotham did well, but he did not go as far as he should have gone to try to lead the people into the right path:

¹Jotham was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jeru'shah the daughter of Zadok. ²And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD according to all that his father Uzzi'ah had done--only he did not invade the temple of the LORD. But the people still followed corrupt practices.

2 Chronicles 27:1-2 (RSV)

Nonetheless, because of the general faithfulness that he did show, God made King Jotham mighty:

So Jotham became mighty because he ordered his ways before the LORD his God.

2 Chronicles 27:6 (RSV)

Next we see a King who received a wholly bad report from God. We are told that King Ahaz "*did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD*". Note the things that God highlights which led to his downfall:

¹Ahaz was twenty years old when he began to reign, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem. And he did not do what was right in the eyes of the LORD, like his father David, ²but walked in the ways of the kings of Israel. He even made molten images for the Ba'als; ³and he burned incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burned his sons as an offering, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. ⁴And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree. ⁵Therefore the LORD his God gave him into the hand of the king of Syria, who defeated him and took captive a great number of his people and brought them to Damascus. He was also given into the hand of the king of Israel, who defeated him with great slaughter.

2 Chronicles 28:1-5 (RSV)

The sins of King Ahaz, which caused God to condemn his time as King, were that:

- a) he did not do what was right in God's eyes (By that God means what he did morally and spiritually, not economically or militarily).
- b) he walked in the ways of the Kings of Israel, i.e. in idolatry and unfaithfulness to God
- c) he made molten images of the Baals and burned incense as part of idolatrous worship

d) he even burned his own sons as human sacrifices to the pagan gods.

The terrible sins of King Ahaz brought down the Southern Kingdom of Judah. God also brought judgment on Ahaz personally. But, as He did so, Ahaz turned towards the pagan gods even more thoroughly than before, seeking their help rather than God's. Instead of repenting when God brought him under judgment, he continued, and even intensified, his sin. Thus he brought even worse judgment upon himself and also on his people:

¹⁹For the LORD brought Judah low because of Ahaz king of Israel, for he had dealt wantonly in Judah and had been faithless to the LORD. ²⁰So Til'gath-pilne'ser king of Assyria came against him, and afflicted him instead of strengthening him. ²¹For Ahaz took from the house of the LORD and the house of the king and of the princes, and gave tribute to the king of Assyria; but it did not help him. ²²In the time of his distress he became yet more faithless to the LORD--this same King Ahaz. ²³For he sacrificed to the gods of Damascus which had defeated him, and said, "Because the gods of the kings of Syria helped them, I will sacrifice to them that they may help me." But they were the ruin of him, and of all Israel. ²⁴And Ahaz gathered together the vessels of the house of God and cut in pieces the vessels of the house of God, and he shut up the doors of the house of the LORD; and he made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem. ²⁵In every city of Judah he made high places to burn incense to other gods, provoking to anger the LORD, the God of his fathers.

2 Chronicles 28:19-25 (RSV)

Next we see a faithful King, Hezekiah of Judah. Note that the Northern Kingdom of Israel never had any faithful kings. Every single one of them was unfaithful and evil. King Hezekiah saw what the unfaithfulness of previous Kings of Judah had caused and also how the unfaithfulness of the people, and especially their idolatry, had brought them under God's judgment. He was determined to put things right. His main focus was not on restoring the *economy* of Judah, or the power of its *military*. It was on leading the people into *greater faithfulness towards God*. What a striking contrast there is between his priorities and those of our political leaders today, or even our church leaders:

¹Hezeki'ah began to reign when he was twenty-five years old, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Abi'jah the daughter of Zechari'ah. ²And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that David his father had done. ³In the first year of his reign, in the first month, he opened the doors of the house of the LORD, and repaired them. ⁴He brought in the priests and the Levites, and assembled them in the square on the east, ⁵and said to them, "Hear me, Levites! Now sanctify yourselves, and sanctify the house of the LORD, the God of your fathers, and carry out the filth from the holy place.

⁶For our fathers have been unfaithful and have done what was evil in the sight of the LORD our God; they have forsaken him, and have turned away their faces from the habitation of the LORD, and turned their backs. ⁷They also shut the doors of the vestibule and put out the lamps, and have not burned incense or offered burnt offerings in the holy place to the God of Israel. ⁸Therefore the wrath of the LORD came on Judah and Jerusalem, and he has made them an object of horror, of astonishment, and of hissing, as you see with your own eyes. ⁹For lo, our fathers have fallen by the sword and our sons and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this.

¹⁰Now it is in my heart to make a covenant with the LORD, the God of Israel, that his fierce anger may turn away from us. ¹¹My sons, do not now be negligent, for the LORD has chosen you to stand in his presence, to minister to him, and to be his ministers and burn incense to him."

2 Chronicles 29:1-11 (RSV)

Hezekiah took steps not only to put things right in Judah, but even to help to improve the situation in the Northern Kingdom of Israel:

¹Hezeki'ah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to E'phraim and Manas'seh, that they should come to the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, to keep the passover to the LORD the God of Israel.

2 Chronicles 30:1 (RSV)

However, despite his best efforts, not many people from the Northern Kingdom responded well to his invitations. Nevertheless, though he did not always succeed, God's overall verdict on King Hezekiah was very positive. In particular, we are told that he did what he did "with all his heart". Again God's emphasis is on Hezekiah's wholeheartedness and faithfulness, even though he did not fully succeed in the things he was trying to do for God, because the people were not willing to obey. His abilities and the extent of his achievements are not even mentioned, let alone emphasised:

²⁰Thus Hezeki'ah did throughout all Judah; and he did what was good and right and faithful before the LORD his God. ²¹And every work that he undertook in the service of the house of God and in accordance with the law and the commandments, seeking his God, he did with all his heart, and prospered.

2 Chronicles 31:20-21 (RSV)

Sadly, Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, was evil, at least for the majority of his reign. God's verdict on those wasted and misused years is very scathing:

¹Manas'seh was twelve years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. ²He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. ³For he rebuilt the high places which his father Hezeki'ah had broken down, and erected altars to the Ba'als, and made Ashe'rahs, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served them. ⁴And he built altars in the house of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "In Jerusalem shall my name be forever." ⁵And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD. ⁶And he burned his sons as an offering in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and practiced soothsaying and augury and sorcery, and dealt with mediums and with wizards. He did much evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.

2 Chronicles 33:1-6 (RSV)

⁹Manas'seh seduced Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that they did more evil than the nations whom the LORD destroyed before the people of Israel.

2 Chronicles 33:9 (RSV)

Strangely, at the very end of his reign, when God's judgment was already coming upon him for his wickedness and unfaithfulness, Manasseh repented. It is one of the very few examples we see in the Bible of a really wicked man repenting and genuinely turning back to God:

¹⁰The LORD spoke to Manas'seh and to his people, but they gave no heed. ¹¹Therefore the LORD brought upon them the commanders of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manas'seh with hooks and bound him with fetters of bronze and brought him to Babylon. ¹²And when he was in distress he entreated the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. ¹³He prayed to him, and God received his entreaty and heard his supplication and brought him again to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manas'seh knew that the LORD was God.

2 Chronicles 33:10-13 (RSV)

After his repentance, King Manasseh changed and sincerely tried his best to put right the terrible harm he had done:

¹⁴Afterwards he built an outer wall for the city of David west of Gihon, in the valley, and for the entrance into the Fish Gate, and carried it round Ophel, and raised it to a very great height; he also put commanders of the army in all the fortified cities in Judah. ¹⁵And he took away the foreign

gods and the idol from the house of the LORD, and all the altars that he had built on the mountain of the house of the LORD and in Jerusalem, and he threw them outside of the city. ¹⁶He also restored the altar of the LORD and offered upon it sacrifices of peace offerings and of thanksgiving; and he commanded Judah to serve the LORD the God of Israel.

2 Chronicles 33:14-16 (RSV)

Thus, having been grossly unfaithful for most of his life, Manasseh became faithful in the end. That gives us hope for ourselves and for those we know who seem very far from God. The final verdict on Manasseh is brief, but positive. It says he "*slept with his fathers*". That is an expression used in the Bible to indicate that a man died as a believer and that he was saved. So, we will see King Manasseh in Heaven (and also on the Earth, when Jesus returns and Manasseh is resurrected so that he can be on Earth during the Millennium):

²⁰So Manas'sseh slept with his fathers, and they buried him in his house; and Amon his son reigned in his stead.

2 Chronicles 33:20 (RSV)

Next came Manasseh's son Amon. He was evil but, unlike his father, he did not repent or change:

²¹Amon was twenty-two years old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years in Jerusalem. ²²He did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, as Manas'sseh his father had done. Amon sacrificed to all the images that Manas'sseh his father had made, and served them. ²³And he did not humble himself before the LORD, as Manas'sseh his father had humbled himself, but this Amon incurred guilt more and more. ²⁴And his servants conspired against him and killed him in his house.

2 Chronicles 33:21-24 (RSV)

We now come to the most faithful King that Judah ever had, the godly child-king, Josiah. He was more faithful, and more wholehearted, than any of his predecessors, even the good ones:

¹Josi'ah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. ²He did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right or to the left. ³For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father; and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Ashe'rim, and the graven and the molten images.

2 Chronicles 34:1-3 (RSV)

King Josiah was deeply moved when he came across the Law of Moses and read it in the early part of his reign. He realised how great the need was for repentance and he led the people in that repentance, and in focusing again on the Bible:

¹⁹When the king heard the words of the law he rent his clothes. ²⁰And the king commanded Hilki'ah, Ahi'kam the son of Shaphan, Abdon the son of Micah, Shaphan the secretary, and Asai'ah the king's servant, saying, ²¹"Go, inquire of the LORD for me and for those who are left in Israel and in Judah, concerning the words of the book that has been found; for great is the wrath of the LORD that is poured out on us, because our fathers have not kept the word of the LORD, to do according to all that is written in this book."

2 Chronicles 34:19-21 (RSV)

²⁹Then the king sent and gathered together all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem. ³⁰And the king went up to the house of the LORD, with all the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem and the priests and the Levites, all the people both great and small; and he read in their hearing all the words of the book of the covenant which had been found in the house of the LORD. ³¹And the king stood in his place and made a covenant before the LORD, to walk after the LORD and to keep his commandments and his testimonies and his statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform

the words of the covenant that were written in this book. ³²Then he made all who were present in Jerusalem and in Benjamin stand to it. And the inhabitants of Jerusalem did according to the covenant of God, the God of their fathers. ³³And Josi'ah took away all the abominations from all the territory that belonged to the people of Israel, and made all who were in Israel serve the LORD their God. All his days they did not turn away from following the LORD the God of their fathers.

2 Chronicles 34:29-33 (RSV)

The zeal, devotion and faithfulness of King Josiah led to him receiving God's commendation. Look at this passage from 2 Kings. Wouldn't you like Jesus to say something like this about you at the Judgment Seat of Christ?

²⁵Before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him.
2 Kings 23:25 (RSV)

The prospect of the Judgment Seat of Christ needs to become a vivid reality to you. It must be real enough to affect your daily life

It's not easy to be faithful, especially over a long period of time. There are so many ways that we can fail God and let other people down. However, if we can learn to see the future Judgment Seat of Christ as a reality, that will help us to be much more faithful, and to remain so to the end. We may face temptations and we may want to take shortcuts, or let God down. But, the thought of one day having to stand before Jesus Christ, face to face, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, will help to bring us back to our senses.

Remembering each day that what we are about to do that day will either bring rebuke or reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ will help to keep us on the right path. Therefore we really need to remind ourselves every day of the Judgment Seat of Christ and what will happen at it:

*The faithless will be fully repaid for their ways,
and the good man rewarded for his.*
Proverbs 14:14 (NIV)

¹⁰Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God; ¹¹for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God." ¹²So each of us shall give account of himself to God.

Romans 14:10-12 (RSV)

Everything you ever do, however small, is going to be assessed and either rewarded, or not rewarded, at the Judgment Seat of Christ. I have asked God to help me to see that judgment as a very clear reality. I want to become more and more conscious of it every day as I go about my ordinary tasks. One day we will all have to give an individual account to the Lord Jesus Christ for how we used or misused, and invested or wasted, every day of our lives.

When you ponder on what it will be like to meet Jesus face to face at that awesome encounter, do not think of Him as He was when He was with His disciples during His earthly ministry. Instead, think of Him as He is now, as shown in the book of Revelation. When the apostle John saw Jesus as He is now, he fell down at His feet in awe, because seeing Him as He really is came as a huge shock. That was despite the fact that, during His earthly ministry, John had been Jesus' best friend:

¹²Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³and 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; ¹⁴his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; ¹⁶in 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. ¹⁷When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, ¹⁸and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Revelation 1:12-18 (RSV)

Jesus is therefore to be feared. The need to face Him on that Judgment Day should concentrate your mind now. That is another benefit that comes from having the fear of the LORD.

Nobody will get away with anything at the Judgment Seat of Christ. Jesus sees everything we ever do.

Nothing we ever do will be overlooked. Jesus is continuously assessing the level of our faithfulness to decide what position and rewards (if any) to award to us in His Kingdom. See Book Four for much more detail on the Judgment Seat of Christ and about what the Bible says about rewards and rebuke. Do not make the mistake of thinking that there is anything too small for Him to notice or care about:

*The eyes of the LORD are in every place,
watching the evil and the good.
Proverbs 15:3 (NASB)*

Everything that we ever think, say or do is being recorded in Jesus' infinite memory. He is concerned about every part of your life, especially the private things which nobody else ever sees.

Jesus knows all our real motives – therefore we may as well be totally honest with ourselves

There is no point trying to deceive Jesus or to hide things from Him. He knows exactly what you do and why you do it. He knows whether you are wholehearted or reluctant. Look at the glowing assessment God made of Caleb:

²⁴ But because my servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.

Numbers 14:24 (NIV)

Jesus knows exactly how much we care about Him and how loyal we are to Him. Therefore do everything wholeheartedly, as if you were doing it for Jesus, because that is precisely what you are doing. We need to see every task, no matter what it is, as being done for Him:

²³ Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

Colossians 3:23-24 (NASB)

You should resolve, as David did, to live a 'blameless' life. That is to live with integrity and to keep yourself away from corrupt activities and corrupt people:

*² I will be careful to lead a blameless life—
when will you come to me?
I will conduct the affairs of my house
with a blameless heart.*

³ *I will not look with approval
on anything that is vile.
I hate what faithless people do;
I will have no part in it.*
⁴ *The perverse of heart shall be far from me;
I will have nothing to do with what is evil.*
Psalm 101:2-4 (NIV)

Our word must be our bond

For many years I was involved in commercial litigation. I would act as a lawyer for one side or another in commercial disputes. Our client would either be suing or being sued. It would generally be because somebody had failed to keep to the contracts they had agreed. They would have either broken a promise or let some other company down in some way. Having done so, instead of admitting it, the party in the wrong would generally deny it and seek to get away with it. Those who did that were unfaithful men who did not consider their word to be their bond. Sadly, there are very many people who act in that way.

For that reason, when contracts are entered onto between businesses, one of the jobs of the lawyers drawing up the contract is to give thought to what will happen if one of the parties breaks any of the terms. Even before the contract is entered into, we have to think about, and plan for, somebody breaking the agreement. We even work out in advance what the damages should be. We also make provisions in the contract for our own client being in breach, not just the other party. That's sad, but necessary, because so few businessmen have any strong sense of honour. Many do not feel any shame at all at the idea of not keeping their word.

For the Christian there has to be a higher standard. We must consider ourselves bound by our words, regardless of whether it was ever put in writing. We must view our own word as being unbreakable. A hundred years ago, or even fifty, that was how most business was conducted, but no longer. Too few people have enough personal integrity for business to be able to operate on that basis today. It cannot now be based on trust, because so few people can be trusted.

We need to be faithful in all our relationships

That kind of faithfulness and honour, where our word is regarded as our bond, needs to apply not just in business but in every transaction we make and in all our relationships. Look at how Samuel operated as a judge over Israel. He was able to challenge the whole nation to name even a single occasion when he had ever acted unfaithfully. Not one person was able to do so:

³ *"Here I am; bear witness against me before the LORD and His anointed Whose ox have I taken, or whose donkey have I taken, or whom have I defrauded? Whom have I oppressed, or from whose hand have I taken a bribe to blind my eyes with it? I will restore it to you."* ⁴ *They said, "You have not defrauded us or oppressed us or taken anything from any man's hand."* ⁵ *He said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day that you have found nothing in my hand." And they said, "He is witness.*

1 Samuel 12:3-5 (NASB)

Would you feel confident enough to stand in front of all the people who have ever known you and challenge them all to point out even one occasion when you have ever acted unfaithfully? Few of us could stand up to that test. We must seek to be blameless, like Samuel, in all our dealings with other people, even in the smallest details.

By contrast, one only has to look at the difficulties faced by the Democratic and Republic parties in the USA when trying to find a presidential candidate, out of a population of over 300 million. One would imagine it would be easy to find thousands of exemplary candidates for that office. Instead, we see men coming forward, but as soon as the media begin to dig around and investigate their past life, all sorts of things come out, such as drug abuse, adultery, unfaithfulness or sexual harassment. We must be different and go to great lengths to maintain our integrity consistently and over the long term.

Faithfulness to God Himself

Being faithful to God is our greatest duty. He is the main person to whom we must be loyal. God wants us to make a clear and definite choice to follow Him alone and to serve Him with unwavering sincerity. We also need to be faithful in obeying God's Word:

¹⁴ "Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵ And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

Joshua 24:14-15 (RSV)

Let your heart therefore be wholly true to the LORD our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day."

1 Kings 8:61 (RSV)

Moreover, the prophet Samuel told the people of Israel that they needed to put away all other gods and serve only God. They needed to direct their hearts *to Him only* and turn away from all other competing attractions. The same applies to us:

³ Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, "If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Ash'taroth from among you, and direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the hand of the Philistines." ⁴ So Israel put away the Ba'als and the Ash'taroth, and they served the Lord only.

1 Samuel 7:3-4 (RSV)

King Saul was not faithful to God. He disobeyed God's commands and failed to seek God's guidance. None of that sounds spectacular or remarkable. Saul did what most of us do. Yet, it was serious enough in God's eyes to cause Him to take the kingdom away from Saul and to give it to David:

¹³ So Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the LORD in that he did not keep the command of the LORD, and also consulted a medium, seeking guidance. ¹⁴ He did not seek guidance from the LORD. Therefore the LORD put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.

1 Chronicles 10:13-14(ESV)

Faithfulness to our husband or wife

Over the past few decades there has been, throughout most of the Western world, a collapse in the sanctity of marriage. Divorce is at epidemic levels. One of the main causes of divorce, after selfishness, is unfaithfulness, where one party, or both, are committing adultery. For Christians that must never happen.

We must stay with our husband or wife through good times and bad, for richer for poorer, in sickness or in health, till death parts us. There must be an absolute determination to do all of that, no matter what happens. We must also resolve never to look at any person in an improper or lustful way. Be like Job. Make a firm decision not even to look at a member of the opposite sex:

***1**"I have made a covenant with my eyes; How then could I gaze at a virgin?
Job 31:1 (NASB)*

We need to make a decision, as Job did, that we will have eyes for nobody else and that we will not commit adultery, even in our thoughts. We need to honour all the vows we made on our wedding day, no matter what temptations later come our way, as they surely will. The prophet Malachi expresses the strength of God's feelings about divorce very clearly. He says that God hates divorce:

***13**"This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour from your hand. **14**"Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the LORD has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. **15**"But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. **16**"For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."*

Malachi 2:13-16 (NASB)

Faithfulness to our children

Likewise, when we become a parent, we are entrusted with another sacred responsibility, for which God will hold us accountable. This is especially so for fathers. Yet, what we see around us in the West doesn't look much like this. There is a widespread abdication of responsibility by increasingly delinquent and feckless men. Many of them fail to take their duties seriously. There are lots of men who put their job, or even their hobbies, ahead of their children.

Being faithful to a child involves making a solemn commitment to devote ourselves to them. That means spending a lot of time with the child and putting the child's needs first, ahead of what we want. In particular, it means taking responsibly for the child's spiritual condition.

Too many fathers leave these issues to be dealt with solely or mainly by their wives. However, God will still hold fathers primarily accountable for their children's spiritual condition, whether they realise it or not. God has commanded all fathers to teach their children about Him and about the Bible:

***5** He established a testimony in Jacob,
and appointed a law in Israel,
which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children;
6 that the next generation might know them,
the children yet unborn,
and arise and tell them to their children,
7 so that they should set their hope in God,
and not forget the works of God,
but keep his commandments;
8 and that they should not be like their fathers,
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
a generation whose heart was not steadfast,
whose spirit was not faithful to God.*

Psalm 78:5-8 (RSV)

The emphasis that God places on the role of the father in bringing his children up to know and obey God flies in the face of our society's attitude and assumptions about fatherhood. Even in better families, it is usually left to the mother to teach the children about God. But that isn't how God views it. Therefore we need to get into line with Him, especially those of us who are fathers.

Faithfulness to our parents

See chapter seven of Book One in this series for a more detailed discussion of our duties to our parents. The biblical method of social security is for adult children to look after their own parents in old age. We are to honour them and care for their practical and financial needs. Therefore start to see yourself and your siblings as having that responsibility.

View yourself as being at least one of the people who will care for your parents in their old age. God will still hold you accountable for how they are treated, no matter how much you might seek to offload that duty onto the State. The only exception would be if you are *genuinely* incapable of helping them, due to your own health problems or poverty etc. However, we should not be quick to assume that we come into any of those categories.

Faithfulness to our friends and acquaintances

One of the main things we can do to show ourselves faithful to friends is to avoid gossip. Learn to control your tongue. If you are told a secret, then tell nobody. That will eventually transform the way people see you. People who can be fully relied on to keep a confidence are very rare. Aim to become such a person, so that others can trust you completely and confide in you, knowing that you will never reveal a word of what they say.

*¹³ A gossip betrays a confidence,
but a trustworthy person keeps a secret.
Proverbs 11:13 (NIV)*

The norm however, is to betray other people's confidences and to pass information on to others. We usually do it because we wish to be significant and to be considered to have inside knowledge. Resolve now to build a reputation, for the long term, as one who can be trusted with confidential information. Furthermore, seek to be the kind of friend who tells the truth, gives honest advice, and never engages in flattery:

*⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend;
profuse are the kisses of an enemy.
Proverbs 27:6 (RSV)*

Far too many people are false friends. They say things that they do not really mean. They appear supportive to a person's face but are disloyal to them, and critical of them, behind their backs. Resolve to do the opposite. Tell the truth to your friends' faces, but defend them behind their backs. If so, you will be one of a very small minority. People will eventually notice that and they will seek you out, especially in times of adversity:

*¹⁷ A friend loves at all times,
And a brother is born for adversity.
Proverbs 17:17 (NASB)*

*There are friends who pretend to be friends,
but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.
Proverbs 18:24 (RSV)*

Faithfulness to our employer

Having practiced in employment law for many years, I find it remarkable how many employees resent, despise, or even hate their employer. It seems to be the norm. This is frequently true even amongst Christians. Perhaps this malaise is more widespread in Britain, than elsewhere? However, the reality is that your employer has done you a great favour, simply in giving you a job at all. Presumably, that job is good enough to accept and remain in, otherwise you wouldn't still be there?

Why not start to view your job and your employer differently? Make a decision that from now on you will be appreciative and work diligently, even when nobody is looking. In fact, work hard *especially* when nobody is looking. The rarest thing for any employer to find in a member of staff is faithfulness. That has always been my experience. Even King Solomon thought so:

*Many a man proclaims his own loyalty;
but a faithful man who can find?
Proverbs 20:6 (RSV)*

*Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest
is a faithful messenger to those who send him,
he refreshes the spirit of his masters.
Proverbs 25:13 (RSV)*

*Trust in a faithless man in time of trouble
is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.
Proverbs 25:19 (RSV)*

Apostle Paul gives clear instructions on how a servant should relate to their master. They must be faithful, trustworthy and loyal. The same applies to us today in our dealings with employers:

⁹Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, ¹⁰ not pilfering, but showing all good faith so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.

Titus 2:9-10 (NASB)

Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for any honest work,

Titus 3:1 (RSV)

⁵Slaves, be obedient to those who are your earthly masters, with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as to Christ; ⁶not in the way of eye-service, as men-pleasers, but as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to men, ⁸knowing that whatever good any one does, he will receive the same again from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.

Ephesians 6:5-8 (RSV)

Resolve to become the most faithful member of staff at your workplace. It won't be very hard because few, if any, other staff will be competing with you for that title. If you do, your bosses will certainly notice. You'll be promoted sooner or later, either there or somewhere else. If for some reason your current bosses refuse to reward you, God will probably move you to another boss who will. More importantly, Jesus will be so pleased that He will reward you for it Himself, even if your own boss doesn't.

Whatever job you do, and whoever you work for, you are a “*steward*”. That is a person who has been entrusted with responsibilities to look after certain people, property, money or tasks. A steward has a

“*duty of care*” He will be held accountable by his employer for the way in which he discharged his responsibilities.

The same applies even if you do not currently have a job. You will have been entrusted by God with specific tasks or duties and He too will hold you accountable and gauge the extent of your trustworthiness, just like any other employer would do:

Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.
1 Corinthians 4:2 (ESV)

Please also remember that your duty to be faithful to your employer is *not conditional* upon him also being faithful to you. It is great if you do happen to have a good and faithful boss, but whether he is or not has no bearing on your duty to be faithful to him. So, you are not merely to be faithful in response, or as your part of a two-way arrangement. Just be faithful to your boss all the time, *regardless of how he treats you.*

The reason you must be faithful is simply because God wants you to behave in that way, not necessarily because your boss deserves it. The same is true of every other relationship. You are required to be faithful no matter what other people do. They will answer to God for what they do and you will answer to God for what you do. Therefore don't confuse matters by imagining that there has to be a mutual faithfulness as a pre-condition to you being under any obligation to be faithful yourself. That is not the case.

I emphasise that point because a lot of people wrongly imagine that wrongful behaviour on our own part is justified if the other person has previously treated us wrongly. It isn't. So, if your boss was to fail to pay you fairly, or on time, or if he was rude or disrespectful, that would not justify you in doing the same back to him by being rude in return, or by short-changing him with your time or effort. Neither could you steal from him because he has stolen from you. Apostle Peter addresses this point in his first letter:

¹⁸ Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing. ¹⁹ For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. ²⁰ For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval. ²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly.

1 Peter 2:18-23 (RSV)

You could, of course, openly question your boss, or even confront him, about his behaviour towards you. But nothing that he does would ever justify you in behaving discourteously, improperly, dishonestly or disloyally towards him. In short, you must be faithful, even if you are the only person who ever operates that way in your workplace.

Faithfulness concerning any responsibilities that are entrusted to us

When King Jehoshaphat, the godly king of Judah, appointed judges this is what he told them:

⁶ He said to the judges, “Consider what you are doing, for you do not judge for man but for the LORD who is with you when you render judgment. ⁷ Now then let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe.”

2 Chronicles 19:6-7 (NASB)

He wanted them to be aware at all times that God is watching and will hold each one of them accountable for all that they do. The same is true for all of us. Whatever work we do, we are accountable for it, and we are doing it for the Lord. Even if we allow ourselves to forget that, it still remains true.

Whether we are managers, or shop floor workers, or have any other kind of job, we need to learn to take every duty very seriously, however small it may seem. We need to become the kind of person who, when they agree to do something, or are told to, put their whole heart into it. We must remain vigilant and focused until it is done, and done well. Nehemiah, when he was responsible for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, appointed men whom he knew to be more faithful than other men:

¹Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, ²I gave my brother Hana'ni and Hanani'ah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many.

Nehemiah 7:1-2 (RSV)

This reminds me of my own Dad. He took any responsibility exceptionally seriously and would go very far out of his way to ensure he never let anybody down. If he was asked to do a thing, or if he volunteered to do it, you could guarantee it would be done, not just on time, but early. I never saw him forget anything, or be late, or do a shoddy job. He could always be relied on 100%. When he left the army he was graded as having given 'exemplary service', which is not said of many.

Faithfulness to our colleagues at work

It's not just with your bosses that you need to be faithful. It's with your colleagues as well, at every level. You owe a duty of care to everybody else at work to be reliable, honest and hard-working. Never take the credit for what others have done. If you are mistakenly praised by a manager for another man's work or input, say so immediately and redirect the praise. Always keep your promises and do your tasks faithfully. Do not let your team down. Start to see everyday things like that as a part of the process of becoming a mature disciple. If you do, you'll be unusual.

Most Christians do not think that their job has got anything to do with being a disciple. However, in God's eyes, it is an essential part of the Christian life, which He takes very seriously. A Christian employee should be one of the last people to ring in to work to say he is sick. Even if the practice of abusing sick leave is widespread where you work, *you must never join in*. It lets your colleagues down as well as your company, quite apart from being dishonest. Therefore, even if the whole office does it, including the managers, you must still be the only one who doesn't.

Faithfulness to our customers/clients/patients

Another group to whom we owe a duty of care are the customers, clients, patients etc that we serve in our job. If you are a mechanic working on someone's car, be completely honest, down to the last detail. Do your best standard of work at all times, regardless of whether the customer or client is watching or will ever find out. Also treat every customer well, regardless of whether they are rich and powerful or poor and weak.

The reason to do your best work is not just so that you can avoid getting into trouble. It is because the customer is paying and is, therefore, contractually entitled to your best service. Focus far more on your duty to the customer than on any rights you might have, or think you have. The customer always comes first, not you. If you can understand that, and apply it, then the rest of it will come easily.

Faithfulness to our staff/employees/junior colleagues

If God has put you into a managerial position, or if you have your own business, that doesn't mean you have no boss. God is always your boss and you must report to Him daily. One of the first priorities He will have for you is to treat your staff fairly. Actually they are really His staff, not yours and God is very interested in how you deal with them:

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty.

James 5:4 (NIV)

God is watching over the people who work for you, or under you, and He hears their cries. So, always pay wages on time. Don't hold them back just to ease your own cash flow. A Christian employer must still pay the wages, even when there is nothing left for himself. I have been in that place, in the past, as most businessmen have, especially when starting out. Likewise, in dealing with staff, you have a responsibility to treat them fairly and to provide them with the opportunity to grow and develop.

Moreover, one of the key duties of every boss is to protect the weak from the strong. In any workplace, unless the boss is vigilant, bullies and tyrants will inevitably emerge amongst the staff, and at every level. Even if you get rid of them, others will always arise. There will always be some who seek to exploit, dominate and use their colleagues, especially the more timid ones.

A good boss always steps in to side with the victim and to resist the bully or manipulator, however difficult or time consuming that may be. That is the duty of every boss, though very few bother even to consider it, let alone do anything about it. A Christian boss must be keenly aware of this and take it all very seriously.

Many bosses choose to turn a blind eye to bullying, domination and manipulation at work. That is because standing up to workplace bullies requires courage and is costly, in all sorts of ways. At the very least, it is emotionally draining and it takes up a lot of time. A good boss will inevitably get abused, undermined and lied about, and especially so if he ever stands up to workplace bullies. Moreover, few people will recognise the price he is paying, or thank him for what he is doing.

Bad staff and workplace bullies will band together to attack and undermine such a boss. You must fully expect that, and be ready for it. Even so, have courage and do your duty. Use your authority faithfully. Stand up to such people and get all of them out of the business, even if you end up taking a lot of abuse and trouble for it. Be faithful to your good staff and defend them from oppressors and always choose the right course of action, not the easiest one.

Faithfulness to remember and repay those who have helped us

This is an aspect of faithfulness which applies in every relationship. There are bound to be people who, have helped you, given you things or prayed for you. Yet it is a feature of our selfish flesh nature that we tend to take such support for granted. We don't appreciate it enough. Many times we do not even remember it. There are people who have done things for us but we forget them completely. Here is an example of that from the life of Joseph:

⁹So the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph and said to him, "In my dream there was a vine before me, ¹⁰ and on the vine there were three branches. As soon as it budded, its blossoms shot forth, and the clusters ripened into grapes. ¹¹Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand." ¹²Then Joseph said to him, "This is its interpretation: the three branches are three days. ¹³ In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and restore you to your office, and you shall place Pharaoh's cup in his hand as

formerly, when you were his cupbearer. ¹⁴ Only remember me, when it is well with you, and please do me the kindness to mention me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this house. ¹⁵ For I was indeed stolen out of the land of the Hebrews, and here also I have done nothing that they should put me into the pit."

Genesis 40:9-15 (ESV)

Joseph had helped and encouraged a fellow prisoner while they were in jail together, but when that man got out of prison he forgot Joseph completely and did nothing to help him in return:

²⁰On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. ²¹ He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. ²² But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them. ²³ Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him.

Genesis 40:20-23 (ESV)

Most of us have played the parts of both Joseph and the cup-bearer in our own lives. We have been unfaithful to others by failing to repay them, or even to thank them. We have also experienced how ingratitude feels when it is shown to us by others. The first step in remedying this fault is to recognise that it exists and to begin to give it thought. We need to reflect on what we owe to others and start to make an inventory. Then begin to thank people and take opportunities to repay them in whatever way you can when they need your help. Positively seek for opportunities to repay others.

Faithfulness to our enemies

One of the hardest things to learn as a Christian is how to handle your enemies, and defend yourself from them, *yet without becoming like them*. When dealing with fools or wicked people, they will use lies and dirty tricks and they will conspire with others to undermine you by any means possible. They recognise no moral or ethical boundaries to their behaviour. In short, they will do whatever they believe they can get away with, regardless of whether it is right or wrong. Such considerations mean nothing to them.

When an immature, fleshly, worldly Christian comes up against such opposition at work, or even at church, there is a tendency to operate in the flesh and to "give as good as you get". They will tend to respond in like manner and hit back at the person wrongly, even to the extent of using the same worldly tactics and methods. They will justify this, if they consider it at all, by saying "Well, they started it" or "They did it to me, so why can't I do it back to them?"

However, that line of reasoning isn't valid. We cannot fight fire with fire. That is we can't use the same carnal, devious methods that our enemies use. That makes the battle more difficult. We have to realise that other people can be wicked, and therefore anticipate all sorts of deviousness from them, whilst not doing the same in return.

We can certainly be very firm, decisive and assertive. We can also confront people, sack them, give evidence against them and so on. We just can't sink to their level, by sinning in our handling of them. A mature Christian therefore treats his enemies better than most people treat their friends, even while he stands up to them.

Rid yourself of the love of money

One of the main reasons why people act unfaithfully is because they are tempted by the desire for money. The love of money will cause you to do wrong in all sorts of ways:

¹⁰ *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.*

1 Timothy 6:10 (NIV)

A man who can rid himself of the love of money will be liberated from all that. He will be free to do whatever is right and cannot be bought or controlled by money. Whatever wages you get, be content with them. Never allow yourself to be induced to do wrong in order to get more money. It is far better to do right, and lose money as a result, than to do wrong in order to keep it. Losing money has only temporary results, but the consequences of doing wrong, or being unfaithful, are eternal. Therefore resolve to change, so that you have no love of money at all:

⁵*Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have;*
Hebrews 13:5 (a) (NASB)

Moreover, if you should happen to become rich because God blesses you with abundance, do not set your heart on it or grow to depend on it. We need to be open-hearted so that God can give us wealth, or take it away, without us getting agitated about it. If not, then we will always be open to being tempted to do wrong in order to preserve our wealth, even if we did not do anything wrong to acquire it in the first place. That is an easy trap for wealthy people to fall into. The fear of losing what they have can easily cause them to start to compromise and to sin. It also tends to choke the effect of God's Word in their lives:

*Put no trust in extortion;
set no vain hopes on robbery;
if riches increase,
set not your heart on them.*
Psalm 62:10 (ESV)

¹⁸*And others are the ones sown among thorns; they are those who hear the word, ¹⁹but the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, and the desire for other things, enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.*

Mark 4:18-19 (ESV)

Rid yourself of selfish ambition

On a similar theme, set out to rid yourself of all selfish or improper ambition. If you don't, then you will always be vulnerable to being tempted to do wrong in order to protect your current position or your promotion prospects. The demons assigned to you will see that selfish ambition in you and they will make full use of it to trip you up. So close off that opening. Then they can't make use of it any longer.

By contrast, godly ambition is fine. You should always aim to do your best, and it is perfectly alright to seek promotion. There is nothing wrong with any of that. However it becomes wrong where your ambition is elevated to the place where it takes priority over your duties to God and to other people, or where your ambitions for yourself in this life mean more to you than your ambitions for the next life. If any of those things are true of you, then your ambition has become a god or an idol.

You have no right to do wrong to others in order to protect, or further, your own career. It is much better for your career to be held back because you do right than for you to advance it by doing wrong. That may sound obvious, but it's not what most people think, at least, not in my experience. Most people regularly operate in the flesh, even within churches. In particular, most people would act wrongly, without even hesitating, whenever they see their career as being at stake. That is wrong, and you have to convince yourself of the truth of that, so that you are ready, when the temptation comes, to stand firm.

Rid yourself of the craving to be approved of or highly esteemed

The desire to be approved of, or to be popular, is another deeply ingrained craving in all of us. It will inevitably affect, or even control, our actions unless we make a determined effort to control and resist it. However, few people do that. Most of us live our lives in a state of fear, dreading disapproval, criticism or ridicule, and making whatever decisions are necessary to avoid these things. But that will rarely, if ever, cause us to go in the right direction, or to do what God wants. When difficult situations arise you will usually go wrong if your aim is to be approved of by others.

Instead, decide that the only approval that really counts is God's. Seek always to do what He wants, regardless of whether anybody else approves, or disapproves, of you for that. This is very hard to achieve. Few even attempt it. However, if you are willing to do it, you will find it gets easier every time. The first few times where you risk disapproval will be hard, but as time goes by, you will begin to lose your fear of people. Then you will become free to do whatever God wants, without the fear of other people's disapproval influencing your decisions.

Tell the truth every time and be faithful with money

Never give in to the temptation to lie, or to misuse money or property that has been entrusted to you. Resolve always to be a faithful steward and to tell the truth at all times.

*⁵A faithful witness does not lie,
But a false witness will utter lies.
Proverbs 14:5 (NKJV)*

Make a decision also to be completely honest with other people's money when it is entrusted to you:

¹⁵ They did not require an accounting from those to whom they gave the money to pay the workers, because they acted with complete honesty.

2 Kings 12:15 (NIV)

Aim to gain a reputation for being totally trustworthy with money, and for having complete integrity:

¹³I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zakkur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because they were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible for distributing the supplies to their fellow Levites.

Nehemiah 13:13 (NIV)

Never use people

Here is another vital principle. You have no right to use any other person. In all your dealings with others you must be open and transparent and pay for all services or goods that you need. If you are willing to reciprocate, then it's alright to seek favours and help from others. But it's only acceptable if it's *mutual*. You must always return the favour later, or be sincerely willing to do so if needed. It is very wrong to see other people as "resources" to be made use of.

There are times when people have rung me up and I know immediately that they are only calling me because they want something. It's not a real friendship. They are solely looking for favours, or the use of my time. But they don't want to pay for it. Neither do they want to return the favour by doing anything for me.

I would be ashamed to ring people in that way, but many are not. They see it as fair game if they can get something from it. Resolve that you will not use other people and that any friendships you have are solely about friendship, not about getting favours on the cheap, or making use of other people in a covert or non-reciprocal way.

Never manipulate people. Always be direct and straight forward

We must never manipulate others. We must always be straightforward and tell people our real aims and motives. Then they can decide for themselves whether to participate in something. Never trick people into doing things that you want them to do. The polite word for that is *manipulation* or *control*. A blunter word for it is *witchcraft*. That's what witchcraft really is. It's about trying to manipulate, dominate or control other people, so as to influence them or get them to do what you want, without them realising what you are doing.

So, if you are running a Tupperware business, or selling life insurance, then don't ever invite people to your home or to a function without openly telling them what your aims are. Say "*I've set up a financial services business. Would you like to come to a barbecue I'm having, after which I will give a 20 minute talk about pensions?*" That's OK to say because it's open and honest. The person is then made fully aware of your motives and is free to say no.

But it would be wrong if you just invited them to your barbecue without saying why and then took the opportunity to try to sell to them afterwards. Such manipulative behaviour is very widespread. Indeed, it is often taught in courses on how to sell to people. But a Christian must never stoop to such depths.

Always follow your conscience

The Bible is full of principles that guide us in how to approach decisions and situations. Life is so varied that infinite permutations of circumstances can arise. We then have to decide which principles to apply, or which principle comes first on a particular occasion. At such times, we need to be guided by conscience. That is the gift God gives each of us to guide us. It's like using a compass in a heavy storm, when we can't get directions from anything else.

We can ask God and He will guide us through our conscience. We will just know that a certain course of action doesn't *feel* right, even if we can't explain why, and even though it seems there are many good points in favour of it. When that happens, always follow your conscience and never go against it.

Be very careful before you make any vow. God will hold you to your word.

Be careful with your words. Don't make rash promises to God, or anybody else, without proper consideration and reflection. He will hold you to what you say. Therefore avoid making any promise or vow unless you have thought it through and fully intend to honour it. Even then, don't make vows at all, unless you are really sure God wants you to do so:

⁴When you make a vow to God, do not be late in paying it; for He takes no delight in fools. Pay what you vow! ⁵It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. ⁶Do not let your speech cause you to sin and do not say in the presence of the messenger of God that it was a mistake. Why should God be angry on account of your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

Ecclesiastes 5:4-6 (NASB)

How to decide whether to get drawn in to a dispute which involves other people

This is a vexed question, to which there can be no easy or quick answer. What to do in any given situation will depend on all the specific facts of the case and on a number of relevant principles, one or other of which could loom large. Let's consider first the general problem and then look at some of the different principles that the Bible sets out.

When a conflict arises at work, or in some other setting, such as amongst neighbours, friends or family, it may sometimes be right to get involved and to take sides or speak up. Other times God will want you to stay out of it. It depends on a host of factors. We have to weigh them all up, including, amongst other things, the following series of questions:

- 1) Is there right and wrong on both sides, or just on one side? If there is wrongdoing on both sides, I'd be inclined to stay out of it. If it is only on the one side, I'd be more willing to consider getting involved.
- 2) How serious is the dispute and how grave could the consequences be? If the dispute is minor, you may be best to keep out of it and only get involved if serious issues are at stake, such as someone's career or reputation or a court case.
- 3) What are your respective duties to each of the parties? Sometimes you owe no specific duties to either party. Other times you may do so, such as where you are an employee of one of the parties. The greater the duty, the more you ought to be willing to intervene.
- 4) Are each of the parties wise, simple, foolish or wicked? If both of them are wicked or foolish, there is little point joining in. Nothing will be achieved and harm will come to you for having tried to help. But if one or both are wise, or even simple, that may be different. (See Books Five and Six for more detail)
- 5) Has the person who needs your help been faithful to you previously and are they generally faithful to others? If not, there would be little point in getting involved, because they would not appreciate your help or reciprocate it. They would not deserve it either.
- 6) Is anybody's job, reputation, marriage or legal case at stake? If so, a willingness for you to take a risk may be required.
- 7) Are there frequent conflicts involving this person? Or is this a one-off? If frequent, there may be little point getting involved, as even if you did something on this occasion, another dispute would soon spring up to take its place.
- 8) Does the dispute properly involve you, or would you be meddling in a quarrel which is not your own, such that you should keep out of it?

He who meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.

Proverbs 26:17 (RSV)

Keeping away from strife is an honor for a man, But any fool will quarrel.

Proverbs 20:3 (NASB)

- 9) Is the wronged/innocent party worthy of your support, given that any intervention may involve you putting yourself at risk of hostility? Be aware that people often resent a witness or intervener far more than they resent their original opponent.

10) Is the party who needs your help seeking to use or manipulate you, or any other person? If so, you ought to back off.

There is a time to be diplomatic and to stay out of a conflict, but there is also a time to take risks and get involved

It is usually wrong to get involved in another person's quarrel or dispute. The general rule is that we should stay out of it unless there is a good reason to get involved. But if there is a duty to help, or if our conscience tells us we should, then we must come forward, give evidence, or do whatever else is required of us, even if it is risky to us. There may be factors which require you to speak up and defend someone, even if it jeopardises your own position. If so, you need to brace yourself and do your duty.

I can think of a particularly heated and protracted dispute which had been going on for some time. It involved parties, who were all well known to me. Initially I stayed out of it, hoping it would resolve itself without me having to step in or take sides. I knew it would cause problems for me if I did get involved.

However the dispute eventually became very nasty and unfair. False accusations were being made by the blameworthy party against the innocent party. Therefore I felt, in the end, that I needed to speak up openly. The event which prompted it was when the person whom I considered to be at fault rang me up and spoke very unfairly and aggressively about the innocent party. I told them, straightforwardly, that I believed that they were actually the one in the wrong.

Later a meeting took place and again I spoke frankly. It did not resolve the dispute, but I felt that the innocent party needed me to speak out. They were reeling from a series of blows being landed on them and needed to be openly supported. They were being harmed, both emotionally and spiritually. Therefore it was no longer possible for me to remain neutral. Too much was at stake for them and a deep injustice was being done.

So, that was a case where I got openly involved and I think it was right to do so, even though the wrongdoers ended up insulting and resenting me as a result of my having spoken up for the innocent party. But I can also remember a situation about 20 years ago where, very unwisely, I allowed myself to be manipulated into joining in with someone else's dispute at work. It all ended badly for me and nothing useful was achieved. The person who had enlisted my help was just using me for his own selfish purposes, to advance himself at someone else's expense.

I realised that later, but only when it was too late. I had allowed myself to be used by another man in his own private battle with a colleague. It turned out he was no more right than the other person was, and no profound issues of justice were involved. I misjudged the situation badly and took sides, mainly because I simply preferred him to the other person. I therefore assumed he must be in the right. But I had never looked into it deeply, or weighed it up carefully. I had never prayed about it either, i.e. as to *whether* to get involved. I just went ahead without seeking God's guidance. That was asking for trouble.

I can recall another occasion, when I was a very young and inexperienced police constable. We received a new shift inspector who was a woman. That was rare in those days. The whole shift felt that she was not very good at her job, and that she had been given accelerated promotion solely due to being female. They were probably right.

She was not liked by the shift and the older men in particular bristled at her abrasive style. She lacked people skills, had very little tact, and was not as effective as the other inspectors. Things got very bad and the atmosphere on the shift declined. Morale was low and, in the end, some of the older

constables became insubordinate to her, usually covertly, but sometimes openly. It all went over my head. I was too junior at the time to play any part in it.

However it got so bad in the end that the Superintendent came in to carry out an enquiry into what was going wrong on our shift. He questioned us, one by one, in front of the Inspector. I was so naïve that I gave frank, honest answers and told the Superintendent that part of the problem was the Inspector's abrasive manner etc. I said it in front of her. It seemed to me that I had been asked a straightforward question and that I therefore needed to answer it truthfully.

However, it achieved no good and my transparency just did me harm. The rest of the shift, having savagely criticised the Inspector behind her back, were shrewd enough to keep quiet and even to be sycophantic, in that formal interview, while she was present. Ironically, I was the only one to criticise the Inspector openly, even though I was the one who felt the least discontented and who had said the least up to that point. It was purely due to my naivety. I did not realise that that was an occasion when no good could come from my speaking up and that silence was the only wise policy.

Ask God to help you never to compromise and never to betray Him

As with any difficult task, if you are going to succeed, you will need God's help. That is very much the case here. To be faithful to God will require prayer. You need to ask Him to help you never to compromise, even on so called 'small' issues, and never to betray Him. If you don't pray, then you may have to manage it on your own, which is impossible. Don't even attempt that. Be wise enough to realise that you always need God's help, and especially so where difficult issues are involved and wisdom is needed.

Respond quickly to God's promptings. Never harden your heart or stop listening to Him.

God will speak to you through your conscience to guide you as to what to do in a given situation, especially if you ask Him to do so. When He speaks in this way, it will not be in a loud, clear, unmistakable voice. It will be with a quiet, inner voice which enables you to know, or usually just to feel, that a certain path is right or wrong.

When God speaks through our conscience He does not necessarily explain *why* a thing is wrong, or go into any detail. But He will enable you to know enough to do His will. If you obey that prompting, then more clarity will be given to you later. Then you will more fully grasp *why* God did, or didn't, want you to do the thing in question.

Therefore, don't wait till you have that full understanding. *Respond to what you do know*. Obey your conscience immediately, *as it currently stands*. Don't delay or argue with it, just because you don't yet have full understanding. Accept God's promptings quickly and willingly. If you do, then they will get clearer, louder and more frequent, which is exactly what is best for you. Never refuse to listen to, or to obey, your conscience. Never harden your heart towards God, or take liberties with His grace and patience.

If you stop listening to God and stop obeying Him then eventually He may 'hand you over' and allow you to destroy yourself

The Egyptian Pharaoh, with whom Moses dealt, chose to harden his heart repeatedly. He refused to do what he knew to be the will of God. We know this because there was a previous contest between Moses and Pharaoh's magicians, Jannes and Jambres. Each time that Moses produced a miracle these occult practitioners did the same, using demonic power. However, there came a point when they

could no longer match Moses. When that point came, the magicians, Jannes and Jambres, told Pharaoh that what Moses had was from God:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Stretch out your rod and strike the dust of the earth, that it may become gnats throughout all the land of Egypt.'" 17 And they did so; Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod, and struck the dust of the earth, and there came gnats on man and beast; all the dust of the earth became gnats throughout all the land of Egypt. 18 The magicians tried by their secret arts to bring forth gnats, but they could not. So there were gnats on man and beast. 19 And the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them; as the LORD had said.

Exodus 8:16-19 (RSV)

So, although he knew that Moses was representing God, Pharaoh still chose to 'harden his heart' and to refuse to obey God's instructions. If you read the whole account in Exodus you will see that Pharaoh does this repeatedly, at least seven times. After that the position altered. Instead of Pharaoh hardening his own heart, we see that God actually began to harden Pharaoh's heart for him:

8 And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "Take handfuls of ashes from the kiln, and let Moses throw them toward heaven in the sight of Pharaoh. 9 And it shall become fine dust over all the land of Egypt, and become boils breaking out in sores on man and beast throughout all the land of Egypt." 10 So they took ashes from the kiln, and stood before Pharaoh, and Moses threw them toward heaven, and it became boils breaking out in sores on man and beast. 11 And the magicians could not stand before Moses because of the boils, for the boils were upon the magicians and upon all the Egyptians. 12 But the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them; as the LORD had spoken to Moses.

Exodus 9:8-12 (RSV)

After this, we see that when God sent a plague of hail, Pharaoh again chose to harden his own heart, but then, with the next plagues of locusts and the three days of total darkness, it was God who, again, hardened Pharaoh's heart for him. We are actually told this directly:

Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them,

Exodus 10:1 (RSV)

The relevance of these passages to us is that there comes a point in our dealings with God where He will, eventually, stop speaking to our conscience and stop trying to get us to listen to Him. This will only come after we have repeatedly and *deliberately ignored God's voice*, in the form of His written Word, or our conscience, or even the advice of godly people. If so, then at some point, God will 'switch off the transmitter' and stop trying to speak to us. He will then leave us to keep going in the wrong direction that we have chosen, until it ends in disaster.

Therefore do not ever allow that stage to be reached. Who knows how many times, or for how long, God will be patient with you? Perhaps His patience will not run out for several weeks or months, or even years. Or, perhaps today is your final chance to listen to His voice or to obey your conscience before God begins to harden your heart for you, as He did with Pharaoh?

Never put God to the test. Never go anywhere near that 'cliff edge'. Obey your conscience today and every day. Obey God's Word today, without delay or argument, and without fudging or compromise. It is not just with Pharaoh that God acts in this way. He also did it with the people of Israel:

11 "But my people did not listen to my voice;

Israel would have none of me.

12 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.

*¹³O that my people would listen to me,
that Israel would walk in my ways!
Psalm 81:11-13 (RSV)*

If God is willing to let the Jewish people go their own way and “give them over to their stubborn hearts” then what basis is there to assume that He is not willing to do the same with you? Therefore fear Him and do not be presumptuous.

One of the main causes of unfaithfulness is lack of courage. Therefore ask God for the courage to overcome all your fears and to obey Him, even when you are afraid.

I have no statistical data to back up my point, but I have observed from experience that fear is one of the main things which causes people to be unfaithful or to drop their standards. For example a person might know that some practice at work is wrong but they fear to say anything, or are afraid to refuse to take part. They worry that doing so may result in ridicule or unpopularity, or that they may even lose their job. The list of things that people fear is endless. What frightens you may not frighten someone else and vice versa. But, whoever you are, there will be certain things which you particularly fear.

The demons who are involved in your life are well aware of what those particular things are for you. Therefore, they calculate that all they have to do to get you to be unfaithful is to engineer it so that one or more of these things, or people, or circumstances, that you fear are brought into the situation. They will take care to arrange that, so that you are put under pressure and made to feel afraid. They will then use the thing that you fear, whatever it may be, as a leverage point to unsettle you. They want to get you to lose your nerve, and then to be unfaithful, by doing something which you know to be wrong.

The answer in every such situation is that we need to have more courage. Lack of courage is perhaps the one most significant feature which causes Christians to let God down and to fail to do their duty. Conversely, if we have courage, i.e. if we *choose to be courageous*, then we will be able to go the things that please God, because doing His will requires courage.

Look at how God viewed King Jehoshaphat. God praises him in various ways, but especially for being courageous. Moreover, it doesn't just mean courageous in battle, but courageous “*in the ways of the LORD.*” That means having the courage to do God's will, even when that provokes controversy and makes you unpopular.

For example, King Jehoshaphat showed courage by getting rid of the ‘high places’ and the Asherim, i.e. the means by which occultic, idolatrous worship was conducted. These things were popular with the people. Therefore most kings, even the better ones, left them in place, for fear of getting an adverse reaction from the people. But Jehoshaphat went through with it and tackled the idolatry head on, regardless of the criticism it provoked. He did so because He knew it was what God wanted and he put God's commands ahead of his own welfare:

³ The Lord was with Jehosh'aphat, because he walked in the earlier ways of his father; he did not seek the Ba'als, ⁴ but sought the God of his father and walked in his commandments, and not according to the ways of Israel. ⁵ Therefore the Lord established the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah brought tribute to Jehosh'aphat; and he had great riches and honor. ⁶ His heart was courageous in the ways of the Lord; and furthermore he took the high places and the Ashe'rim out of Judah.

2 Chronicles 17:3-6 (RSV)

Lack of courage causes people to stay silent when they should speak up. It causes many preachers to give a compromised, watered down message. They know that telling the whole truth about what the

Bible says would cause controversy and tension. It could possibly even lead to them losing their position as a minister. The thought of losing his income, home and pension has caused many a preacher to tone down what the Bible says and to limit themselves to saying what people want to hear, rather than what God wants to be said.

Whoever you are, and whatever the circumstances you might face, the answer is the same. We all need to *settle things beforehand*, and to make a clear and firm decision, that we will always say and do what is right, *regardless of the consequences*. It is no good leaving it to the moment of crisis and hoping that at that point you will make the right choice. You won't. You will buckle under the immediate pressure of the situation and give in to your fear.

But if you settle it all clearly beforehand then, when the moment of testing comes, you will already know very clearly what you must do. The fact that *the decision has already been made* makes it much easier to carry it out when the crisis comes. It means that you don't have to think quickly on the spot, or make instant decisions, because you have already done your thinking and made your decisions.

But someone might reply to that by saying that if the fear is too strong, and your courage is too small, then there is nothing you can do about it, just as there is nothing you can do about your height or the colour of your eyes. Some might even say that the amount of courage you have is genetically determined and is just something you are born with. Therefore, they would argue that there is nothing you can do about it if you don't have enough courage. According to that line of reasoning you can't be blamed if you fail for lack of courage, because it's not your fault.

That is not how the Bible presents it. It makes clear that we are very much answerable for our lack of courage. We are also answerable for our failure, in the months or years leading up to that point of severe testing, to have prepared ourselves for it properly. The point is that, at least in the West, it is rare for any person to begin their life as a Christian and then immediately be thrust into a situation of very severe testing and danger. It is not impossible, especially in certain countries where Christianity is forbidden. However, by and large, God arranges it so that the tests we have to face begin small and then get steadily larger over the years.

Therefore, a faithful person with the right heart-attitude will prepare themselves for larger and larger tests by passing each of the smaller tests which they face along the way. No school will enter a pupil for 'A' level exams before he has taken GCSE exams and a host of other, easier, exams in the years before those. Likewise, God expects you to develop the quality of faithfulness, and to grow your courage, by taking and passing a long series of smaller tests from the moment you become a Christian.

If you set your heart to pass those earlier tests and sincerely pray that God will give you the courage to face them, then your courage will have grown to the required level when the time comes to face a more severe test. Moreover, the practice you have had will put you in the habit of immediately resolving to be faithful and deciding to be obedient *before you ever face the danger*. That way, when danger does come, you will be ready to make the right decisions instantly, before you have had any time to dwell on the danger, or to be talked out of doing what is right.

So, you will certainly be held accountable for the hundreds of small challenges and tests of your courage that you take along the way. Therefore, if you really want to be faithful, then you will resolve to learn courage from each of those experiences. So any failure on your part to handle a severe test later on would really have been caused by your repeated failures to overcome your fear when facing smaller tests in the past. For those reasons, you cannot deny responsibility when your courage fails you in some major crisis. That's because you *could* have developed your courage to the necessary level, if you had really wanted to and had been determined to pass the earlier test.

A classic example of this is the teenage David, when he volunteered to fight Goliath. He was certainly brave on that day, but it was by no means his first battle. He had, on many occasions, fought smaller battles with bears and lions when he was caring for his father's sheep. It was on those many previous occasions that he learned how to control and overcome his fear.

That was also when he had learned how to use a sling shot. So he perfected that skill too, ready for when he needed it. David had practiced overcoming his fear and so the contest with Goliath was not quite as unfamiliar an experience as it might appear. He knew that he had killed lions and bears before and thus he was confident, with good reason, that he could kill Goliath in the same way.

If you don't resolve now to deal with whatever your current fear may be, and also to seek God's help to overcome it, then it will eventually grow to the point where it controls you and paralyzes you. Your fear will then be a snare to you. It will trip you up and trap you every time you have to face a test.

There is nothing wrong with being afraid. Fear is not sin in itself. It is natural, and even necessary, at times. Indeed, without fear there cannot be any real bravery. A brave person is just someone who has *learned how to control* their fear and to go ahead despite it, rather than someone who has no capacity to feel it.

A coward is someone who feels exactly the same fear, or even less, but has decided that he is *not willing to face up to it*. Indeed, for a coward, the fear may well be less, because he is well aware that he has no intention of facing *any* challenge or taking *any* risk, whether small or large. Thus, the dangers he faces are largely academic and theoretical rather than real. However, for a brave person the fear is all the more real, precisely because he knows that he does not have the option of running away and that he will have to face up to it.

By contrast, a coward does not even try to overcome his fear and he does not seek God's help to defeat it. He has already made a clear decision of a very different kind. That is that he will not do or say anything, or make any decision, that would have the potential to cost him, hurt him or upset him.

In the end he becomes programmed with a default-setting that guides him on every occasion away from risk, danger or cost and towards the preservation of himself, his property and his reputation. I have seen this in operation many times and have noted how quickly certain people can be diverted from the right path, merely because they see a risk of danger ahead. As soon as they see it they immediately, and automatically, seek for compromise and a way of escape.

They do so as a matter of habit because it has become such a settled policy to avoid personal danger or cost. They do not even need to think it through when the crisis emerges. They have already pre-programmed themselves to make it their top priority to preserve themselves, and/or their possessions or popularity, rather than be faithful to what God asks of them.

For example, I have seen this trait in managers and supervisors within a workplace. Most of them will instinctively choose to overlook wrongdoing, and to 'turn a blind eye', so as to avoid a challenge or a controversy. They don't want to be put under any personal pressure. Above all, they will avoid any face to face confrontation. Thus, for example, such a manager may face a situation where a nasty, hardened, battle-axe of an employee is causing problems within the office or is bullying or exploiting weaker colleagues.

The duty of that manager is obvious. It is to confront the wrongdoer, stand up for the victim, commence an investigation and disciplinary proceedings and get the wrongdoer out. But they usually don't do so because they already know, without needing to think it over, that doing what is right would be difficult. They don't relish the prospect of tackling the bully or facing a backlash from the bully's supporters. So, they tell themselves that the wrongdoing isn't happening, or that it isn't their

responsibility, or that nothing can be done about it. Then they look the other way and keep on looking the other way.

That manager or supervisor is a coward, not because they felt fear, but because they allowed that fear to rule them and to cause them to neglect their clear duty. They chose self-preservation, or even the preservation of their own comfort, peace and well-being, rather than the needs of their junior colleagues and their duty to the business. Their cowardice manifests itself in their decisions and in the order of their list of priorities. A coward will put himself first every time. By contrast, for a brave person, it is duty that must come first, even though he feels all the same fears, and faces all the same pressures, as the rest of us.

Dangerous or challenging situations will inevitably arise from time to time. In fact, God probably causes some of them to happen. At the very least, He makes use of them. He sees them as tests of your courage and faithfulness and He will watch closely to see how you respond to danger and pressure.

One example of this, on a very large scale, is the way that God allowed King Hezekiah of Judah to face the terrible prospect of an invading army. We are told directly that God wanted to see what was in Hezekiah's heart. In other words, God wanted to see what Hezekiah was made of and how he would react in a major crisis, when a large army approached Judah and was likely to invade:

Even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.

2 Chronicles 32:31 (NASB)

You need to make a firm decision that being faithful is more important than staying alive

Probably the ultimate test of our courage is whether we are willing to die rather than abandon our faithfulness. Resolve now, ahead of time, that being faithful and staying true to what you believe is more important even than staying alive. Then you will be set free from what is probably the demons' best leverage point. Demons use fear to get you to compromise, to give in, and to let God down.

They will whisper into your mind that unless you compromise your faith, or drop your standards, you might lose your job, your home, your business, or even your life. The dread of losing such things causes most of us to panic and to disobey God. We have trained ourselves over many years that, when under pressure, the main priority is self-preservation, i.e. to look after number one.

But you can reverse that pre-programming. If you begin now to train yourself to say that staying faithful to God is more important than getting a pay rise or a promotion, then you will gradually learn how to see your faithfulness as more important than keeping your job or your home or business. Once you've reached that level you will be ready to move up to the next stage, which is to resolve that your faithfulness and loyalty to God are more important than staying alive. You can build up to that level in stages if you don't feel you can make that jump all in one go.

You can then make a firm decision, in advance that, if faced with a crisis, you will stay faithful. Making that decision, now, ahead of time, means that you don't need to pause and think if and when the crisis actually arises, which could be suddenly. Then you won't be taken by surprise or panic or get '*caught in the headlights*'. You will react well to the threat when it comes because your mind was already made up beforehand. It is also because you will have learned to be courageous as a *habit*, by responding to earlier and smaller tests of your nerve and resolve.

A classic example of a group of people who made this decision not to compromise, even if it meant death, is the group referred to in Revelation chapter 12. They are the 'Tribulation saints' who are

called upon to face the lies and threats of the antichrist during the period known as the Tribulation. They refuse to give in and worship the antichrist, or his image, because they have decided that they would prefer to die rather than do that. In the RSV it says “*for they loved not their lives even unto death.*”

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. ¹¹ And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death. ¹² Rejoice then, O heaven and you that dwell therein! But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

Revelation 12:9-12 (RSV)

They make that choice in a period of intense suffering and persecution which comes about because the Devil knows that the time he has left is very short. The tribulation is only seven years long and the Devil knows that. But so too do the believers who are alive at that time, because the Bible makes that clear. So they wisely choose to give up their lives here and gain eternal life, rather than worship Satan and be lost forever.

In their circumstances that is a sensible and logical choice. It is equally so in our circumstances today. Therefore we must not love our lives so much as to make self-preservation our priority, which is how the world thinks. It is yet another aspect of worldly thinking that we have to reject. Then we too can conquer, as the Tribulation saints will conquer, by not loving our lives, even unto death, or as the NIV translates it, by not loving our lives “*so much as to shrink from death*”:

*They triumphed over him
by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much
as to shrink from death.*

Revelation 12:11 (NIV)

In Revelation chapter two, in Jesus’ letter to the church at Smyrna, He actually warns them in advance that a time of persecution is going to come to them. He then urges them to “*Be faithful unto death...*” If they will do so, then He promises them the reward of the ‘*crown of life*’:

Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

Revelation 2:10 (RSV)

The fear of the LORD helps you to remain faithful

The Bible regularly tells us to “fear the Lord”. It is a major theme and a very important issue. Here is an example. Joshua is speaking to the Israelites as they were about to enter the Promised Land:

¹⁴“Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

Joshua 24:14-15 (RSV)

The phrase “*the fear of the LORD*” is confusing to many people. In particular, its purpose is not clear to them. Basically, the fear of the LORD involves realising who God is and how immense, powerful, and holy He is. It also involves recognising the reality of the fact that He is God and that He judges all people and punishes evil and wrongdoing.

If we are genuine Christians then we will not have to face His wrath at the Great White Throne judgment, provided we remain faithful to Him. However, see Chapter 21 in Book One of this series for an analysis of whether a real Christian can ever lose his salvation and end up at the Great White Throne Judgment and then the Lake of Fire.

But even if the judgment we have to face is the Judgment Seat of Christ, which is for saved believers, we should still fear it. I am not looking forward to that day. I fear it. I am keenly aware that there are many areas of my life which do not come up to the standard that God wants from me. Although God is patient and is working with me to get me to change, I cannot be complacent or presumptuous or assume that my own sin or unfaithfulness doesn’t matter. It does. It will have consequences, especially if I do not take it seriously or repent of it.

At the very least, it may involve the loss of rewards that I might otherwise have received. Even worse, it could lead to me being publicly rebuked by Jesus at the Judgment Seat. I fear that, and wish to avoid it. I want Him to praise me and reward me, not to scold me or to tell me what might have been, if only I had obeyed Him.

Perhaps the most painful thing of all would be to be told that my unfaithfulness had prevented me and/or others being effective in reaching the lost, such that men and woman went to the Lake of Fire as the indirect consequence of my own disobedience, laziness, selfishness or neglect.

I have not come across many other believers who share that concern, or who are even aware of the concept of the fear of the LORD, let alone gripped by it. It is rare today in the West. However, it is actually something which you should seek for and ask God to produce in you. It is for your own good. Many beneficial things will come from it. A lot of promises are made in the Bible to those who fear the LORD. It is therefore an advantage, not a handicap.

Perhaps the greatest benefit that comes from the fear of the Lord is that it helps us to remain acutely conscious of God at times when we are tempted to sin or to be unfaithful to Him. Our fear of Him can then jolt us back to our senses before it is too late and before we do wrong. Therefore, every day, indeed every moment, we must choose whom we are going to serve. The fear of the LORD will help us to make the right choice:

***⁷The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge;
Fools despise wisdom and instruction.
Proverbs 1:7 (NASB)***

Stay faithful for the long term - until the day you die

It’s hard enough just to begin to be faithful. However, it is much harder to continue. Staying faithful to God, year after year, decade after decade, until the day you die, is very difficult. Few can manage it. The greatest danger is the complacency that can arise after years of having followed the LORD. It is so easy to imagine, having come so far, and having remained faithful until now, that you are immune to temptation.

If you ever assume that, then you will begin to think that you can afford to relax your standards a little and ‘cut corners,’ or make small compromises. You can’t afford to do that. The later stages of a

person's life can be the period in which they become most likely to do this, such that they fall into sin and let God down. We must never let that happen to us. The only way to avoid it is to keep relying on God, and to ask for His help in avoiding presumption and in staying vigilant and alert. There is no place for a casual attitude, however well you may have done so far.

Examples of biblical characters who were faithful to begin with but then compromised and became unfaithful later in life

We have already seen, in earlier chapters, some examples of characters in the Bible who began well but then let God down and became unfaithful later in life. These accounts are in the Bible to bring home to us the danger that we ourselves are in. There is the account of King Uzziah, which we looked at earlier. He began his reign aged 16 and was faithful for many years but then, due to becoming proud as a result of his fame and success, he became arrogant and disobedient. He usurped the position of the priests and presumed to enter the Temple to offer a sacrifice himself, which he was not authorised to do.

Then there is the sad example of King Saul who began well and with great promise, but who ended up a petulant, self-pitiful, paranoid man. He even consulted a witch rather than seek God's guidance. Saul did all that despite the fact that when he began, he was the best man God could find in all of Israel. He had also operated, for a time, in prophetic gifts. That ought to sober us. If even he could degenerate so badly, then so can we, if we allow ourselves to drift or to compromise with sin.

In addition there is King Solomon. He began very well indeed and had more wisdom than any other man. But even he went astray due to marrying so many wives, many of whom were not Israelites and were worshippers of idols. Then there is Gehazi, the assistant to the prophet Elisha. He served Elisha for years but then fell into sin and unfaithfulness when he was tempted by the desire for money. He lied to Naaman the Syrian and extracted a financial gift from him, pretending that Elisha had asked for it. As a result of that deception God struck Gehazi down with leprosy.

There is also King Rehoboam, the son of King Solomon. Consider the advantages he had in having a father like that. Yet, we are told that when Rehoboam became established as King he abandoned the law of the LORD and ended up doing evil:

When the rule of Rehoboam was established and he was strong, he abandoned the law of the LORD, and all Israel with him.

2 Chronicles 12:1 (ESV)

And he did evil, for he did not set his heart to seek the LORD

2 Chronicles 12:14 (ESV)

Consider also the life of King Asa of Judah. He began well but in his later years he did not maintain the faithfulness with which he began.

One reads of very many bad kings of Judah, and even more so in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. But it is perhaps even sadder to read of kings who began well but who did not keep it up. They failed or let themselves down in the end. One such is King Asa. He began well and was full of zeal for God and did what was right. In particular he took action to stamp out idolatrous worship of false gods and to encourage the people of Judah to serve the one true God:

¹So Abijah slept with his fathers, and they buried him in the city of David; and Asa his son reigned in his stead. In his days the land had rest for ten years. ²And Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the LORD his God. ³ He took away the foreign altars and the high places, and broke

down the pillars and hewed down the Ashe'rim, ⁴and commanded Judah to seek the LORD, the God of their fathers, and to keep the law and the commandment. ⁵He also took out of all the cities of Judah the high places and the incense altars. And the kingdom had rest under him. ⁶He built fortified cities in Judah, for the land had rest. He had no war in those years, for the LORD gave him peace. ⁷And he said to Judah, "Let us build these cities, and surround them with walls and towers, gates and bars; the land is still ours, because we have sought the LORD our God; we have sought him, and he has given us peace on every side." So they built and prospered.

2 Chronicles 14:1-7 (RSV)

King Asa also put his trust in God when it came to military matters. Therefore, with God's help he was able to defeat armies far larger than his own:

⁸And Asa had an army of three hundred thousand from Judah, armed with bucklers and spears, and two hundred and eighty thousand men from Benjamin, that carried shields and drew bows; all these were mighty men of valor. ⁹Zerah the Ethiopian came out against them with an army of a million men and three hundred chariots, and came as far as Mare'shah. ¹⁰And Asa went out to meet him, and they drew up their lines of battle in the valley of Zeph'athah at Mare'shah. ¹¹And Asa cried to the LORD his God, "O LORD, there is none like thee to help, between the mighty and the weak. Help us, O LORD our God, for we rely on thee, and in thy name we have come against this multitude. O LORD, thou art our God; let not man prevail against thee." ¹²So the LORD defeated the Ethiopians before Asa and before Judah, and the Ethiopians fled.

2 Chronicles 14:8-12 (RSV)

Asa had been inspired by a prophet called Azariah and had embarked on a programme of stamping out idolatry. This was so successful that many of the faithful Jews who were living in the Northern Kingdom of Israel came south to live in Judah:

" ⁸When Asa heard these words, the prophecy of Azari'ah the son of Oded, he took courage, and put away the abominable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities which he had taken in the hill country of E'phraim, and he repaired the altar of the LORD that was in front of the vestibule of the house of the LORD. ⁹And he gathered all Judah and Benjamin, and those from E'phraim, Manas'seh, and Simeon who were sojourning with them, for great numbers had deserted to him from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him.

2 Chronicles 15:8-9 (RSV)

Asa was so full of faith and zeal that he even confronted his own mother, Maacah, and removed her from her position as Queen Mother, because she got herself involved in idolatry:

Even Ma'acah, his mother, King Asa removed from being queen mother because she had made an abominable image for Ashe'rah. Asa cut down her image, crushed it, and burned it at the brook Kidron.

2 Chronicles 15:16 (RSV)

Nevertheless, despite the great victory he had had over the Ethiopians, who had had an army more than twice the size of his, King Asa let himself down later in his reign. He formed an alliance with the King of Syria and relied on him to help him deal with the threat being made to the Kingdom of Judah from the King of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. What Asa should have done was to rely on God, as he had done early in his reign in the war against Ethiopia. Instead he put his trust in men and formed an ungodly and unnecessary alliance, which God did not want him to make:

¹In the thirty-sixth year of the reign of Asa, Ba'asha king of Israel went up against Judah, and built Ramah, that he might permit no one to go out or come in to Asa king of Judah. ²Then Asa took silver and gold from the treasures of the house of the LORD and the king's house, and sent them to Ben-ha'dad king of Syria, who dwelt in Damascus, saying, ³"Let there be a league between me and you, as between my father and your father; behold, I am sending to you silver and gold; go,

break your league with Ba'asha king of Israel, that he may withdraw from me." ⁴And Ben-ha'dad hearkened to King Asa, and sent the commanders of his armies against the cities of Israel, and they conquered I'jon, Dan, A'bel-ma'im, and all the store-cities of Naph'tali. ⁵And when Ba'asha heard of it, he stopped building Ramah, and let his work cease. ⁶Then King Asa took all Judah, and they carried away the stones of Ramah and its timber, with which Ba'asha had been building, and with them he built Geba and Mizpah.

2 Chronicles 16:1-6 (RSV)

As a result of this disobedience and lack of trust, God sent another prophet, Hanani, to rebuke King Asa. However, Asa's heart had grown proud over the years as a result of all the peace and success he had enjoyed. Therefore, by this stage, he was much less receptive to hear God's voice than he had been when he was younger. Even when he became ill he did not seek God's help, but put his trust solely in doctors to heal him. Evidently, he was no longer as close to God as he had once been:

⁷At that time Hana'ni the seer came to Asa king of Judah, and said to him, "Because you relied on the king of Syria, and did not rely on the LORD your God, the army of the king of Syria has escaped you. ⁸Were not the Ethiopians and the Libyans a huge army with exceedingly many chariots and horsemen? Yet because you relied on the LORD, he gave them into your hand. ⁹For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show his might in behalf of those whose heart is blameless toward him. You have done foolishly in this; for from now on you will have wars." ¹⁰Then Asa was angry with the seer, and put him in the stocks, in prison, for he was in a rage with him because of this. And Asa inflicted cruelties upon some of the people at the same time. ¹¹The acts of Asa, from first to last, are written in the Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel. ¹²In the thirty-ninth year of his reign Asa was diseased in his feet, and his disease became severe; yet even in his disease he did not seek the LORD, but sought help from physicians. ¹³And Asa slept with his fathers, dying in the forty-first year of his reign. ¹⁴They buried him in the tomb which he had hewn out for himself in the city of David. They laid him on a bier which had been filled with various kinds of spices prepared by the perfumer's art; and they made a very great fire in his honor.

2 Chronicles 16:7-14 (RSV)

It is easy to be critical of King Asa, but actually the tests of his faith that he faced in the later years of his long reign were very difficult. It is surprisingly hard to remain faithful for long periods of time and to keep on being willing to trust God. It can mean taking risks, even when you have become wealthy and successful and you have grown used to the trappings of power and of being in office.

I can speak with some experience of how difficult a test that is. I set up a law firm from a standing start when I was in my thirties. At the outset I had no staff, no files, no equipment, no anything. But I had a burning desire to set up a business which God could use for His purposes and to expand the ministry of financial giving, in which I had already been engaged since I was 19.

In the early years of the new firm I faced many different tests and battles which severely stretched my faith. I found it hard. Yet, I found the later years, when the firm was succeeding and prospering, an even more difficult test. In the early years I had no alternative but to trust God, because the firm was small and had no money or strength. But in the end I faced the more difficult test, like King Asa faced, of how to remain faithful, and how to keep on taking risks for God, when I had an abundance of money and when I had a lot of staff working for me.

I will have to find out at the Judgment Seat of Christ how well, or badly, I did. However, what I can say for sure, is that it is much harder to remain faithful to God, to put your trust in Him, and take risks for Him, when you have got power, money and position than it is when you have none of those things.

People might imagine that it must be easy to live the Christian life if you have got power and possessions, but it isn't. Those things actually become a source of temptation in themselves. In one sense they are undoubtedly a blessing from God and a reward for past faithfulness. But they do also

present a real challenge and make it harder, in some ways, to carry on being faithful. That is one reason why it is wise to ask God not to give you more power, money or influence than you are capable of handling faithfully.

You should specifically ask God, in your prayers, not to allow your possessions, power, income, profits, wealth, role or position to become too large for you, such that they might turn your head. Few people ever pray in that way but I really think they ought to. I have done so many times and I believe God has answered my requests.

I could have made even greater profits than I did and made the business even larger, but I don't think it would have been good. To the best of my knowledge, I believe I stayed faithful to the end. I was helped in that test by the fact that God limited my profits and my success to levels that my faithfulness could withstand. I am glad He did.

Next we can look at the life of King Jehu of Israel (i.e. the Northern Kingdom). He had the chance to become the one and only good King that the Northern Kingdom ever had. He began well and showed remarkable zeal and enthusiasm to obey God. He wiped out the evil family of King Ahab and also the wicked practice of Baal worship. In all of that he did well and achieved God's purposes for his life. However, he later allowed himself to become unfaithful. Let's follow him through the stages of his life, starting from the day he was anointed to become King:

¹Then Elisha the prophet called one of the sons of the prophets and said to him, "Tie up your garments, and take this flask of oil in your hand, and go to Ramoth-gilead.² And when you arrive, look there for Jehu the son of Jehoshaphat, son of Nimshi. And go in and have him rise from among his fellows, and lead him to an inner chamber.³ Then take the flask of oil and pour it on his head and say, 'Thus says the LORD, I anoint you king over Israel.' Then open the door and flee; do not linger." ⁴So the young man, the servant of the prophet, went to Ramoth-gilead. ⁵ And when he came, behold, the commanders of the army were in council. And he said, "I have a word for you, O commander." And Jehu said, "To which of us all?" And he said, "To you, O commander."

⁶So he arose and went into the house. And the young man poured the oil on his head, saying to him, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, I anoint you king over the people of the LORD, over Israel. ⁷And you shall strike down the house of Ahab your master, so that I may avenge on Jezebel the blood of my servants the prophets, and the blood of all the servants of the LORD.⁸ For the whole house of Ahab shall perish, and I will cut off from Ahab every male, bond or free, in Israel. ⁹And I will make the house of Ahab like the house of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, and like the house of Baasha the son of Ahijah.¹⁰ And the dogs shall eat Jezebel in the territory of Jezreel, and none shall bury her." Then he opened the door and fled.¹¹ When Jehu came out to the servants of his master, they said to him, "Is all well? Why did this mad fellow come to you?" And he said to them, "You know the fellow and his talk." ¹² And they said, "That is not true; tell us now." And he said, "Thus and so he spoke to me, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, I anoint you king over Israel.'" ¹³Then in haste every man of them took his garment and put it under him on the bare steps, and they blew the trumpet and proclaimed, "Jehu is king."

2 Kings 9:1-13 (ESV)

Jehu knew that it was God's will for him to remove King Joram (the son of King Ahab) and his wicked mother, Jezebel and also to destroy all King Ahab's descendents so that their line could not be resumed. In fact, God had said earlier that this is what would happen. So, he began by removing King Joram:

²¹ Joram said, "Make ready." And they made ready his chariot. Then Joram king of Israel and Ahaziah king of Judah set out, each in his chariot, and went to meet Jehu, and met him at the property of Naboth the Jezreelite. ²²And when Joram saw Jehu, he said, "Is it peace, Jehu?" He answered, "What peace can there be, so long as the whorings and the sorceries of your mother

Jezebel are so many?"²³ Then Joram reined about and fled, saying to Ahaziah, "Treachery, O Ahaziah!"

²⁴ And Jehu drew his bow with his full strength, and shot Joram between the shoulders, so that the arrow pierced his heart, and he sank in his chariot. ²⁵ Jehu said to Bidkar his aide, "Take him up and throw him on the plot of ground belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite. For remember, when you and I rode side by side behind Ahab his father, how the LORD made this pronouncement against him: ²⁶ 'As surely as I saw yesterday the blood of Naboth and the blood of his sons--declares the LORD--I will repay you on this plot of ground.' Now therefore take him up and throw him on the plot of ground, in accordance with the word of the LORD."

2 Kings 9: 21-26 (ESV)

Then Jehu went and dealt with the despicable Queen Jezebel, the pagan, Baal-worshiping wife of Ahab and mother of King Joram:

³⁰ When Jehu came to Jezreel, Jezebel heard of it. And she painted her eyes and adorned her head and looked out of the window. ³¹ And as Jehu entered the gate, she said, "Is it peace, you Zimri, murderer of your master?" ³² And he lifted up his face to the window and said, "Who is on my side? Who?" Two or three eunuchs looked out at him. ³³ He said, "Throw her down." So they threw her down. And some of her blood spattered on the wall and on the horses, and they trampled on her. ³⁴ Then he went in and ate and drank. And he said, "See now to this cursed woman and bury her, for she is a king's daughter." ³⁵ But when they went to bury her, they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands. ³⁶ When they came back and told him, he said, "This is the word of the LORD, which he spoke by his servant Elijah the Tishbite, 'In the territory of Jezreel the dogs shall eat the flesh of Jezebel, ³⁷ and the corpse of Jezebel shall be as dung on the face of the field in the territory of Jezreel, so that no one can say, This is Jezebel.'"

2 Kings 9:30-37 (ESV)

Jehu then proceeded to wipe out all the descendants of King Ahab. He did so on God's instructions, to destroy that family line and prevent them ever regaining the throne:

So Jehu struck down all who remained of the house of Ahab in Jezreel, all his great men and his close friends and his priests, until he left him none remaining

2 Kings 10:11 (ESV)

¹⁵ And when he departed from there, he met Jehonadab the son of Rechab coming to meet him. And he greeted him and said to him, "Is your heart true to my heart as mine is to yours?" And Jehonadab answered, "It is." Jehu said, "If it is, give me your hand." So he gave him his hand. And Jehu took him up with him into the chariot. ¹⁶ And he said, "Come with me, and see my zeal for the LORD." So he had him ride in his chariot. ¹⁷ And when he came to Samaria, he struck down all who remained to Ahab in Samaria, till he had wiped them out, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke to Elijah.

2 Kings 10:15-17 (ESV)

After that, Jehu took on all the prophets of Baal and wiped them all out, removing all the leaders of Baal worship from Israel:

¹⁸ Then Jehu assembled all the people and said to them, "Ahab served Baal a little, but Jehu will serve him much. ¹⁹ Now therefore call to me all the prophets of Baal, all his worshipers and all his priests. Let none be missing, for I have a great sacrifice to offer to Baal. Whoever is missing shall not live." But Jehu did it with cunning in order to destroy the worshipers of Baal. ²⁰ And Jehu ordered, "Sanctify a solemn assembly for Baal." So they proclaimed it. ²¹ And Jehu sent throughout all Israel, and all the worshipers of Baal came, so that there was not a man left who did not come. And they entered the house of Baal, and the house of Baal was filled from one end to the other. ²² He said to him who was in charge of the wardrobe, "Bring out the vestments for all the worshipers of Baal." So he brought out the vestments for them. ²³ Then Jehu went into the house of

Baal with Jehonadab the son of Rechab, and he said to the worshipers of Baal, "Search, and see that there is no servant of the LORD here among you, but only the worshipers of Baal." ²⁴Then they went in to offer sacrifices and burnt offerings. Now Jehu had stationed eighty men outside and said, "The man who allows any of those whom I give into your hands to escape shall forfeit his life." ²⁵ So as soon as he had made an end of offering the burnt offering, Jehu said to the guard and to the officers, "Go in and strike them down; let not a man escape." So when they put them to the sword, the guard and the officers cast them out and went into the inner room of the house of Baal, ²⁶ and they brought out the pillar that was in the house of Baal and burned it. ²⁷ And they demolished the pillar of Baal, and demolished the house of Baal, and made it a latrine to this day.

2 Kings 10:18-28 (ESV)

However, despite all of that initial zeal and dynamic action for the Lord, King Jehu later degenerated and became unfaithful. Like so many others, he started well, but did not finish well:

²⁹But Jehu did not turn aside from the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin--that is, the golden calves that were in Bethel and in Dan. ³⁰ And the LORD said to Jehu, "Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel." ³¹ But Jehu was not careful to walk in the law of the LORD, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn from the sins of Jeroboam, which he made Israel to sin.

2 Kings 10:29-31 (ESV)

Some people become unfaithful after they lose their mentor's influence. They can't keep up their faithfulness on their own

One of the reasons why faithful, obedient, God-fearing people sometimes become unfaithful, and let God down in later life, is that they began with the influence and guidance of a godly mentor, but then could not keep up that faithfulness on their own, without that mentor's help. An example of this is King Joash of Judah. He came to the throne when he was only a child and benefitted greatly from the godly influence of Jehoiada, a faithful priest who advised and taught the young king:

¹Jo'ash was seven years old when he began to reign, and he reigned forty years in Jerusalem; his mother's name was Zib'iah of Beer-sheba. ² And Jo'ash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all the days of Jehoi'ada the priest.

2 Chronicles 24:1-2 (RSV)

So, King Joash did what was right for very many years, i.e while Jehoiada was still alive and able to guide him. But then things changed when Jehoiada died:

¹⁵But Jehoi'ada grew old and full of days, and died; he was a hundred and thirty years old at his death. ¹⁶ And they buried him in the city of David among the kings, because he had done good in Israel, and toward God and his house.

2 Chronicles 24:15-16 (RSV)

¹⁷ Now after the death of Jehoi'ada the princes of Judah came and did obeisance to the king; then the king hearkened to them. ¹⁸ And they forsook the house of the LORD, the God of their fathers, and served the Ashe'rim and the idols. And wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem for this their guilt. ¹⁹ Yet he sent prophets among them to bring them back to the LORD; these testified against them, but they would not give heed.

2 Chronicles 24:17-19 (RSV)

After Jehoiada died, King Joash unwisely allowed himself to be advised and influenced by unworthy people who were not of the same calibre as Jehoiada. Therefore King Joash went astray, and so did many of the people of Judah. It reached such a point that Zechariah, the son of Jehoiada, tried to intervene to confront King Joash and to get him to see how God saw the situation. But King Joash did not listen to him. In fact he had him killed, despite all that Zechariah's father had done for him for so many years:

²⁰Then the Spirit of God took possession of Zechari'ah the son of Jehoi'ada the priest; and he stood above the people, and said to them, "Thus says God, 'Why do you transgress the commandments of the LORD, so that you cannot prosper? Because you have forsaken the LORD, he has forsaken you.'" ²¹ But they conspired against him, and by command of the king they stoned him with stones in the court of the house of the LORD. ²² Thus Jo'ash the king did not remember the kindness which Jehoi'ada, Zechari'ah's father, had shown him, but killed his son. And when he was dying, he said, "May the LORD see and avenge!"

2 Chronicles 24:20-22 (RSV)

As a result of the unfaithfulness of King Joash, and also in response to Zechariah's prayer, God moved to judge Joash by sending the Syrian army to attack him:

²³At the end of the year the army of the Syrians came up against Jo'ash. They came to Judah and Jerusalem, and destroyed all the princes of the people from among the people, and sent all their spoil to the king of Damascus. ²⁴ Though the army of the Syrians had come with few men, the LORD delivered into their hand a very great army, because they had forsaken the LORD, the God of their fathers. Thus they executed judgment on Jo'ash. ²⁵ When they had departed from him, leaving him severely wounded, his servants conspired against him because of the blood of the son of Jehoi'ada the priest, and slew him on his bed. So he died; and they buried him in the city of David, but they did not bury him in the tombs of the kings.

2 Chronicles 24:23-25 (RSV)

What Joash should have done, following the death of Jehoiada, was to recognise that he was now entering into a new test, i.e. for God to see how well he could do without his mentor. He should therefore have responded to his new circumstances by:

- a) immersing himself in the Bible, so as to obtain guidance from there for himself
- b) carefully selecting other godly people to advise him in place of Jehoiada, instead of being passive and leaving it for advisors to come to him randomly.

The hardest thing to cope with is success. Few people's faithfulness can survive that

We all know that failure and difficulty are a challenge. However, as we have seen above, in terms of maintaining our faithfulness, success is a much harder test. When a person fails, or suffers, the obvious thing to do is to turn to God for help. But how many of us turn to God when we have been *succeeding* in our job or ministry? If anything, the need for God's help is even greater then, though very few people realise that.

Success, wealth, power, fame, prestige and academic achievement present us with some very strong temptations to pride, self-sufficiency and arrogance. If we yield to such temptations, even once, then we are in grave danger of doing so again and again, until it becomes our undoing. A proud, self-sufficient person is very unlikely to remain faithful to Jesus, or to succeed in the tests that Jesus sets for us.

*I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, 'I will not listen.....'
Jeremiah 22:21 (a)(RSV)*

So, if you are fortunate enough to achieve success in any field then see it as your cue to humble yourself, to stay close to God and to pray for His help. Ask Him to provide people and circumstances that will help you to stay humble. Also ask Him to help you to humble yourself and to avoid relying on yourself or trusting in your own ability. Then you will hopefully avoid doing what King Uzziah did, as we saw above. He began well, but success and power went to his head and caused him to stop being faithful:

But when he was strong he grew proud, to his destruction. For he was false to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense.

2 Chronicles 26:16 (RSV)

You can never afford to become complacent or to cut corners as you get older

On a similar theme, there is a temptation, as you get older, to become casual and to assume that you have now learned how to handle pressures and temptations. You may then begin to loosen your standards and to think that it is safe for you to cut corners slightly, or to compromise a little on ethical issues relating to money, sex, work, relationships, or your use of power. It is precisely when you think you cannot, or will not, fall that you are in greatest danger of falling.

A person who is aware of their weakness, and concerned that they may fall, will take care to avoid tempting situations. But a person who has begun to trust themselves is in great danger. Therefore never trust yourself. Never consider yourself to be above temptation, or immune to falling into any kind of sin, especially the ones that you feel drawn to, or about which you have ever felt tempted to compromise. Those are the very areas where you particularly need to redouble your vigilance, and keep yourself on a short lead. As Malachi puts it, we need to guard ourselves:

So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.

Malachi 2:16(b) (ESV)

Resolve to become more radical, not less, as you get older. Balance is good, but moderation may not be.

It is usually assumed that young people are radical but that as we get older we mellow, moderate ourselves and become more pragmatic, rather than more principled or idealistic. But why should that have to be so? If anything, as we grow older, we ought to aim to become more radical, not less. We should set higher targets for ourselves and aim for greater levels of personal faithfulness.

The more we get to know Jesus, the more we ought to seek to please Him and to honour Him in ways we never even realised existed, or which we never noticed when we were younger. So, following our conversion, when we are only a new believer, Jesus' main objectives for us might be, for example, to give up sexual sin, excessive drinking or drugs.

However, as we get older and gain self-control in those areas, Jesus will turn His eye towards other areas of sin in our lives which might appear less important, but are still crucial if we wish to continue to make progress as a disciple. These areas might include sins such as pride, gossip, over-eating, cowardice, laziness, selfishness and so on.

We need to get all of our thinking, and all our actions, in line with Jesus, and to gain the mastery over every new area of sin that He shines the 'spotlight' on. Instead of considering such things less important, or less urgent, areas in which to obey Him, we should become more radical and less satisfied with ourselves as we grow older.

We never 'arrive' and therefore we never have any basis for being self-satisfied. So you should be just as determined to cut out gossip or pride as a new convert should be to cut out pornography, lying, drunkenness etc. There is no area of sin which is too small for you to care about and to tackle. Neither is there any sin which you can safely indulge in or compromise over. Every sin is toxic and will damage you and your future.

Do not put limits on your faithfulness, such that you only obey God up to a certain point. Go all the way.

A feature which is found in the vast majority of people, even among the best, is that they tend to have limits, beyond which their faithfulness does not go, or does not continue. In other words, even the best of us tend only to be faithful up to a certain point, but no further. We see this feature quite often among the better kings of Judah. The Bible speaks of them as having done what was right and as being faithful. But it then points out what they did not do, i.e. the things which they did not have the courage or the determination to achieve.

An example of this is found in the lives of King Jehoash of Judah and his son, Amaziah and grandson, Azariah. In general these three kings did what was right. But there were certain things which they did not have enough courage or will power to do:

In the seventh year of Jehu, Jehoash began to reign, and he reigned forty years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Zibiah of Beersheba. ² And Jehoash did what was right in the eyes of the LORD all his days, because Jehoiada the priest instructed him. ³ Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away; the people continued to sacrifice and make offerings on the high places.

2 Kings 12:1-3 (ESV)

In the second year of Joash the son of Joahaz, king of Israel, Amaziah the son of Joash, king of Judah, began to reign. ² He was twenty-five years old when he began to reign, and he reigned twenty-nine years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jehoaddin of Jerusalem. ³ And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, yet not like David his father. He did in all things as Joash his father had done. ⁴ But the high places were not removed; the people still sacrificed and made offerings on the high places.

2 Kings 14:1-4 (ESV)

In the twenty-seventh year of Jeroboam king of Israel, Azariah the son of Amaziah, king of Judah, began to reign. ² He was sixteen years old when he began to reign, and he reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem. His mother's name was Jecoliah of Jerusalem. ³ And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. ⁴ Nevertheless, the high places were not taken away. The people still sacrificed and made offerings on the high places.

2 Kings 15:1-4 (ESV)

Kings Jehoash, Amaziah and Azariah, like most of the Kings of Judah, stopped short of demolishing the 'high places' where some of the people used to go to offer false and idolatrous sacrifices. Perhaps they feared the reaction of the people if they went that far, just as modern day politicians will only go so far. They stop short of doing anything which would arouse substantial public outcry or opposition.

We do the same ourselves and set up boundaries, beyond which we will not go, because we think it would be too hard, dangerous, costly or difficult. Sometimes we may even do that unconsciously, without ever saying out loud, even to ourselves, that we are holding back or what it is that we are afraid of.

One of the main reasons why a person sets limits on the extent of their own faithfulness and obedience is that they are not wholehearted. That means that they are generally loyal and willing, but

only up to a point. It is usually up to the point where faithfulness begins to cost too much, or is likely to cause more difficulty than they want to face.

The problem with being on God's side, but only up to a certain pre-determined limit, is that there will eventually come a point at which your willingness to obey will be used up. You will then betray God, and even switch sides. That is inevitable if you set any limits beforehand on how much you are willing to endure or how far you are willing to go. Any such limit, wherever you choose to place it, will inevitably lead to you being brought up to and beyond that point. The demons in your life will make sure of that.

So, if you say to yourself "*I will endure for up to six months, but that's all*", then you can be sure that a demon will arrange things so that your ordeal lasts longer than six months. Or, if you were to say "*I will be honest and do what's right at work, as long as I don't have to lose my job*", then you can be sure that the demons will engineer some situation that requires you to choose between being faithful to God or losing your job.

Therefore the only safe and sensible policy is *total faithfulness*, where you are wholehearted and *set no limits at all*. Just resolve to do whatever God asks you to do, no matter what. Then ask Him for the grace to be obedient. That is the only approach that will work. A person who is not wholehearted will inevitably come unstuck and go wrong

Why not begin to examine yourself in this area and to ask yourself whether, how and where you are doing this and what the boundaries are to your own faithfulness? Ask God to expose these limits or boundaries to you and to help you to break through them and go beyond them. Imagine the changes that would occur in your life if you were to do this and to become, like King David, a person who is "*a man wholly after God's heart*".

The consequences could be very significant, in terms of what God could then achieve through your life, but also how well you would do at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The famous nineteenth century evangelist and Bible teacher, D. L Moody, put it very well when he said:

"The world has yet to see what God can do with, and for, and through, and in, and by a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him. I will do my utmost to be that man".